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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT


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Abstract

This dissertation examines French and Francophone texts, contexts and thematic problems that comprise a genre I call “ethnographic fiction,” whose development we can trace throughout the twentieth century in several geographic locations and in distinct historical moments. During the twentieth century in France, anthropology as an institutionalized discipline and “literature” (writ large) were in constant communication with one another. On the one hand, many French anthropologists produced stylized works demonstrating aesthetic sensibilities that were increasingly difficult to classify. On the other hand, though, poets, philosophers and other literary intellectuals read, absorbed, commented on and attacked texts from anthropology. This century-long conversation produced an interdisciplinary conceptual field allowing French anthropology to borrow from and adapt models from literature at the same time as literature asserted itself as more than just an artistic enterprise and, indeed, as one whose epistemological prerogative was to contribute to and enrich the understanding of humankind and its cultural processes.

In this dissertation I argue that fiction can be seen to travel in multiple directions within France’s twentieth-century conversation between literature and anthropology such that we can observe the formation of a new genre, one comprised of texts that either explicitly or more implicitly fuse fictional forms and contents together with the methodological and representational imperatives of anthropology and
ethnographic fieldwork. Additionally, I argue that fiction moves geographically as well, notably from the metropole to Francophone West Africa which became an anthropological hotspot in the twentieth century once extended field research was legitimated in France and armchair anthropology was thoroughly discredited. By investigating ethnographies, novels, memoirs and films produced in metropolitan France, Francophone West Africa, and the French Caribbean (including texts by Michel Leiris, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Jean Rouch, Jean-Claude Izzo and Raphaël Confiant) I aim to shed light on the kinds of work that elements of fiction perform in ethnographic texts and, by contrast, on how ethnographic concepts, strategies and fieldwork methods are implicitly or explicitly adopted and reformulated in more literarily oriented works of fiction. Ethnographic fiction as a genre, then, was born not only from the epistemological rapprochement of anthropology and literature in metropolitan France, but from complex and often fraught encounters with the very locations where anthropological praxis was carried out.
This dissertation is dedicated to my family.
Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgements.......................................................................................................................viii
Introduction.......................................................................................................................................... 1
Itinerant Fictions: Colonial Cultures and Ethnographic Selfhood in L’Afrique fantôme and Oui mon commandant!........................................................................................................... 22
Narrative, Improvisation, Modernity: Ethnographic Fiction in Jean Rouch’s Jaguar and Moi, un Noir........................................................................................................................................ 92
Ethnography, Policing and Utopia in Jean-Claude Izzo’s Fabio Montale Trilogy........ 141
Conclusion: Raphaël Confiant’s L’Allée des Soupirs and a Rereading of Ethnographic Fiction, or, Éloge de la Créolité Ethnographique ................................................................. 193
Bibliography .................................................................................................................................. 213
Filmography.................................................................................................................................... 222
Biography........................................................................................................................................ 224
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the right time.
**Introduction**

This dissertation sets for itself the task of defining a genre, one that crosses the frontiers of a number of academic disciplines as well as the increasingly porous border between the humanities and the social sciences. More specifically, this dissertation examines key French and Francophone texts, contexts and thematic problems that comprise a genre I call “ethnographic fiction,” whose development we can trace in several geographic locations and in distinct historical moments throughout the twentieth century. By investigating ethnographies, novels, memoirs and films produced both in metropolitan France and in Francophone West Africa, I aim to shed light on the kinds of work that elements of fiction perform in ethnographic texts and, by contrast, on how ethnographic concepts, strategies and fieldwork methods are implicitly or explicitly adopted and reformulated in more literarily oriented works of fiction. Although certain texts under consideration in these pages work well within the conventional boundaries of established fields (i.e., anthropology or literature), certain others seek more clearly to disrupt disciplinary demarcations by positioning themselves within a grey area where fiction and ethnography appear to be mutually constitutive and co-dependent. In other words, the analytic power of these latter texts derives from the fact that they do not allow us to choose between their representational authority as works of anthropology and their imaginative impulses stemming from their keen sense of fictionality. Thus the goal of this dissertation is not simply to identify the interplay between fiction and ethnography in
French and Francophone anthropological and literary works; rather, as these provocatively hybridized texts urge us to do, we can sketch the contours and announce the formation of a genre in its own right that relies on the indistinguishable nature and mutual imbrication of fiction and ethnography understood in their most broad terms.

During the twentieth century in France, anthropology as an institutionalized discipline and “literature” (writ large) were in constant communication with one another. As Vincent Debaene argues, the period between 1925 and 1970 might be considered as the “moment ethnologique de la culture française,” not only because French anthropologists produced stylized works demonstrating aesthetic sensibilities that were increasingly difficult to classify, but also because poets, philosophers and other literary intellectuals such as Georges Bataille, Simone de Beauvoir, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze read, absorbed, commented on and attacked texts from anthropology. Journals such as La Nouvelle Revue française, Présence africaine, Bataille’s Documents and Aimé

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1 Although ethnology and physical anthropology certainly predate the twentieth century in France, their existence was confined to certain learned societies in the 19th century and it was not until 1925 that anthropology as we understand it today was institutionalized in France at the Institut d’ethnologie in Paris and became an academic discipline. At the time the discipline was referred to as “ethnologie” to distinguish it from the work of scientists and pseudo-scientists interested, as Emmanuelle Sibeud demonstrates, in “the physical description of races and the elucidation of racial hierarchy, based on anthropometric measures,” which was referred to as “anthropologie.” In the 1930s, as “ethnologie” began to gain the upper hand thanks to institutional legitimacy and colonial funding, the distinctions between the two terms began to blur considerably. See Emmanuelle Sibeud, “The Metamorphosis of Ethnology in France, 1839-1930,” in A New History of Anthropology, ed. Henrika Kuklick (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 98, 96-110. For a helpful overview of the properly colonial context of the institutionalization of anthropology in France and the foundation of the Institut d’ethnologie, see Alice Conklin, “The New ‘Ethnology’ and ‘La Situation Coloniale’ in Interwar France,” French Politics, Culture and Society 20, no. 2 (2002): 29-46.

and Suzanne Césaire’s *Tropiques* published ethnographic findings, theory, and “exotic” proverbs and stories alongside innovative texts from more conventional literary and philosophical domains. Additionally, important figures like Michel Leiris, Arnold Van Gennep, and Claude Lévi-Strauss moved within this interdisciplinary nexus and testified to the porousness of the boundaries between the fledgling discipline of “ethnologie” and France’s literary-philosophical avant-garde.³ As Debaene puts it rather grandly, we can historicize this trend and observe that these diverse figures represent “le prolongement d’une tradition proprement française qui, de Montaigne à Rousseau en passant par Montesquieu, a toujours mêlé la réflexion philosophique, la curiosité pour l’exotique, le retour sur soi et la méditation sur la nature humaine.”⁴ These are the thematic markers of an interdisciplinary conceptual field in which French literary studies and the academic discipline of anthropology exchanged theoretical concepts, stylistic concerns and disparate notions of humankind’s relationship to social worlds in addition to the students and scholars who passed back and forth between the two increasingly interrelated camps. In fact, throughout the twentieth century it was *de rigueur* for anthropologists in France to publish two books from a single fieldwork trip, making ethnographic research (which

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³ Debaene, *L’adieu au voyage*, 12-13. For an especially rich example of this interdisciplinary “contact zone” one need look no further than the famous case of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was originally trained in law and philosophy, passed the *aggregation* exam in the latter discipline, and took up a teaching post in Brazil in sociology on his way to conducting fieldwork in the Amazon which he recounts in *Tristes tropiques*. In this book Lévi-Strauss explains the ways in which philosophy failed to satisfy him intellectually and points out that since he was well disposed to both Marxism and psychoanalysis, anthropology represented a natural, almost inevitable career path for him since the discipline for him seemed to spring up between these two *sciences de l’homme*. See his chapter entitled “Comment on devient ethnographe,” in *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), 52-64, especially 61-62.

did not come into its own as a legitimate mode of inquiry until the beginning of the century) move in two directions at once: the first book represented a conventional anthropological intervention and was positioned as a scientifically oriented text, one that adopted the norms and forms of academic writing in the discipline. The second, however, was a *récit*, a narrative account of an ethnographic fieldwork experience that, if not explicitly literary, was at least aimed at a broad reading public and did not necessarily seek to conform to the aesthetic standards of the social sciences. Thus this interdisciplinary conceptual field allowed French anthropology to borrow from and adapt models from literature at the same time as literature asserted itself as more than just an artistic enterprise and, indeed, as one whose epistemological prerogative was to contribute to and enrich the understanding of humankind and its cultural processes.

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5 Debaene, *L’adieu au voyage*, 14-27. This is Debaene’s major point of reference in his illuminating and helpful book on the relationship between anthropology and literature (understood most broadly) in twentieth-century France. His investigative strategy begins from an analysis of the “two books of French ethnographic texts” and how what we might call “scientific,” on the one hand, and “literary,” on the other hand, ethnographic texts were produced by researchers and subsequently received and consumed by a readerly public. As initial examples of this phenomenon he cites, of course, Lévi-Strauss and his *La vie familiale et sociale des Indiens nambikwara* and *Tristes tropiques*, Michel Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme* (to which I will return in the next chapter) and his *La possession et ses aspects théatraux chez les Éthiopiens de Gondar* and Marcel Griaule’s *Silhouettes et graffiti abyssins* and *Les Flambeurs d’hommes*. This is also the case for the Malian colonial-era ethnographer, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, whose work I examine in chapter one. His two volumes of memoirs, for example, are very literary in nature (as is his *L’étrange destin de Wangrin* that I briefly examine below) but he also published more strictly social scientific and ethnohistorical works such as *L’Empire peul du Macina*, which deals with Fulani cultural history. We could also point to French ethnographic cinema and observe that Jean Rouch, the father of visual anthropology, made more conventional anthropological documentaries in addition to more explicitly artistic and experimental fiction films from the same ethnographic material. His conventional ethnographic writings, such as *Migrations au Ghana*, are also very dry and make for difficult reading. Rouch will be the focus of chapter two. Although Debaene’s work is clearly crucial to my concerns here, I depart from what we could call his “literary history of anthropology” and examine instead how we can observe a new genre, “ethnographic fiction,” emerging from the rich conceptual field he identifies.

6 For Debaene, this vocation of literature is the quintessentially French conception of what literature can and should do. As he puts it, the great tradition of French literary exceptionalism is that it “refuse de n’être
In this dissertation I argue, broadly, that fiction can be seen to travel in multiple directions within France’s twentieth-century conversation between literature and anthropology such that we can observe the formation of a new genre, one comprised of texts that either explicitly or more implicitly fuse fictional forms and contents together with the methodological and representational imperatives of anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork. Some of these texts are more conventionally literary in origin, whereas others can easily be read purely as ethnographic studies, and still others clearly aim to problematize any easy distinction between these two fields. Additionally, I argue that fiction moves geographically as well, notably from the metropole to Francophone West Africa which became an anthropological hotspot in the twentieth century once extended field research was legitimated in France and armchair anthropology was thoroughly discredited. 

Ethnographic fiction as a genre, then, was born not only from the epistemological rapprochement of anthropology and literature in metropolitan France, but from complex and often fraught encounters with the very locations where anthropological

qu’un parmi les beaux-arts,” the implication being that literature and literary studies actually share the same disciplinary purview as anthropology. See Debaene, L’adieu au voyage, 99-100, 86-111.

7 As Emmanuelle Sibeud argues, the colony of French West Africa (AOF) “devient dès les années 1910 le terrain de prédilection de l’ethnologie naissante.” She goes on to point out how in the first decades of the twentieth century, colonial administrators, in conjunction with learned societies of ethnology in the metropole whose patron saints were Maurice Delafosse and Marcel Mauss, were among the first recognized fieldworkers in French anthropological history. This helps to explain why, when the Institut d’ethnologie was finally founded in 1925 and ethnology institutionalized as an academic discipline at the Sorbonne, it was with significant financial backing from colonial funds. See Sibeud, “Ethnographie africaniste et ‘inauthenticité’ coloniale,” French Politics, Culture and Society 20, no. 2 (2002): 17. For a more extended treatment of how French West Africa became a preferential site for ethnographic field research thanks to the anthropological interests of white colonial administrators in Africa, see Emmanuelle Sibeud, Une science impériale pour l’Afrique? La construction des savoirs africanistes en France, 1878-1930 (Paris: Éditions EHESS, 2002).
praxis was carried out. One of my goals in the chapters that follow is to elucidate precisely why fictional forms and categories become aesthetically useful tools for ethnographers seeking to negotiate particularly thorny or problematic relationships both with the people they study and with the people they imagine will be engaging with their texts as readers and viewers.

Anthropology and literature may have realized their kinship early in the twentieth century in France, but it was not until much later that anthropology as an international discipline consciously embraced the ways that literary studies could complicate the kinds of claims anthropology wanted to make about cultural and social processes and about its own academic discourse. Even before the discipline’s “crisis of representation” in the mid-1980s, in which anthropologists (largely from the English-speaking world) challenged their status as “objective” producers of scientific knowledge about peoples and cultures and explicitly sought to interrogate the politics of their research and writing methods, anthropology was generally aware of the ways in which ethnographic writing could be understood as a genre and had begun to examine critically how written ethnographies were related to literary texts. Thus when the “crisis” was precipitated by the appearance of important works such as James Clifford and George Marcus’s Writing

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Culture, Renato Rosaldo’s *Culture and Truth* and George Marcus and Michael Fischer’s *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, anthropologists began to understand their disciplinary project as a text-making enterprise that had a politics as well as a poetics and that had much in common with literature and literary studies. However much anthropology’s embracing of literary theory and postmodern cultural critique prompted it to question its own claims to represent “true” or “authentic” social worlds, the relationship between anthropology and fiction has received far less critical attention. Although since this moment of crisis many anthropologists have been bent on interrogating their own subjectivities as fieldworkers or questioning the authority of ethnography as a project capable of producing knowledge about other people, few have sought to investigate or establish a relationship between anthropology and fiction writ large. Renowned figures like Clifford Geertz have spoken of the “family resemblances” between ethnographers

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10 One notable exception to this observation is Richard Handler and Daniel Segal’s book, *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture: An Essay on the Narration of Social Realities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999 [1990]). This book is primarily concerned with the observation of social conventions and kinship practices among characters in Jane Austen’s novels. As such, it is certainly relevant to my concerns here, although it does not offer any thoroughgoing investigation of what ethnographic fiction might look like as a genre. Christopher Miller’s *Theories of Africans* poses the question of the relationship between anthropology and literature in Francophone Africa but is unconcerned with the question of genre and focuses instead on the problem of the ethics of (Western) representations of Africa and Africans. See Miller, *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Marcus and Fischer offer a brief mention of the use of fictional strategies in ethnographic writing but do not seek to conceptualize their points. See *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 75-76. Clifford Geertz, in his earlier but well known *Interpretation of Cultures*, suggests that ethnographic description and narration is “fictional” in the sense that it creates its object, but this observation only gestures vaguely in the direction of ethnographic fiction as genre. See Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 15-19.
and novelists and of “the question of how ethnographical texts are ‘author-ized’,” but there have been no attempts to tease out what implications there might be for the discipline of its participation in a genre such as ethnographic fiction. Another goal of this dissertation, then, is to reexamine anthropology’s relationship with literature and literary studies by filtering it through the hybridized and interdisciplinary genre of ethnographic fiction as it was created throughout the twentieth century in the French-speaking world, where the interaction between literature and anthropology produces a deep-seated and cross-cultural intellectual domain. Anthropology understood as an international academic discipline, in other words, has much to gain from this consideration of how French and Francophone ethnographic fiction offers an intriguing confluence of aesthetic, narrative and representational possibilities.

As I mentioned above, we can understand the genre of ethnographic fiction as constituted by the explicit or implicit fusion of fictional forms, categories and narrative strategies with the observational, representational and methodological approaches and devices proper to the discipline of anthropology. This broad characterization, however, demands further definition and specification of its constituent terms, that is, “ethnography,” on the one hand, and “fiction,” on the other. Turning first to the anthropological side of the equation, I would like to borrow from Marcus and Fischer’s definitions of “ethnography” and “fieldwork” from Anthropology as Cultural Critique, both because this text was written when anthropology as a discipline was especially

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sensitive to its relationship with literary studies and because the rich conceptualizations they offer of these terms will serve us well as we consider works produced from several moments in the twentieth century. As they define it,

a ‘good’ ethnography, whatever its particular arguments, is one that gives a sense of the conditions of fieldwork, of everyday life, of microscale processes (an implicit validation of the fieldwork method that itself indicates the anthropologist ‘was there’); of translation across cultural and linguistic boundaries (the conceptual and linguistic exegesis of indigenous ideas, thus demonstrating both the ethnographer’s language competence and the fact that he has successfully captured native meanings and subjectivity); and of holism.\(^\text{12}\)

Although not every text under consideration in this project adopts these genre characteristics systematically, this definition nonetheless enables us to understand generally what ethnography as a written genre looks like in the texts I analyze and what goals that a work of ethnographic writing sets for itself. Whether or not these goals are actually met is another matter, entirely, and one that we will be able to push in productive ways in later chapters. In the case of anthropology’s principal research methodology, fieldwork (which anthropologists tend to guard closely as the defining element of their discipline), it can be understood as follows: “a complex web of interactions in which anthropologists in collaboration with others, conventionally conceived as informants and located in a variety of often contrasting settings, track connections amid networks,

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\(^{12}\) Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 24-25. It is important to point out that “holism,” as they refer to it here, does not imply a totalizing account of another culture taken as a discrete and isolated entity, but rather its goal is “to contextualize elements of culture and to make systematic connections between them.” See Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 22-23. I will return to this definition in chapter three where I observe how ethnography as a genre and detective fiction share common cause.
mutations, influences of cultural forces and changing social pressures.”\textsuperscript{13} This definition is especially helpful, for it permits us to specify what kinds of work ethnographers are doing “on the ground” in the anthropological texts I study here at the same time as it offers a broad conceptualization of fieldwork as an investigative strategy that we can discern in more conventional literary and fictional works.

Turning our attention to the term “fiction,” we can begin from an observation Tzvetan Todorov makes in an essay called “The Notion of Literature” from his \textit{Genres in Discourse}. In this essay one of Todorov’s goals is to establish that fiction is composed of literary language that is in many respects self-referential since it evokes a reality all its own. For Todorov, literary language does not rely on propositions that can be proven or disproven, and we can create an opposition that places the true and the false on one side and the fictional on the other side, removed from regimes of linguistic truth-telling.\textsuperscript{14} From our point of view, the problem with Todorov’s schema is that it locks fiction into a zero-sum game wherein a text must either be internally consistent with the (literary) reality it evokes or it must veer off into nonliterary language that is concerned primarily with verifiable propositions. By sequestering fictionality in this manner, we lose a sense of the ways in which the “documentaryness” of what Todorov would call nonliterary

\textsuperscript{13} Marcus and Fischer, introduction to the second edition of \textit{Anthropology as Cultural Critique}, xviii-xix. We will also be returning to this definition in chapter three.

\textsuperscript{14} Tzvetan Todorov, “The Notion of Literature,” in \textit{Genres in Discourse} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990 [1978]), 7-9. Thomas Pavel offers an analysis of the semantics peculiar to fiction that link fiction’s relationship with reality (i.e., the extra-textual world) and with the types of literary worlds that only fiction can create. While the nuts and bolts of Pavel’s readings are not necessarily relevant to our context, his broader approach to fiction is unquestionably in line with my own. See Pavel, \textit{Fictional Worlds} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).
texts might coexist, if only problematically and in a fragmented fashion, with the textual elements and worlds that fiction can create. And yet, many works of ethnographic fiction (especially those produced by professional ethnographers) appear to maintain or even to revel in this apparently paradoxical coexistence that puts the “real world” cultural processes anthropology is supposed to document into conversation with fictional narrative strategies and modes of representation.\\footnote{Hayden White makes a similar claim when speaking of historiography and of how our conceptions of “narrative” and “fiction” determine (or even overdetermine) the ways in which we construct and represent social reality as an at least imagined totality. For White, the value “attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.” See White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” Critical Inquiry 7, no. 1 (1980): 27. In a later essay, White distills some of these concerns into remarks on the (im)possibility of a theory of genre and on the relationship between literary genres and “history” writ large. See his “Anomalies of Genre: The Utility of Theory and History for the Study of Literary Genres,” New Literary History 34, no. 3 (2003): 597-615.}

We can delineate four primary characteristics of ethnographic fiction that go a long way toward clarifying and complicating the relationship that obtains between its constituent terms.\\footnote{Obviously, not all of these elements are present in equal measure, or at all, in every example of ethnographic fiction that I examine in this project. Regardless, to lay out these characteristics schematically helps us better understand what is at stake, in terms of narrative and representation, in ethnographic fiction as a genre. To recognize and delineate these constitutive elements is also to gesture implicitly toward what is not ethnographic fiction since as Derrida reminds us, the “law” of genre demands that the very mention of the word requires that we think through the types of norms and limits that “genre” in its broadest sense necessarily outlines. See Derrida, “The Law of Genre,” Critical Inquiry 7, no. 1 (1980): 56.} Doing so will also allow me to set the scene conceptually for the chapters that follow and the individual texts they analyze. The first of these characteristics is an exaggerated sense of the “constructedness” of social and cultural processes, and an awareness pushed to the point of tension or even crisis that anthropology and ethnographic discourse is heavily involved in creating the very objects it purports to represent. Several important theoretical works in anthropology helped bring
these ideas into the discipline (Johannes Fabian’s book *Time and the Other*, Paul Rabinow’s “Representations are Social Facts” and *French Modern*, and the *Writing Culture* project generally, along with the debates to which it gave rise), but a work of ethnographic fiction may use these claims to consider how fiction is built into the anthropological project or even, in a more extreme example we will explore in chapter one, to assert that ethnographic work in general creates and pursues its own fictional chimeras. James Clifford cites the examples of Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as two texts that offer fictional constructions of ethnographic subjectivity and (in the case of Malinowski) of the culture undergoing ethnographic scrutiny, and we can certainly subsume these works under our generic rubric. Thus this first characteristic is predicated, as Clifford Geertz puts it, on recognizing anthropological writing as *fictiō*, that is, as something made and constructed. Works of ethnographic fiction offer particularly keen and provocative, if occasionally frustrating, approaches to this notion.

A second characteristic we can outline here is the incorporation of fictional flourishes and narrative strategies that serve to highlight the stylistic virtuosity of the ethnographic writer and facilitate the creation of a relationship to a readerly public.

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19 Geertz, “Thick Description,” 15.
Chapter one takes up the example of the second volume of memoirs by the Malian ethnographer, storyteller and colonial civil servant, Amadou Hampâté Bâ, but we could just as easily point to another of his works as satisfying this generic requirement. Hampâté Bâ’s *L’étrange destin de Wangrin* is what we might call an ethnographic biography, a text that recounts the rise and fall of an indigenous civil servant who goes by the name of “Wangrin” and who tricks his way into prosperity in French West Africa during the first decades of the twentieth century. The book is, strictly speaking, not a work of fiction: “Wangrin” was a real person, and Hampâté Bâ tells his life story while also making rich ethnographic observations about West African oral traditions and the political culture of the French colonial administration at the time (additionally, the biography is followed by several pages of explanatory footnotes). However, the text also contains numerous anecdotes and scenes with reconstructed dialogue and other fictional elements that put Hampâté Bâ’s merits as a storyteller on display without detracting from the “truth-value” of the biography or from the ethnographic detail in the work as a whole. From this perspective, ethnographic fiction as a genre raises the question of how the documentary and representative imperatives of ethnography (even an ethnography that “constructs” its own object) might be coextensive with an author’s selective recourse to a fictional aesthetic that would function as a narrative supplement to ethnography’s documentary aims.

A third element of ethnographic fiction that I take up here is what I will call “transposition,” the (re)casting of ethnographic results (what we could crudely refer to as ethnographic “data”) into a purely fictional mode of expression. This is a more overtly experimental proposition, since it involves actively choosing to represent ethnography and/or cultural processes through narrative fiction rather than through a more conventional social scientific lens. This is also a characteristic that prompts us to seek out examples of ethnographic fiction from among texts that are not necessarily in explicit dialogue with anthropology as a discipline. Let us consider, for instance, Roberto Rossellini’s 1950 film, *Stromboli*, starring Ingrid Bergman as a Lithuanian refugee who escapes from an Italian internment camp by agreeing to marry an Italian soldier from the tiny island from which the film takes its name.21 In the film we see Bergman’s character take on the characteristics of a fieldworker, as she moves with her husband to Stromboli and attempts (in vain) to make sense of local traditions and how people negotiate their geographic isolation. However, it is crucial to point out that most of the islanders in the film play themselves and Rossellini weaves shots into his narrative that are unabashedly documentary, such as during a sequence when Bergman’s character joins her husband in his fishing boat and the two watch a traditional Stromboli tuna hunt. Rossellini had islanders recreate a massive tuna fishing expedition, and the sequence is composed of both documentary-style footage of ordinary fishermen and cuts back to Ingrid Bergman’s

21 I have not chosen this example at random. *Stromboli* was a film that greatly influenced French ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch, two of whose “ethnofiction” films are the subject of chapter two. Further, *Stromboli* was screened in Paris back-to-back with Rouch’s first film, *Au pays des mages noirs*, dealing with hippopotamus hunting in Niger. See Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 136, 151.
polished gaze looking on. These two series of images appear to fuse together when, in a later cut to Bergman’s face, we watch her be splashed with water from all the chaos of the fishing expedition that is occurring in an entirely different series. Nonetheless, the two series of shots do not actually coincide but they do inch ever closer, with the splash of water making the jump from the “ethnographic” images to the purely fictional ones with Bergman. Works such as *Stromboli* make Italian neo-realism particularly well suited to being read as ethnographic fiction, but it is enough for our purposes here to point out that this element of the genre relies upon the co-presence of both ethnographic and fictional modes of representation and explicitly renders the two mutually constitutive, such that we as viewers or readers must accept that we cannot choose between them.

The fourth characteristic of the genre at stake in this project requires us to identify more implicit representations of fieldwork and an ethnographic aesthetic in texts that are conventionally understood as purely fictional works. From this perspective ethnographic modes of representation do double duty as innovative narrative devices in fictional texts and as opportunities to link these texts to an interdisciplinary context. Purely fictional texts also allow, in their very form, for the kinds of thought experiments that might remain unavailable to normative ethnographic writing, such that the most provocative of these ethnographic works of fiction urge us to reevaluate and reshape ethnographic theories and concepts that we can then put back into conversation with anthropology. As a negative example we might consider French Guyanese novelist René Maran’s 1921
work, *Batouala*.\(^{22}\) This novel tells the story of an African chief in French Equatorial Africa, his worries about the future (including contact with whites) and his involvement in a love triangle. Maran unquestionably plunges us into the cultural world of the chief and his people, but whatever ethnography we can observe in this text is communicated impressionistically and is not organized around the perspective of fieldwork or the narrative voice of a fieldworker-character. By contrast, Patrick Chamoiseau’s 1992 novel, *Texaco*, presents a cultural history of Martinique that is organized around the narrative voice of an elderly woman who acts as an ethnographic informant to a young, white urban planner sent by the state to survey the shantytown in which she happens to live.\(^{23}\) The text itself contains “excerpts” from the notebooks in which Marie-Sophie, the old woman, records her life story, the history of the shantytown and, by extension, the history of the island, at the behest of the urban planner whose ethnographic curiosity lurks in the background and holds the narrative together. The opposition we might thus draw between *Batouala* and *Texaco* is not one of organization versus disorganization, or one of realism versus impressionistic modernism. The difference is at once much more simple and more telling, as it relates to my project: in *Texaco* we can observe the problems and possibilities inherent in the fictional representation of ethnographic praxis whereas *Batouala*’s more conventionally omniscient narration is not mediated by any sort of ethnographic gaze of the kind we can so clearly see at work in Chamoiseau. It is this

\(^{22}\) René Maran, *Batouala* (Monaco: Éditions de l’imprimerie nationale de Monaco, 1938 [1921]).
ethnographic mediation (what we might identify as potentially diverse representations of fieldwork) that we can recognize as an aesthetic hallmark of ethnographic fiction.

The chapters that follow are organized chronologically, beginning with an ethnographic memoir that takes place in the 1920s (although written much later) and ending with a trilogy of novels written at the very end of the twentieth century. I also sketch a trajectory that takes us from the metropole to Africa and back again, in an organizational representation of how I view fiction traveling throughout the French and Francophone worlds. Chapter one follows Surrealist writer Michel Leiris from Paris to Africa as he tries his hand at ethnography while acting as the secrétaire-archiviste for the 1931-33 Dakar-Djibouti ethnographic mission led by anthropologist Marcel Griaule. In many respects the journal adopts the stylistic and thematic concerns of modernism as it was conceived in the first decades of the twentieth century: Leiris is obsessed with his own sense of alienation, with the (im)possibilities of travel and displacement and with a fragmented sense of self whose unity is increasingly difficult to conceptualize literarily. This chapter puts Leiris’s fieldwork journal, published as L’Afrique fantôme, into conversation with the second volume of Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic memoirs, 24

24 Leiris’s L’âge d’homme takes up these concerns even more explicitly and, owing to its interrogations of the self’s relationship to art and artistic production/consumption, demands to be read alongside Proust, for example. We could even propose an alternate reading of L’Afrique fantôme that would highlight Leiris’s affinities with Proust’s search for an authentic (literary) self that seems constantly to elude him. To engage in this type of reading would be to accentuate the thoroughly modernist aspects of Leiris’s early ethnographic work.
entitled *Oui mon commandant!*. In this latter text Hampâté Bâ recounts his early adulthood (roughly 1920-1940) and his career as a civil servant in the French colonial bureaucracy that allowed him to move throughout French West Africa collecting oral histories and accounts of local traditions that fed his growing obsession with recording in writing African oral cultures that threatened to be dissolved by colonialism. In this chapter I examine how each writer relates to his own complicity with the French colonial project and how these relationships inflect their conceptions and literary uses of ethnography such that fiction becomes an indispensable narrative device for both of them.

Chapter two approaches two ethnographic films by prolific French anthropologist and director, Jean Rouch. Rouch knew both Leiris and Hampâté Bâ well: Leiris, for example, attended the first screening of Rouch’s first film (*Au pays des mages noirs*) together with Griaule, Rouch’s ethnographic mentor and dissertation advisor, and both men concluded that Rouch’s innovative take on visual anthropology represented a new avenue for the discipline.\(^{25}\) Rouch was also complicit with the colonial situation, in his own way, since he worked as an engineer in West Africa before ethnographic curiosity took over and he was persecuted by the Vichy regime for being too close to Africans. To avoid punishment he took a job working with famous Africanist Théodore Monod at the Institut français d’Afrique noire (IFAN) where he met Hampâté Bâ who was employed there as an ethnographer after also being pushed out of his career in the French

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administration by Vichy. In this chapter I analyze two of Rouch’s films, Jaguar (1957-67) and Moi, un Noir (1958), which grew out of Rouch’s ethnographic research on migrants from Niger, where he did so much of his fieldwork, who traveled to the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and to Côte d’Ivoire in search of work. These films were shot silently and starred individuals that Rouch actually studied: in post-synchronized dialogue, his African amateur actors improvised fictional narratives that corresponded to whatever they felt like saying about their lives. His ethnographic informants thus play filmic characters at the same time as they play themselves. The films deal with the Africans’ adaptations to and negotiations of the complexities of modern life in West African metropolises, and in the chapter I investigate how modernity becomes a racialized narrative category based on a mode of expression that is simultaneously ethnographic and fictional. Rouch’s films are much more explicitly experimental than Leiris’s or Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic texts, but all three figures articulate anthropological projects and, within those projects, representations of Africa and Africans that proceed from a problematic or joyously innovative positing of the relationship between ethnography and fiction.

Whereas my first two chapters deal, respectively, with the colonial period and the beginning of the transition from colonialism to independence and postcolonialism in West Africa, my third chapter is resolutely postcolonial in nature and returns us to

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metropolitan France at a time (the 1990s) when immigration from many of these former colonies became the contested object of French political discourses and preoccupations. This chapter takes as its object of analysis the trilogy of detective novels set in Marseille by the journalist turned writer of fiction, Jean-Claude Izzo. In these texts, Izzo’s noir hero, Fabio Montale, not only solves crimes but also expounds at length on the changing urban landscape of the city, the forms of exclusion and marginalization suffered by generations of immigrant families and how Marseille’s dystopian cultural present might overlap with a more Utopian vision of radically inclusive belonging in the city. The figure of the noir detective, I suggest in this chapter, can be read as a fieldworker, and Izzo’s crime trilogy offers an ethnographic rendering of policing and cultural belonging in Marseille that adopts and also problematizes two propositions made by George Marcus concerning what literary modernism might have to offer experimental forms of ethnographic writing. In the first two chapters, then, I examine the work of ethnographers who turn to fiction in order to address problems of ethnographic representation; in this third chapter I examine how a novelist represents ethnography fictionally in order to posit a reading of contemporary Marseille that functions as a Utopian thought experiment.

In these chapters, fiction moves chronologically, geographically and aesthetically from the works of anthropologists to those of a novelist at the end of the twentieth century. Additionally, it spans what we can periodize as the movement from French colonialism to the era of independence and, finally, to a millennial form of

27 No (known) relation to yours truly.
postcolonialism in which the colonial situation lies firmly within the metropolitan political imaginary. What emerges in the pages to come is the outline of a genre that is supple enough to encompass a number of textual forms (a feature which poses additional interesting problems for my project) while still allowing us to keep the broad relationship between ethnography and fiction squarely in view.
Itinerant Fictions: Colonial Cultures and Ethnographic Selfhood in *L’Afrique fantôme* and *Oui mon commandant!*

It has long been taken for granted that ethnographers in Africa during the first half of the twentieth century were in many ways complicit with the everyday practices (not to mention the ideologies) of colonial regimes. In fact, the recognition of this complicity has become the founding myth of contemporary anthropology to such an extent that even to mention it anymore seems redundant and rather curious.  

However, in this opening chapter I aim to problematize ethnographic complicity by examining the problematic symbiosis of fiction, ethnography and relationships to colonialism and the colonial state in Michel Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme* and Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *Oui mon commandant!* These texts together offer visions of ethnographic selfhood, which we can understand as textual constructions of the persona of an anthropologist that emerge from the messiness of fieldwork and from reflections on fraught and problematic fieldwork experiences. In these two works, ethnographic selves are produced through the narration of voyages through French colonial Africa, and this chapter raises and responds to two inextricably

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linked questions: first, I ask why a relationship to colonialism functions as a privileged and fraught mediator through which ethnographic selfhood becomes meaningful and coherent. Second, I ask how this form of selfhood, which relies for its elaboration on the narrative possibilities of anthropological writing, is composed of constantly shifting relations between fiction and ethnography. Although these texts are not fictional works in the strict sense of the term, I argue that fictive elements move in each of them in provocative ways and that both Hampâté Bâ and Leiris incorporate fictional concepts and strategies as literary devices that hold together their ethnographic narratives. These recourses to fiction do not spring from the same desire in both cases, though: for Hampâté Bâ the incorporation of fiction supplements and enhances a relationship he cultivates to the reader that is characterized by openness, didacticism and a sense of ethnographic pedagogy. Leiris, by contrast, highlights what for him are ethnography’s attendant fictional pursuits in an effort to provoke an alienation-effect for his reader that is akin to the alienation he experiences in relation to fieldwork and Africa more generally.

Leiris’s *L’Afrique fantôme* was published in 1934, five years after Leiris cut his literary teeth working for the Surrealist journal *Documents* with Georges Bataille and Georges Henri Rivière. Leiris (1901-1990) was interested from the outset in publishing articles that put Marxist theories into conversation with the social sciences and Marcel Griaule recruited him for the Dakar-Djibouti Mission even though Leiris had no formal training in ethnography. Upon his return from Africa he began studying ethnology under Marcel Mauss at the Institut d’ethnologie in Paris while also turning his literary interests
to autobiography, a shift that can hardly surprise readers of his African journal given its increasingly personal and introspective tone. Leiris’s first autobiographical work, *L’âge d’homme*, which reads in many ways like an ethnography of his own self, was published shortly after *L’Afrique fantôme* and would later be followed by four other autobiographical volumes (collectively called *La règle du jeu*) published between 1948 and 1976. Leiris supplemented his literary career by working for *Les Temps modernes* and by continuing to pursue ethnography, most notably in research trips to study race and ethnicity in the French Antilles which resulted in the 1955 UNESCO publication *Contacts de civilisation en Martinique et en Guadeloupe*. In addition to his ambitious ethnographic and autobiographical work, Leiris also wrote critical essays on art, theater, opera and jazz in which he outlines varied (and occasionally contradictory) positions on contemporary politics, aesthetics and his relationship to successive literary movements.²

Although Leiris’s journalistic account of his work as *secrétaire-archiviste* for Marcel Griaule’s 1931-33 Dakar-Djibouti Mission is by far the better known text, Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *Oui mon commandant!*, the second of his two published volumes of memoirs³, intersects with Leiris’s sprawling travel diary in several provocative respects. Written in the late 1970s and early 80s but published posthumously in 1994, *Oui*

² See Seán Hand’s monograph on Leiris’s critical work, which does well to outline and engage with Leiris’s opinions and perspectives as they are articulated through his critical essays: *Alter Ego: The Critical Writings of Michel Leiris* (Oxford: Legenda, European Humanities Research Centre, 2004).
³ The first volume, *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul*, has received much more critical attention than the second and ends with Amadou being “banished” to a post as a lowly colonial civil servant in Upper Volta after having refused to attend the prestigious *Ecole normale* in Gorée, Senegal. Although I will refer to this first volume in this chapter, I will focus my analytic gaze primarily on the second since it deals specifically with Amadou’s career as a civil servant in the French colonial bureaucracy and with the ethnographic work he was able to carry out thanks to the mobility his job afforded him.
*mon commandant!* tells the story of Hampâté Bâ’s travels through his native French Sudan (now Mali) and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) during a period—roughly 1920-40—that overlaps with Leiris and Griaule’s fieldwork journey.\(^4\) Their itineraries also partially converged as both Hampâté Bâ and Leiris traveled from Bamako through Mopti in the French Sudan and down into Upper Volta to the colonial hinterland of Ouagadougou: when reading these texts in concert one has little trouble imagining Hampâté Bâ as one of the many indigenous interpreters, clerks and other civil servants with whom Leiris and his colleagues came into contact as they wheedled their way into the good graces of the colonial administration in French West Africa (AOF) in order to facilitate their fieldwork.

Hampâté Bâ’s itinerary reflects the various posts to which he was affected as a member of the French colonial bureaucracy. Although Hampâté Bâ (1900 or 1901-1991) was raised as a Muslim in an aristocratic Fulani family in the French Sudan (Mali) and attended Koranic schools as a child, his family was pressed to send him to French schools designed to produce indigenous colonial civil servants of all types. After several years of French schooling in Djenne and Bamako (interrupted when he ran away to rejoin his family), he won admission to but refused to attend the prestigious Ecole normale William Ponty in Gorée, Senegal, that would have enabled him to become a high-level state

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\(^4\) In fact, Hampâté Bâ came to develop close working relations with Griaule while employed as an ethnographer after 1940 and forged a lasting friendship with Germaine Dieterlen, Griaule’s longtime anthropological collaborator. In the late 40s Hampâté Bâ frequented the black Parisian intelligentsia centered around the fledgling journal *Présence africaine* with which Leiris was associated, and it is certainly no great stretch to conclude that the two knew each other. See Muriel Devey, *Hampâté Bâ: l’homme de la tradition* (Dakar: LivreSud, 1993), 86-107.
employee or teacher. This refusal so incensed local French administrators that they gave Hampâté Bâ the intentionally humiliating (in relation to his qualifications) job of “écrivain temporaire à titre essentiellement précaire et révocable,” a position that situated him in the “essentially precarious” position somewhere between high-level French state bureaucrats and “traditional” illiterate indigenous subjects. Adding insult to injury, the French colonial government in Bamako sent Hampâté Bâ to Upper Volta, which at the time was a recently incorporated, isolated colony; this was the least desirable of all possible employment assignments and is the point in Hampâté Bâ’s life story where *Oui mon commandant!* begins.

Hampâté Bâ’s career as a civil servant was certainly successful, and he also became known for his talents as an Islamic scholar, spiritual advisor and interpreter of Koranic scripture. This reputation never sat well with certain colonial administrators: the colonial Vichy government removed Hampâté Bâ from the civil service in 1940 due to fears of “Islamization” and he went on to join the Institut français de l’Afrique noire (IFAN) at the behest of the famous Africanist Théodore Monod. It was at the IFAN that Hampâté Bâ received formal training in ethnography and he undertook extensive studies on the transmission (and, indeed, the transmissibility) of West African oral histories under colonial rule. In 1955 he published an ethnohistorical account of the Fulani empire, titled *L’Empire peul du Macina*, after winning a UNESCO scholarship to study in Paris where he met Marcel Griaule. When Mali gained independence in 1960 Hampâté Bâ represented his country in UNESCO in which he served on the executive council for a number of years and also served as Mali’s ambassador to Côte d’Ivoire from 1962-1966.
From the 1970s until his death he devoted himself to writing and classifying his ethnographic archives while living in Abidjan. From there he published the prize-winning *L’Étrange destin de Wangrin*, a sort of ethnographic biography of a colonial civil servant and indigenous trickster and friend of Hampâté Bâ, as well as several works on African Islam and collections, recreations and transcriptions of Malian folk tales. His two volumes of memoirs, *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul* and *Oui mon commandant!*, were written in the 1970s and 80s but would only be published after his death in the early 1990s.

*Oui mon commandant!* is the semi-fictional autobiographical account of Amadou’s double exile (both from the upper strata of the French colonial state and from the masses of illiterate indigenous French colonial subjects) and of the ways in which the contingencies it fosters allow him to collect local oral histories while providing a detailed ethnographic look at the French colonial bureaucracy from his liminal position in it. In this memoir, Hampâté Bâ discusses his travels from job to job, outpost to outpost, in both the French Sudan and Upper Volta, describing in great and often hilarious detail his relationships with other indigenous civil servants and white French administrators. In addition to more conventional autobiographical narration, the text is full of anecdotes and stories of adventures (either Amadou’s own or those of people he knows or has heard about) that offer a rich and varied portrait of everyday life as a colonial subject and employee in the French colonial bureaucracy. Hampâté Bâ puts to great narrative use his

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5 Throughout this chapter I will refer to “Hampâté Bâ” as the author of the text and “Amadou” as the autobiographical self who appears in the memoirs and who takes on the characteristics of a literary character narrating other stories for his imagined readers. Hampâté Bâ always refers to himself as “je” in the memoir, but I would like to differentiate between these two aspects of the same person in order to highlight the very literariness of one of them.
penchant for storytelling and for ethnographic description, and his anecdotes and vignettes often take place in implicit dialogue with imagined (Western) readers who, he assumes, are eager to learn not only about “traditional” life in West Africa but also about how the French colonial administration functioned from the inside.° Hampâté Bâ’s autobiographical and ethnographic reflections are bound up with a concern for both the form and content of traditional West African forms of storytelling that blend together intimate forms of knowledge transmission with stylized and fictional flourishes that allow a storyteller to personalize his material.°° Thus through an imagined pact with the well-

° While Hampâté Bâ’s relationship to his readers is generally implicit yet palpable due to the text’s didactic nature, there are several instances in his memoirs where he does address his readers more directly. In Amkoullel, l’enfant peul, for example, he discusses how he and his age-mates in his village founded a waaldé, an association for young men that had quite intricate governmental rules and whose members had a keen sense of political rhetoric. He writes, “Certains lecteurs occidentaux s’étonneront peut-être que des gamins d’une moyenne d’âge de dix à douze ans puissent tenir des réunions de façon aussi réglementaire et en tenant un tel langage. C’est que tout ce que nous faisions tendait à imiter le comportement des adultes, et depuis notre âge le plus tendre le milieu dans lequel nous baignions était celui du verbe.” See Hampâté Bâ, Amkoullel, l’enfant peul (Paris: Actes Sud, 1991), 207. Likewise, at one point in Oui mon commandant!, Amadou tells the story of how he and a companion asked a famous religious scholar to pray that they stay dry during strong storms that threatened to drench them during a trip from Kayes to Koniakary in western French Sudan. Incredibly, the storms passed all around the two travelers and left them dry. “Pour un esprit cartésien,” explains Amadou, “notre aventure ne fut rien d’autre que l’effet d’une coïncidence extraordinaire mais hasardeuse. Pour nous, il était hors de doute que c’était là une manifestation patente de la puissance divine...” See Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant! (Paris: Actes Sud, 1994), 290-91. While both of these examples are exceptions since they explicitly refer to presumed Western readers, they nonetheless demonstrate how Hampâté Bâ creates a didactic autobiography with his readers firmly in mind. And we, as readers, are thoroughly taken in by this relationship because we know that the success of the narrative depends to no small extent on our belief in the authority of the autobiographical narrator. For a thoughtful and inventive book-length analysis of our belief and emotional investment in textual characters, see Blakey Vermeule, Why Do We Care about Literary Characters? (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). Although Vermeule is concerned primarily with fictional characters, his analysis holds for literary characters in general, of which Hampâté Bâ’s textual instantiation of himself is undoubtedly one.

°° This is part of what Kusum Aggarwal calls Hampâté Bâ’s “écriture romanesque” in her study Amadou Hampâté Bâ et l’africanisme: De la recherché anthropologique à la fonction auctoriale (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1999), 228-44. These concerns, and the modes of writing they require for their articulation, are what enable Hampâté Bâ so dexterously to bridge the gap between conventional ethnographic realism and “storytelling” understood in its broadest sense.
meaning reader, Oui mon commandant! becomes both an autobiographical bildungsroman and an ethnographic text with an implied pedagogical bent, concerned as it is with teaching readers about the cultural traditions with which he was so familiar.

Although Hampâté Bâ’s ethnography of the colonial state does not present us with a sustained critique of what Gary Wilder has called colonialism’s “political rationality,” Michel Leiris offers us a similar ambiguity: he often highlights moments of intense discomfort with representatives of the colonial state while underlining his dependence on the bureaucracy in order to carry out the mission which, in any case, represents one-sided colonial ethnography at its finest. However, this chapter begins from the proposition that indicting Leiris on charges of complicity or irresponsible ethnography (some would say thievery) is analytically unhelpful and dismisses the highly intimate, confessional form and content of L’Afrique fantôme—a text that, paradoxically, was nonetheless written with potential non-specialist readers always in mind. We must not throw out the ethnographic baby with the colonial bathwater, as it were, and we can observe how the problem of complicity in ethnography (which he defined in his 1950 introduction as “lived poetry”) for Leiris is intimately linked to a “phantom” self from which he tries to escape during his voyage and which he finds he is condemned to endlessly reassemble. Likewise, ethnography as an epistemological project presents Leiris with similar frustrations, as it appears incapable of ever effecting the type of self-Other fusion that for

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him would produce true anthropological knowledge. The “real” Africa, it seems, always lies somewhere up ahead, such that Leiris the ethnographer continuously bumps up against fictions, ghostly and derealized versions of what he believes to be authentic people and places that exist somewhere other than where he finds himself. As he puts it after the fact in the introduction he wrote in 1950, in retrospect what the confessional nature of his journal entries highlights is not anything about the “real” Africa, but rather simply the feelings of a thirty year-old European who was surprised “de ne pas échapper à lui-même quand il eût dû s’apercevoir que les raisons trop personnelles qui l’avaient décidé à s’arracher à ses proches empêchaient, dès le principe, qu’il en fût autrement.”

Thus the new form of selfhood after which Leiris chases throughout his journey turns out to be just as fictional as the Africa he hoped to find through ethnographic fieldwork.

Fiction for Leiris appears indissolubly tied to what he perceives as the perpetually disappointing inauthenticity of ethnographic objects, a form of epistemological malaise that, by extension, infects and sterilizes ethnography as such. From this perspective, *L’Afrique fantôme* tells the story of Leiris’s growing disappointment with ethnography as a discipline through increasingly introspective comments woven into more conventional ethnographic reporting about meetings with informants, objects collected to be brought back to France, and the day-to-day administrative details of the mission. Throughout the journal he wrestles at length with the nagging realization that although his political beliefs and anthropological aspirations lead him to condemn colonialism intellectually, he

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ultimately cannot divest himself fully of the affective ties that connect him to the colonial project and to the ways in which his own subjectivity is bound up in that project. The text itself is divided into two parts, the first of which describes the mission’s trip to Africa and fieldwork in the territories comprising French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa (AEF), as well as northern Nigeria and the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. In this first half, Leiris’s writing is relatively straightforward, if marked at times by frustrating comments about how certain areas are “too civilized” and about how anxious he is to finally arrive in the “real” Africa. The journal takes a turn, though, just before the second part, when Leiris and his colleagues are forced to wait for several months at the border between the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and independent Abyssinia. The Abyssinian officials put the research team through increasingly ridiculous sorts of bureaucratic rigmarole and Leiris’s journal entries grow more introspective and more disillusioned with the possibilities of a successful continuation of the journey, even though he tries to convince himself that an authentic Africa is still attainable once the mission is finally granted entry into Abyssinia. Thus, about a third of the way through the journal (right before the seemingly arbitrary break between the first and second parts of the text) when, having reached the Abyssinian border, he declares “Voici enfin l’AFRIQUE, la terre des 50° à l’ombre, des convois d’esclaves, des festins cannibales, des crânes vides, de toutes les choses qui sont mangées, corrodées, perdus,”11 we as readers have long since stopped believing him, our expectations having been frustrated several times already by similar statements made in

11 Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 279.
this vein. It would seem, additionally, that Leiris does not even believe himself, since his use of “enfin” is immediately followed by a romanticizing enumeration that can only serve to construct yet another imagined Africa that is but tenuously grounded in the everyday forms of social life the mission attempts to document. Quite predictably, then, this declaration falls flat on its face as the rest of the journal (which deals with fieldwork on spirit possession in rural Abyssinia and a breakdown of relations between Leiris and his informants) is broadly marked by boredom, disillusionment, and listless introspection. Anthropology as a knowledge project in Leiris’s journal is in many ways condemned to unveil fictional ethnographic objects in their very inauthenticity, and Leiris remains highly skeptical of what he sees as the goals that anthropology sets for itself.  

My reading of Leiris’s disappointment is thus consonant with James Clifford’s assessment in *The Predicament of Culture* of Bronislaw Malinowski’s well known field research and writing on the Trobriand islanders: for Clifford, the ethnographic self that emerges in Malinowski’s writings is a persona created from “fictional self-fashioning” who can speak authoritatively about culture and rationalize the often ambivalent messiness of field research.  

Clifford’s book also contains a short essay on *L’Afrique fantôme*, but this brief text focuses more on the journal’s “inexplicability:” its awkwardness as ethnography, as narrative, and as (failed) attempt to compose a new

12 Of course, whether he even wants to be satisfied by these goals is another matter entirely, one that I will consider at some length below. Édouard Glissant provides a rich overview of Leiris’s dissatisfaction with ethnography in his essay “Michel Leiris ethnographe,” *Les Lettres nouvelles* 43 (1956): 609-21.

identity. For my purposes, his reading of Malinowski is actually more useful since it explicitly poses the question of the problematic relationship between ethnographic selfhood and elements of fiction. Clifford’s reading of Malinowski suggests that ethnographic writing itself represents the “fictional invention” of cultural constructs produced from “a mass of field notes, documents, memories, and so forth.” However, while Clifford’s reading demonstrates how we might establish an ex post facto relationship between fiction and ethnography, in L’Afrique fantôme Leiris appears acutely aware of this relationship to the point where his realization of its attendant paradoxes and problems is a principal cause of negative affect and restlessness.

Reading L’Afrique fantôme in conjunction with Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s Oui mon commandant! encourages us to draw out distinctions between two forms of fiction that are at play in these texts. Whereas Leiris’s daily narrative of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission accounts for the various fictions that ethnography is forever condemned to chase, Hampâté Bâ’s work more explicitly weaves fiction into the very form of the autobiographical memoir. Much like Leiris, Hampâté Bâ was meticulous about recording ethnographic observations about the various cultures he encountered during his travels as a colonial civil servant. At the end of the first volume of his memoirs, Amkoullel, l’enfant peul, as he prepares to travel up the Niger river to join his post in Upper Volta,

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he explains that “J’avais emporté avec moi une provision de gros cahiers-registres. J’en pris un qui devint mon premier ‘journal.’ A Koulikoro [a town on the banks of the Niger], et par la suite durant tout mon voyage, j’y noterai les principaux événements de la journée, et surtout tout ce que je verrai ou entendrai d’intéressant se rapportant à nos traditions orales. Une fois l’habitude prise, je ne cesserai plus de le faire ma vie durant.”

This explanation both highlights Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic connection to Leiris, as both took care to record everyday life in the most personal of written forms, and, at the same time, it permits us to begin distinguishing the role fiction plays in Hampâté Bâ’s memoirs. Commentators such as Ralph Austen have pointed to the complex problems, both on the level of form and content, that the textual/ethnographic recording of orality raises in Hampâté Bâ’s autobiographical texts. Both volumes of his memoirs are resolutely intertextual, comprising innumerable anecdotes, ethnographic explanations of local customs and cultures as well as folk tales and oral histories recounted by griot musicians or other raconteurs, if not by Amadou himself. The fact that Hampâté Bâ was not present at many anecdotal scenes (certain of which deal with his own biography) that he nonetheless describes in engagingly entertaining detail, dialogues at the ready, prompts us to read these examples of the colonial *bildungsroman* as literary-fictional

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19 Jean-Marc Moura highlights Hampâté Bâ’s sense of intertextuality by examining what he refers to as the ownership of the various forms of narrative that appear in the memoirs and in *L’étrange destin de Wangrin*, Hampâté Bâ’s biography (that reads like a pseudo-novel) of a trickster friend who was also a civil servant. See Moura, “Textual Ownership in *L’étrange destin de Wangrin* (The Fortunes of Wangrin) by Amadou Hampâté Bâ,” *Research in African Literatures* 37, no. 1 (2006): 91-99.
recreations of oral traditions that were particularly threatened during the colonial period. As Moradewun Adejunmobi observes, this perspective goes beyond locating Hampâté Bâ as an African writer whose sense of stylistics is always already inflected by orality; rather, privileging an idea of literary recreation, as I do, permits us to notice how for Hampâté Bâ the textualization of orality is necessary for the preservation of oral texts in their very non-literary singularity. Adejunmobi helpfully points out that Hampâté Bâ’s writing, unlike that of similar West African bildungsroman writers like Camara Laye, is “unmistakably anthropological,” as it “remind[s] us that we are confronted here not simply with creative texts, but with a documentary about African societies.” Oui mon commandant! is especially complex, I suggest, precisely because it relies on the fundamental undecidability and indistinguishability between the “creative” literary narrative and the documentary aims of ethnographic writing.

Much of the scholarship on Hampâté Bâ’s work pays comparatively less attention to this second volume of memoirs, and yet Oui mon commandant! was published in 1994,

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22 Inmaculada Díaz Narbona and Cristina Boidard Boisson gesture in this direction when they discuss the textual recreation of Tradition in Hampâté Bâ’s work. See their “Amadou Hampâté Bâ: Un voyage à travers la tradition,” International Journal of Francophone Studies 5, no. 1 (2002): 48-57, 54-55. Adejunmobi also situates Hampâté Bâ’s larger literary project in what he calls “the politics of the representation of orality in African texts.” For Adejunmobi, where Hampâté Bâ distinguishes himself from other francophone African writers who are also concerned with the textual representation of orality is in his focus on “the emergence of a historical context privileging writing above oral transmission” rather than on orality on its own. Hampâté Bâ’s focus on this emergence is unique, Adejunmobi argues, and, paraphrasing Ato Quayson, he suggests that Hampâté Bâ’s work “signals ‘a paradigmatic shift’ in the way francophone African writers use and appropriate indigenous resources.” See Adejunmobi, “Disruptions of Orality,” 27. For a broader discussion of orality in African novels, see Eileen Julien, African Novels and the Question of Orality (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3-42.
only two years after the publication of the first volume (both were published posthumously, as Hampâté Bâ died in Abidjan in 1991). It is also the most ethnographic of his texts, concerned as it is with representing his “fieldwork” among local colonized populations and characterized as it is by what contemporary ethnographers would recognize as reflexive interrogations of his own position in colonial structures of power and vis-à-vis his fellow indigenous Africans. As it allows the adult Amadou to tell his story, *Oui mon commandant!* also acts as a way to flesh out Amadou as a literary character, one who is created by Hampâté Bâ the author and who provides us with multiple other narratives from within the first-order narrative of the text itself (and to highlight this distinction I generally refer to the character in the text as Amadou and the author of *Oui mon commandant!* as Hampâté Bâ). At the beginning of the text, Amadou hints to readers that the narrative will be comprised of numerous récits collected during his travels as an administrator: “Il était d’usage, en effet, que les fonctionnaires en déplacement tiennent une sorte de journal de route ou ‘état de voyage.’ Pour ma part, j’utilisais surtout mon grand registre pour y inscrire tous les récits que j’entendais et que ma mémoire, entrainée à cet exercice depuis l’enfance, me restituait fidèlement dès que je me retrouvais seul.”24 Amadou the character is thus also Amadou the storyteller, at once the object of a narrative and a producer of additional narratives contained within his own story. In this respect we can consider Amadou as one of Tzvetan Todorov’s “narrative-men,” a character in a text whose life story is situated within and between disparate

24 Hampâté Bâ, *Oui mon commandant!,* 32.
narrative threads that refer to one another, complete each other and simultaneously produce an array of new narrative instantiations; this literary hall of mirrors produces what Todorov calls embedding and embedded narratives.\textsuperscript{25} Hampâté Bâ’s narratives recount the lives and adventures of colonial administrators, the histories of the cities and towns he visits during his travels, and his own run-ins with (or narrow escapes from) French authorities with bad intentions. These embedding and embedded narratives are, at one and the same time, what lend Hampâté Bâ’s memoirs their “documentariness” as anthropological texts and what allow him to imagine himself literarily as a character who recreates oral traditions for an audience.\textsuperscript{26}

Although Hampâté Bâ’s employment in the French colonial administration is, by and large, only mentioned in passing in the literature on his work\textsuperscript{27} the same does not hold true for Michel Leiris, whose relationship to the French colonial state figures much more prominently in critical engagements with \textit{L’Afrique fantôme}.\textsuperscript{28} Anthropologist Jean Jamin, for example, traces in broad strokes how the Dakar-Djibouti Mission legitimized fieldwork in French anthropology by bridging the epistemological and institutional gap separating those researchers who collected ethnographic data from those who, ensconced

\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, throughout both volumes of memoirs Hampâté Bâ apostrophizes his readers (who he often assumes are Western) in order to explain or expand upon concepts, cultural rituals or matters of historical concern that he imagines will not be immediately understood.
\textsuperscript{27} The notable exception, as I have mentioned above, being Ralph Austen’s chapter on Hampâté Bâ and Jacques Kuoh Moukouri, both interpreters for white French administrators in AOF and Cameroon, respectively. See Austen, “Interpreters Self-Interpreted.”
in their armchairs, simply interpreted it. For Jamin, the shift inaugurated by Leiris and Griaule’s mission ran up against the political and cultural realities of colonialism whose implications on field research were twofold: on the one hand, new, in-depth knowledge about colonized populations was thought to have potentially humanizing effects on colonial forms of administration. On the other hand, though, researchers were expected to understand that colonization would forever change local traditions, modes of belonging and social organizations, such that fieldwork was conceived from the start as an exercise in salvage ethnography. Similarly, Marie-Denise Shelton places *L’Afrique fantôme* into conversation with interwar French modernism’s obsession with figures of the primitive and highlights Leiris’s role as producer of colonialist discourses of primitivism, chiding critics such as James Clifford or George Marcus who in her opinion downplay Leiris’s engagement with colonialism in favor of a celebratory focus on selfhood and surrealism. Such an assessment, in my view, forces approaches to *L’Afrique fantôme*

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30 See Jamin, “Objets trouvés des paradis perdus,” 80. Denis Hollier, in his brief commentary on Griaule and surrealist ethnography in Ethiopia, also points to the Mission’s work on salvaging cultural artefacts that, it was assumed, the “natives” were uninterested in preserving. See Denis Hollier, “Ethiopia,” in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, ed. Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 140-45. Hampâté Bâ’s own work at the time, which was self-consciously aimed at salvaging traditions and oral histories he felt were under threat, clearly gives the lie to these assumptions. In many respects, Hampâté Bâ is a typical “native” ethnographer studying his own Fulani (“peul” in French) culture in French Sudan and Upper Volta, but he also branches out and takes a keen ethnographic interest in collecting/recording/preserving oral traditions from among many different West African ethnic groups who find themselves under French colonial rule.

into a rather unsavory zero-sum game in which Leiris is positioned either as a living repository of colonial primitivist ideologies or, alternatively, as a provocative theorist of literary selfhood who we might hope to extricate from his ethnographic context.  

Instead, my focus on fiction and ethnographic narrative encourages us consider Leiris’s relationship to colonialism and his fraught conceptions of selfhood as two sides of the same anthropological coin. Put another way, both the phantom selves that haunt Leiris throughout his journey across Africa as well as the manifold fictive and inauthentic ethnographic objects that ceaselessly frustrate him are in important respects interrogated through his reflections on colonial social relations. Thus although J. Michael Dash views *L’Afrique fanôme* as an “antinarrative,” I am more concerned with considering the ways in which incomplete and fictive narratives of selfhood and ethnographic authenticity are produced and contained within a travel journal that, at its most basic level, does constitute the narrative of a voyage. We can think of the journal as a narrative of what Seán Hand, in his monograph on Leiris, calls *L’Afrique fantôme*’s search for “an authentic narrative

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*Irene Albers has also argued against such dismissive approaches to Leiris’s travel journal and suggests instead that we might focus on the epistemological underpinnings of Leiris’s ethnographic exoticism. See Irene Albers, “Mimesis and Alterity: Michel Leiris’s Ethnography and Poetics of Spirit Possession,” French Studies 62, no. 3 (2008): 271-89.*

*See J. Michael Dash, “Caraïbe Fantôme: The Play of Difference in the Francophone Caribbean,” Yale French Studies 103 (2003): 95. I would suggest that it does not necessarily follow from the presence of one or more stunted or incomplete narratives in a text that the text in question is an antinarrative. It seems to me, rather, and this is implied in my argument, that the failure of narrative can be captured narratively. In other words, we could take another look at Dash’s claim and observe that his assertion misses the ways in which failed narratives might in fact represent constitutive moments of narrative negativity that can be bound up again in another narrative. *L’Afrique fantôme* is thus the narrative of a failure rather than a failed narrative.*
model for self-expression,” that is, as a narrative that contains within itself any number of failed or incomplete narrative false starts and dead ends.34

Reading Leiris’s problematic ethnographic narrative alongside that of Hampâté Bâ is not just a hermeneutic strategy intended to highlight the complex forms of anthropological dissonance that emerge when we consider the impressions of a European ethnographer studying African “others” in conjunction with those made by a so-called “native” ethnographer studying his own people. This hermeneutic stance and the comparative reading on which it relies demand to be complicated by the fact that both of these writers’ ethnographic reflections are filtered through their peculiar positions with respect to French colonialism and its manifold forms of administrative bureaucracy.

The Culture of Colonialism and the Anthropological Persona

We are, then, not dealing with straightforward (if paradoxical and problematic) narratives of fieldwork, cultural contact and ethnographic data acquisition. Both Leiris and Hampâté Bâ find that reckoning with colonialism and their relationships to the

34 Seán Hand, Michel Leiris: Writing the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 59. Nathaniel Tarn, for his part, goes one step further and figures that “Leiris’s record needs to be taken far more as an autobiographical (and hence, no doubt, literary) document than as an anthropological one.” While this chapter is not concerned with what Leiris’s ethnography might offer us in the form of “evidence,” Tarn’s point regarding the literariness of Leiris’s text is well taken. See Tarn, “Michel Leiris, Timor Mortis, and the Peopled Self: A Reading of L’Afrique fantôme as Auto-Anthropology,” in The Embattled Lyric: Essays and Conversations in Poetics and Anthropology (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 78-79. Catherine Maubon, by contrast, points out that we cannot reduce L’Afrique fantôme to its moments of provocative introspection, and that what moves the text is precisely Leiris’s alternation between introspective and ethnographic-descriptive modes of articulation. See Maubon, Michel Leiris: en marge de l’autobiographie (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1994), 136.
French colonial state is an indispensable part of ethnographic knowledge production; in short, both writers are acutely aware that colonialism writ large conceptually mediates their interaction with anthropology and ethnographic field research. The textual corollary to this ethically tinged epistemological problem is that, following Clifford’s reading of Conrad and Malinowski mentioned above, Hampâté Bâ and Leiris are obliged to create themselves as anthropological personae in response to the colonial situation. I do not use the word “obliged” here lightly, for in fact this process of “ethnographic self-fashioning” as Clifford calls it, is textually necessary for our two authors to maintain and demonstrate a modicum of reflexive self-awareness. The question under consideration here is, how do Leiris and Hampâté Bâ approach and negotiate this imperative? For both writers, the colonial state, and colonialism more generally, becomes a heuristic device enabling them to cultivate and/or represent self-knowledge and self-awareness. Hampâté Bâ, for his part, calls attention to his work for the colonial bureaucracy in order to foster what I call a sense of “ethnographic didacticism,” that is, a relationship to readers that seeks to instruct them via an examination of the complexities of his own subjectivity. For Leiris, though, reflections on the colonial situation prompt an inward turn, and his introspective investigation of his disappointment with fieldwork and inability to oppose colonialism in the way he feels he should result in his calling into question the very possibility that ethnography can create the new form of selfhood that he has come to Africa to seek.

As its suggestive title indicates, in Oui mon commandant! Hampâté Bâ takes up this task by weaving an account of his own subject position as a colonial civil servant into his autobiographical narrative and his didactic anthropological observations on changing
African traditions. This reflexive move allows him to evaluate how his work for the colonial state actually facilitates his ethnographic fieldwork. Crucially, it also allows him to provide an ethnographic account of French administrative life in West Africa: the colonial administration appears as a diffuse cultural-political unit worthy of ethnographic attention and description in its own right. Whereas colonial relations emerge in *Oui mon commandant!* as sites of cultural contact deserving of ethnographic commentary, for Leiris the French administration is a rather different beast entirely. On the one hand, the Dakar-Djibouti Mission cannot proceed without its support, and Leiris is painfully aware that in many respects he has more in common with white French administrators than he does with the people with whom he so earnestly strives to forge ethnographic-affective bonds. On the other hand, though, throughout *L’Afrique fanôme* he is increasingly desperate to escape those aspects of himself that would tie him to France and the colonial situation—a fact attested to by the preamble and introduction added by Leiris to the journal many years afterwards, in retrospective attempts to refocus and resituate the text in the light of emerging anticolonial struggles and, later, decolonization. Thus while Hampâté Bâ’s literary production of his own anthropological persona comes in part through an ethnographic look at the French colonial state, Leiris’s ambivalent complicity prompts him to turn his ethnographic gaze on himself, thereby calling into question the very viability of anthropological forms of selfhood.

Turning first to Hampâté Bâ, in *Oui mon commandant!* the now grown-up Amadou shuttles from outpost to outpost, first in Upper Volta and then back in French Sudan, trying to work his way out of the hilariously menial job of “écrivain temporaire à
titre essentiellement précaire et révocable,” and taking advantage of his semi-voluntary relocations to collect oral histories from subject indigenous populations. While this job description in reality amounts to that of a clerk and part-time bookkeeper for various white administrators, it also confers on Amadou the status of “blanc-noir,” that is, an African who has either made his way in business or gone through enough colonial schooling to enjoy a post in the local bureaucracy. As Amadou explains to us in typical didactic fashion, this status is part of a racial taxonomy developed by Africans, what he calls “la hiérarchie indigène,” that exists alongside, without mapping neatly onto, juridical modes of classification that separate different types of citizens from different types of subjects in French West Africa.35 He goes on to point out that “Du point de vue de la division ‘officielle’ des classes, j’étais un sujet français lettré, né au Soudan et non au Sénégal, donc juste au-dessus de la dernière catégorie [the noirs-noirs, or unassimilated African subjects]. Mais selon la hiérarchie indigène, j’étais incontestablement un blanc-noir, ce qui, on l’a vu, nous valait quelques privilèges—à cette réserve près qu’à l’époque le dernier des Blancs venait toujours avant le premiers des Noirs…”37 An integral part of Hampâté Bâ’s account of his own positioning is his awareness that while his job as a low-level administrator does little to advance his status in the eyes of French colons, his labor racializes him in such a way that he becomes nominally whitened in the eyes of so-called “traditional” Africans. Amadou is aware, in

35 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 229-30.
3* Had he been born in one of the relatively privileged quatre communes of Senegal (Dakar, Gorée, Rufisque or Saint Louis), he would have enjoyed French citizenship from birth. Since Hampâté Bâ was born Sudanese he is a French subject with little hope of attaining French citizenship.
37 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 230. Emphasis in original.
other words, that his identity is caught between flux and stasis, since his blackness is as much relative, according to the supple indigenous hierarchy, as it is absolute, caught in the ontological fixity of colonial racial taxonomies.

*Oui mon commandant*, from this perspective, offers us an ever-proliferating array of interstices in which Amadou is situated. To take another example, we might consider the moment when, upon taking up a coveted post in the town of Dori, Amadou makes the sartorial blunder of dressing in his finest European garb to pay his respects to the white commandant. Ignoring the stares and smirks of the townsfolk as he makes his way to the commandant’s office as well as the warnings offered by the other indigenous bureaucrats, he finds himself sent away by the commandant who summarily tells him, “Eh ben mon cochon!...tu ferais pas mal d’aller t’habiller comme tous les autres nègres. Tu ne feras pas long feu ici…!”38 In this instance, Amadou’s mimetic desire reveals a series of liminal positions in which he is situated: not quite a colonial *évolué*, he is not a typical indigenous subject, either, due to his status as a *blanc-noir*. Further, his relative importance in the local bureaucratic hierarchy means that he does not necessarily have to heed the advice of his juniors who, having worked at the post for some time, offer what turn out to be rather sound tips.

As should be clear at this point, what is at stake here is not simply Amadou feeling out of place on any number of accounts. Rather, my point is that once we begin analytically to pick at major moments of colonial dis-location we provoke the

38 Hampâté Bâ, *Oui mon commandant!*, 183.
proliferation of what I call many “micro-exiles.” Nowhere is this more apparent in the text than when Amadou interacts with low-level indigenous employees, Africans who possess a small amount of colonial schooling and who can thus occupy such positions as cooks, guards, or messengers. Not only is Amadou’s distance from these lowly civil servants coded by educational and class differences, but he is also distanced from them both linguistically and racially. First, on a linguistic level, these employees (even if they are native Fulbe speakers like our hero) address Amadou in the imperfect French that he calls *forofifon naspa*. It is unclear whether this term was invented by Hampâté Bâ or whether it was commonly used in the colonial period, but this pidgin French resembles the *français des tirailleurs* spoken by colonial African soldiers fighting for France in the two World Wars and is characterized primarily by jumbled tenses and unconjugated verbs. A striking example of this fraught linguistic interaction occurs early in *Oui mon commandant!*, when Amadou arrives in Ségou and presents himself to an indigenous guard in anticipation of his required meeting with the local *commandant de cercle*:

“Bonjour, garde de cercle!
--Missié y demander qui?
--Je viens me présenter au commandant de cercle.
--Toi voir d’abord le grand interprète. Lui y connaît manière.”

Thus the distance between Amadou and these functionaries is instantiated anew with each utterance that occurs between speaking beings who, nonetheless, perfectly understand each other. This linguistic differentiation also indicates a racialized form of

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39 In French West Africa (AOF), the *cercle* was the smallest unit of colonial administration. It is an administrative and geographical division still in use in contemporary Mali. Indigenous functionaries passing through various *cercles* in their travels were expected to check in and pay their respects to the French commandants.

40 Hampâté Bâ, *Oui mon commandant!*, 23.
distancing since the usage of correct French marks Amadou as a blanc-noir, a racial
category that is socially and linguistically constructed, that is recognized as such, but that
still takes on great sociocultural salience. Somewhat paradoxically, then, this process of
differential racialization takes place through the intermingling of distinct linguistic
registers understood by both parties but that are always already markers of class
difference. While the sort of racial indeterminacy that makes one a blanc-noir (which is,
still, a complete fiction, since when Amadou actually tries to perform his blanc-noir
status for the commandant he is soundly criticized—one is only a blanc-noir to other
noirs, as it were) confers upon our hero certain privileges, it also actualizes multiple
forms of exile that require Amadou to keep shifting positions vis-à-vis his white French
superiors, lesser functionaries, lowly state employees speaking little or no French, not to
mention other Africans who live on the margins of colonial life and force Amadou to act
according to social rules that have nothing in common with those of the colonial
bureaucracy.

However, our hero is also well aware that due to his liminal social status he is
capable of feeding his nascent obsession with collecting oral histories and accounts of
local traditions, and he describes the ways in which he negotiates his classed and
racialized in-betweenness as a methodological advantage to conducting fieldwork. This
becomes clear from one of the opening scenes of the second volume, a complex passage
demanding careful attention, when the boat carrying Amadou and his entourage up the
Niger River from French Sudan into Upper Volta stops for a night at a town called
Niamina. Realizing that his arrival will be feted by griots who, as our narrator reminds us,
are simultaneously historians, singer-songwriters and petty extortionists trafficking in excessive flattery, he decides to one-up the musicians by playing up his status as a state functionary in order to persuade the griots to sing him the history of the town without making him pay a hefty sum. The scene opens in typical Hampâté Bâ fashion, with ethnographic commentary on the role of the griot in traditional West African culture to which is added the rhetorical flourish of a local illustrative proverb: “Un griot a en effet le droit, reconnu par la coutume,” he explains, “de formuler à l’encontre du noble qui s’aviseraient de lui fermer sa bourse les reproches les plus irrévérencieux...Aussi les nobles s’empressent-ils généralement de combler le griot. Si tu veux éviter que le chien ne te morde et ne te communique pas la rage, jette-lui un os, dit un proverbe peul du Mali.”\(^{41}\)

Having culturally contextualized the scene and punctuated it with a bit of instructive local knowledge, Hampâté Bâ goes on briefly to describe the griot’s functions in traditional society: “Tout à la fois animateur public, porte-parole et intermédiaire, le griot remplissait jadis une fonction essentielle dans la société traditionnelle de la savane, où toute relation était fondée sur la notion d’échange.”\(^{42}\) It is clear here that Hampâté Bâ’s cultural contextualization is also ethnographically didactic, since he is apostrophizing a readerly public who, he imagines, might be unfamiliar with the customs under consideration and, thus, risk misunderstanding the scene that follows without the requisite amount of cultural explanation.

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\(^{41}\) Hampâté Bâ, _Oui mon commandant!,_ 8. Emphasis in original.

\(^{42}\) Hampâté Bâ, _Oui mon commandant!,_ 9.
The scene continues with a savvy narrator deciding to make his nobility known by remaining in his cabin while the griot speaks to his servant and inquires about the mysterious individual traveling up the river. Finally Amadou steps out onto the deck, ready to take advantage of his social standing: “Le griot, malgré notre différence d’âge et sa tenue somptueuse, s’avance vers moi tête nue et pieds déchaussés en signe de respect, et vient s’accroupir humblement sur le sable à quelques mètres de ma natte.” The griot then addresses Amadou, and it is here that Hampâté Bâ the writer decides to cite the griot directly (rather than paraphrasing his words and putting them into the mouth of Amadou) in three paragraphs of recreated dialogue that offer an example of how fiction seeps into Hampâté Bâ’s narrative. The reader is aware at this point that the griot’s speech is approximated and recreated in the text, and Hampâté Bâ does not claim to be reproducing his words verbatim. (Although our narrator certainly has the type of memory that lends itself to prolific storytelling and richly detailed anecdotes, he does not expect his audience to believe that he can conjure up decades-old conversations word for word!) This recreation, both partially fictionalized and borrowed from a “real life” encounter, also serves to give Western readers a rich taste of what the griot’s language looks like: “Ohé, Komikè, Homme-qui-écrit! dit-il. Bonsoir! Sois le bienvenu à Niamina, la ville où résident les plus habiles teinturières de tout le pays, celles qui vous demandent de choisir, parmi les nuages du ciel, la teinte que vous désirez.” While it is undecidable whether Hampâté Bâ “really” recalls verbatim the words of the griot, what stands out here is both 

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43 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 11.
44 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 11.
how the recreation of the scene takes place in true ethnographic realist style, designed to paint as vivid a cultural portrait as possible for the reader, as well as how our narrator uses his class position to his anthropological advantage. Ultimately, the griot agrees to recount the history of Niamina in great depth and for a modest sum, and Amadou avoids being taken in by excessive flattery. While the careful manipulation of class differences here raises interesting ethical questions about anthropological fieldwork practices in a moral economy in which both ethnographer and informant are seeking to get as much as they can out of the deal, what is even more striking in this passage is the ethnographic information that Amadou’s cunning use of his subject position allows him to gather. Instead of abandoning himself entirely to the griot’s words and letting his flattery go to his head—which, ultimately, would lead to Amadou showering more money on the griot—he is able to play the role of the aloof but respectful noble to perfection, although not without some temptation. After the griot initially addresses Amadou so loftily, our hero declares that “Abasourdi par cette tirade volubile et lyrique, je ne puis m’empêcher de me sentir tout à coup comme hissé au rang des grands. Le vieil homme…se rend vite compte que je ne suis pas insensible à son discours…Enivré par la magie du verbe du vieux malin, je ne suis plus moi-même. Vais-je devenir entre ses mains tel un lièvre dans la gueule du boa?” Griots, thus, are great sources of ethnographic information as they are living repositories of local knowledge, but Amadou takes care to show us how one must tread carefully in their presence since these men are always looking to flatter their

45 Hampâté Bâ, *Oui mon commandant!*, 12.
way into extra money. In Amadou’s case, he is able to highlight his status as a civil
servant in order to persuade the griot to tell him everything he wants to know, but he
remains humble enough to avoid handing over large sums (the implication being that this
would certainly not be possible for others in his position).

What follows this scene, in another passage that is given its own section in the
text, is a roughly ten-page recreation of the history of Niamina told “verbatim” in the
words of the griot. It is not necessary to cite from this extensive oral cultural history for
our purposes; however, Amadou does take pains to explain why he provides this lengthy
passage that does quite little to advance his narrative: “Des récits de ce genre, j’en
entendrai un grand nombre au cours de mon périple; si je rapporte celui-ci, c’est pour
donner une idée de la façon dont, à l’époque, se transmettait l’histoire.”46 Although he is
fascinated by the griot’s stories what is equally important for Hampâté Bâ here is that
form is recorded as well as content. This allows us to return to Adejunmobi’s reading of
Hampâté Bâ’s work and his elucidation of narrative moments that “highlight the
significance of writing for the preservation of oral texts,” which he sees as Hampâté Bâ’s
characteristic preoccupation.47 In other words, Amadou is not simply providing us with
one version of the oral history of a small town in the French Sudan; he is also, crucially,
recording the oral transmissibility of that history as such—its very possibility to be
captured in speech and in writing in the form of the memoir. Thus, even if the oral history
of an obscure town does not allow the narrative to progress, we as readers take away

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46 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 13.
from this scene an image of Amadou as a fieldworker ready to play on his ambiguous subjectivity in order to maximize the ethnographic benefits he can derive from it.

We can observe a similar, if a bit more implicit, sort of ethnographic cunning at work in Amadou’s reflections on and narrations of events and stories dealing with his work as a clerk, accountant or assistant administrator in the French colonial bureaucracy. As he travels from post to post he not only recounts significant happenings from early in his career but also takes care to situate these major events in the day-to-day life of the colonial administration. This narrative strategy provides readers with a perspective on the French administration as a social space possessing its own cultural logic, one that Amadou is in a privileged position to observe since he works for the colonial state while remaining nonetheless a colonized subject. To take an example that amply highlights this liminality, we might consider the episode entitled “Une conversion inattendue,” which describes how Hampâté Bâ, now no longer on the lowest rung of the colonial administration, arrives as a clerk in the Upper Volta town of Tougan and finds that his reputation as an Islamic scholar has preceded him. The other indigenous civil servants, all lapsed Muslims forced by the colonial state to convert to Catholicism, look upon Amadou as a marabout, a religious teacher, a designation that displeases our hero since “[l]e titre de marabout comportait en effet plus d’épines que de fleurs.”

He proceeds to explain that at the time the French considered marabouts to be zealots bent on converting colonized subjects to militant Islam: “aussi l’administration coloniale leur faisait-elle une

48 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 322.
“chasse ouverte,” he concludes, “surtout dans les pays où cette religion n’avait pas encore beaucoup pénétré. Or à l’époque, les Samos, comme les Bobos, les Gourmantchés, les Mossis et presque tous les peuples voltaïques tatoués, ne pratiquaient pas l’Islam.”

Much like the beginning of our opening scene with the griot, then, Hampâté Bâ starts by culturally contextualizing the episode to follow, and in this case he offers a brief commentary on the administration’s dim view of Islamic scholars. The drama occurs when Amadou helps the commandant’s indigenous interpreter renew his Islamic faith, drawing the ire of local French missionaries who convince the authorities in Upper Volta to open an official inquiry on the interpreter’s “conversion.” It so happens that, imbued with the spirit of republican laïcité, the French commandant in question resents the church’s involvement in local affairs and sharply criticizes church leaders in his report, but what is more important for our concerns is the way Amadou rhetorically accounts for his commandant’s actions and religious liberalism, which deserves to be quoted at length:

A l’époque, aucun commandant de cercle ou de subdivision ne pouvait espérer mener une enquête valable à l’insu de son interprète et de son commis; aussi le commandant nous demanda-t-il d’être francs avec lui et de l’aider à mener son enquête sans parti pris…Dans l’histoire de l’administration coloniale, il ne fut pas le seul à oser prendre cette attitude. De tels comportements méritent d’être signalés et prouvent, s’il en était besoin, que l’on ne saurait mettre tous les administrateurs coloniaux dans le même panier. La généralisation, quelle qu’elle soit, n’est jamais le reflet de la réalité.

We can discern two forms of didacticism that emerge in this passage and that differ from the way Amadou rhetorically relates to his readers in the earlier griot episode: first, the object of his didactic discourse has clearly shifted, and Amadou now is able to comment

49 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 322-23.
50 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 328.
authoritatively not only on the everyday activities in his own administrative circle, but also on how these activities are representative of certain humanizing and liberal trends in the administrative culture of French colonialism understood in its broadest historical sense. Second, this ethnographic didacticism has become both informative, intended to fill out the cultural knowledge of well-meaning readers, as well as openly persuasive in that it seeks to disabuse readers of the idea that they might angrily paint all white French administrators with the same brush. Hampâté Bâ is not interested here in offering any sort of naïve apology for certain strains of colonial paternalism; at stake in his commentary is the creation of a persona who can speak with as much authority about the intricacies of colonial social relations as he does about his own cultural traditions and customs. In a sense, we can view this passage as Hampâté Bâ playfully demonstrating his own ethnographic virtuosity, since he is clearly fluent enough in the culture of French administrative life that he is able to anticipate the potential reactions of imagined anti-colonial (implicitly Western) readers and critique them with moralizing ethnographic rhetoric.

For Michel Leiris, the ethnographer’s relationship to the colonial situation prompts far too much introspection to be characterized by the sort of avuncular didacticism that we come across in Hampâté Bâ’s narrative. In the case of *L’Afrique fantôme* the very form of the travel journal traps Leiris from the outset in a more intimate and self-reflexive register, but this formal explanation can only partially account for Leiris’s inward turn since he remained aware at the time of writing that his journal was always already a document composed for a public of readers: indeed, one need look no
further than at the two attempts at a preface drafted by Leiris on April 4, 1932, during the mission’s seemingly interminable wait to cross the border into Abyssinia. In these two drafts, Leiris explains to his imagined public that the overall thesis of the journal (which, he explains, cannot be read simply as a récit de voyage that would aim at an “objective” literary reconstruction of a trip) is that “c’est par la subjectivité (portée à son paroxysme) qu’on touche à l’objectivité. Plus simplement: écrivant subjectivement j’augmente la valeur de mon témoignage, en montrant qu’à chaque instant je sais à quoi m’en tenir sur ma valeur comme témoin.” Following the logic of this thesis, the “truth” of the ethnographic text lies much more in what the ethnographer can faithfully record of his own impressions than in what hidden verities anthropology can dispassionately and objectively reveal about other cultures. Ethnography’s epistemological premises appear to have much in common with the Delphic maxim from Ancient Greece, predicated as they are for Leiris on the injunction to “know thyself” and not on a strictly scientific imperative to know others objectively. Leiris would go on to echo his thesis in a 1950 essay titled “L’ethnographe devant le colonialisme,” in which he suggests that

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53 Leiris gives this idea a rather morbid spin when discussing the “deep meaning” of suicide in *L’âge d’homme*, the writing of which overlapped with that of *L’Afrique fantôme* but which was not published until 1939. Reflecting on death and symbolism, he writes that the convergence of opposing symbols reveals “le sens profond du suicide: devenir à la fois *soi* et *l’autre*, mâle et femelle, sujet et objet, ce qui est tué et ce qui tue—seule possibilité de communion avec soi-même.” See Leiris, *L’âge d’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939), 141. *L’âge d’homme* is, also, an autobiographical text in which Leiris takes himself as an ethnographic object in much the same way (although in a different setting) that he seems to want to in his African journal. In *L’âge d’homme*, however, we come across an ethnographic portrait of an aestheticized self (rather than the properly ethnographic self that Leiris seeks in Africa) created through Leiris’s consumption of and reflections on painting, music, opera and theater. In this respect, the Leirisian artistic self that emerges in this other text appears close to Proust and his narrator’s aesthetic vision of selfhood.
ethnography’s scientific pretensions are but “un mythe” and that ethnographers cannot overlook the policies of the very governments who fund their research on (colonized) cultures. These ideas, however, do not receive full analytic treatment in *L’Afrique fantôme*, and Leiris’s thesis is instead filtered through an introspective, often morose, look at the development of his own anthropological persona in relation to a colonial project whose grasp he cannot evade and on whose assistance he must rely.

Leiris’s proximity to the French colonial administration is not limited to the financial and other bureaucratic forms of aid offered to Griaule’s mission by both the national government and local officials in West Africa. Part of the sense of frustration that emerges in the journal is due to Leiris’s growing realization that while he is able to condemn colonialism intellectually, he is unable to sever all affective ties with the colonial situation with the same ease and self-assurance. When in late 1931 the mission must cross an overflowing river separating Upper Volta from Dahomey, for example, Griaule and his colleagues requisition young African laborers and supplies from both sides of the border to reinforce the crossing point with heavy stones. In his entry for that day, Leiris complains of the inefficiency of these (forced) colonial workers and remarks in his recapitulation of the day’s events that “Un brusque éclair me change, pour pas plus de temps que cet éclair, en brute coloniale: je frappe un grand garçon qui reste inerte dans la chaîne, laissant éternellement les grosses pierres dans les bras des plus petits et ne se

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décidant pas à les en débarrasser.” Leiris does not dwell on this sudden transformation or on the sense of entitlement to violence that it entails, and we could hardly bestow on this off-the-cuff comment the rhetorical gravitas of a confession. Its inclusion in the day’s entry seems indicative of a sense of disappointment that will only grow for Leiris in the remaining pages of the text: disappointment not necessarily in the fact that he slipped for an instant into the shady moral economy of colonial violence, but in the more deep-seated fact that there remains a part of his self that is capable of effecting this shift in the first place. We can observe a similar sort of ambivalence in a remark Leiris makes the following month, as the mission travels through Cameroon. In one of the first instances of boredom in the journal, he writes, “On se lasse vite en voyageant et, sauf exception les choses et événements qui défilent ont tôt fait d’être fastidieux, tout comme si l’on ne bougeait pas.” This observation concerning his growing listlessness and the inherent disillusionment of all voyages is followed immediately, at the beginning of the next paragraph, by a comment that is striking in the fact that nothing in the preceding paragraph seems logically to give rise to it: “De moins en moins je supporte l’idée de colonisation…Pacification, assistance médicale n’ont qu’un but: amadouer les gens pour qu’ils se laissent faire et payent l’impôt…Étude ethnographique dans quel but: être à même de mener une politique plus habile qui sera mieux à même de faire rentrer l’impôt.” In much the same way as his earlier remark on his banal turn to colonial

55 Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 170.
violence, this comment appears to stem from the cool, matter-of-fact reporting of his mental state: increasing disappointment in the first instance, and sheer boredom in the second (one even comes away with the idea that Leiris thinks about the colonial question only when he cannot find anything else to think about!). Thus although Leiris ostensibly articulates these thoughts in response to objective, external stimuli—the inefficiency of colonial labor or the realization that colonial politics turns on base forms of economic expediency—they are more fundamentally prompted by internal and subjective shifts in his self and his relation to ethnography. While in the first passage the discipline is not implicated directly when Leiris temporarily becomes a “brute coloniale,” in the second instance ethnography is indicted as an intellectual tool put in the service of the colonial state. However, this passage serves so well to highlight Leiris’s ambivalence because it is thoroughly and curiously unclear whether this indictment of ethnography springs for Leiris from its cozy relationship to colonial policymaking or from his increasing awareness that he is, quite simply, growing tired of fieldwork.

We could certainly cite other examples of Leiris going back and forth on his relationship to colonization and colonial politics. Indeed, this form of affective alternation that gives the journal its narrative impetus, at least on an emotional level, reaches its frustrating crescendo when the mission is whiling away its final days in Abyssinia and the pace of Leiris’s journal has long since slowed to a crawl. The dense Abyssinia section, to which Leiris devotes the entire second part of *L’Afrique fantôme*, owes much of its difficulty to the fact that the mission runs up against bureaucratic roadblocks and internal strife in the country and the resulting inertia infects Leiris’s
journal and changes its tenor entirely. Idleness, it seems, is the devil’s writerly playmate: with too much time on his hands, Leiris reflects for days on his dissatisfaction with himself, his impatience with ethnography’s apparently empty promises of authentic cultural contact and his increasingly unbearable resentment of the Abyssinian people he nonetheless feels he must try to understand. Curiously, this complex ethnographic discomfiture comes to an emotional head not during a failed encounter with an informant but when Leiris is ensconced in the relative comforts of the colonial quarter in a small town: having described the town and his sense of ease with the lifestyle he can finally, if briefly, lead, he ends an entry by observing that “Ce que je ne pardonnerai jamais aux Abyssins, c’est d’être arrivés à me faire reconnaître qu’il y a quelque bien à la colonie…”  

Although the entry trails off at this point, this comment carries something of the weight of a final verdict that Leiris seems to wish he could pass off as a rhetorical afterthought. Once again, however, we can observe that a comment concerning colonialism initially appears prompted by external factors (i.e., the behavior of the Abyssinians) but is quickly redirected inwards since his use of the verb “reconnaître” implies that he both recognizes and admits a state of affairs that another part of his self already suspected to be the case.  

Thus Leiris’s introspective reckoning with his anthropological persona takes place in response to a colonial situation whose unfashionable allure he cannot deny yet whose

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58 Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 611.
59 This reading relies on the fact that the French verb, like the English “recognize,” indicates a process of cognitive identification as well as the logical acceptance of a piece of evidence. In order to admit and accept a state of affairs that runs contrary to what one asserts or wishes to be true, a small part of one’s self must already be disabused or unsure of one’s original position, in however small a way.
political and epistemological influence on ethnography he wants to repudiate. Yet the
decidedly ambivalent note with which Leiris appears to want to leave us toward the end
of the journal would prove not to be his final word on the matter. In fact, Leiris added an
introduction and a preface to *L’Afrique fantôme* in 1951 and 1981, respectively, and both
of these documents raise the thorny question of what we might call the extratextual
production of the textual self; in other words, to what extent can a writer retrospectively
amend and reconfigure the version(s) of himself that appear in a given text through a sort
of literary image management? Taking these two brief pieces chronologically, we can see
how Leiris resituates his own work—and himself in relation to that work—by revisiting
and challenging the very idea of what we have been examining as the anthropological
persona.

Leiris’s introduction, written in 1950, opens with a citation from Rousseau’s
*Confessions* that begins quite tellingly: “Moi seul. Je sens mon cœur, et je connais les
hommes.” This epigraph is Leiris’s opening gambit, and it serves to situate the now
older writer broadly within the thesis with which he was working some twenty years
earlier. *L’Afrique fantôme*’s thesis, as we have seen, suggests that objective knowledge of
other cultures (or of the Other, writ large) can only begin once one’s own subjectivity,
one’s own self, is brought to its most extreme point—its “paroxysme,” as Leiris puts it.
Leiris’s sense of ethnography is here recast in a Rousseauian vein, since solitude and its
ontological experience of self appears to bring with it (or even to cause, as the

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conjunction “et” would imply) a universalist knowledge of mankind. The rest of the introduction, however, seems to undercut this connection to the earlier journal, since Leiris now establishes a dichotomy between ethnographic observation, understood as dispassionate and detached, and a universalist sense of political solidarity. He writes that “l’ethnographie ne pouvait que me décevoir: une science humaine reste une science et l’observation détachée ne saurait, à elle seule, amener le contact [.]”\(^6\) We see here the same desire for an authentic experience of the Other, but Leiris now despairs of ethnography ever being able to bring it about. Rather, he argues that ethnography breaks down before the sweeping social and cultural changes brought about by capitalist modernity and that some more primal form of connection must be forged: “si le contact entre hommes nés sous des climats très différents n’est pas un mythe, c’est dans l’exacte mesure où il peut se réaliser par le travail en commun contre ceux qui, dans la société capitaliste de notre XXe siècle, sont les représentants de l’ancien esclavagisme.”\(^6\)

Solidarity represents a political and ethical imperative that forestalls any possibility of the detachment of subject from object, self from Other, that for Leiris was the problematic corollary of ethnography taken as a field science. Solidarity also allows for a more clear-cut opposition to colonialism, but only insofar as the struggle between colonizer and colonized is subsumed by a larger colorblind struggle between oppressors and oppressed\(^6\): “je ne perçois p’lus guère, s’il est encore des barriers,” he asserts, “que celles

\(^6\) Leiris, _L’Afrique fantôme_, 13.
\(^6\) This formulation is strikingly similar to Sartre’s position in “Black Orpheus,” according to which black men must divest themselves of their racial particularity in order to join a colorblind, universalist struggle
qui se dressent entre oppresseurs et opprimés pour les diviser en deux camps.”

In this introduction, then, Leiris accomplishes two moves that are remarkable for their absence from the journal proper: he outlines a form of universalist “contact” between the self and mankind in which ethnography has no role and he views this solidarity as a political tool that makes possible the self’s effective opposition to colonialism.

Leiris’s 1981 preface is less rich and impassioned than his postwar introduction, but it adds another layer of selfhood to *L’Afrique fantôme* which puts even more distance between a more current version of Leiris and Leiris the 1930s ethnographer. Whereas the introduction serves to outline a more militant form of political selfhood than that which appears in his ambivalent introspection in the journal itself, in the preface Leiris acknowledges this earlier re-situating of his anthropological persona and admits that Africa is even more fictive and ghostly for him than ever. He traces the development of his anthropological self from a naïve collector of objects for museums to a proponent of “une ethnographie…de fraternité militante” and concludes that had he not republished the original journal or written about the mission over the years his voyage would not carry

**against capitalism that will ultimately liberate them.** “But there is something even more important in [negritude]: the Negro himself, we have said, creates a kind of antiracist racism. He wishes in no way to dominate the world: he desires abolition of *all* kinds of ethnic privileges; he asserts his solidarity with the oppressed of every color. After that, the subjective, existential, ethnic notion of negritude ‘passes,’ as Hegel says, into that which one has of the proletariat: objective, positive, and precise.” Both Leiris and Sartre argue in favor of a Hegelian-inflected sense of solidarity that gathers up political particularisms into the universalist *Aufhebung* of the proletariat’s struggle against capitalism. See Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” in *What is Literature?* and Other Essays (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 326.

any more weight in his memory than “[mon souvenir] de maints rêves évanouis dont seuls les récits qu’à peu près de tout temps je me suis attaché à en faire ont encore quelque cohésion.” From this perspective, his own journal appears nearly as derealized, inauthentic and fictive to him as the continent of Africa did to his younger ethnographic self who produced the journal in the first place. This is a self who barely recognizes the one posited in the journal some fifty years before, and in this respect his preface reads like the opening remarks that an author writes about a text written by someone else entirely. Thus both the introduction and this later preface are resolutely external to the journal but cannot be read separately from it (if only because they are contained in the same volume from Gallimard!) and, as such, these extratextual documents force Leiris’s original anthropological persona to recede from us, pushing him ever closer to the realm of unreality until we, too, become increasingly unable to recognize this young secrétaire-archiviste as more than a literary character tilting at ethnographic windmills.

These multiple layers of selfhood, each characterized by a “real” Michel Leiris assuring us that the self that came before is somehow but a fiction from which he must keep his distance (all the way back to the inauthentic self Leiris thinks he leaves behind in Paris when he goes off to Africa in the first place), destabilize any sense we as readers might have that Leiris’s anthropological persona is simply coextensive with any of the selves he gives us to view in either the journal or its prefatory comments. All of these instantiations of selfhood, and the acts of distancing they imply, are articulated in relation

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Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 8-9.
to the question of colonialism—even in Leiris’s preface, in which he moves beyond the selves he created in the journal and after the war, he suggests that as much as *L’Afrique fantôme* appears nearly fictional to his current self it is all the more so to Africans who are struggling to deal with the effects of neo-colonialism. 67 Whereas Leiris’s anthropological persona appears increasingly fictional and unreliable, Hampâté Bâ’s process of “ethnographic self-fashioning” is predicated on establishing a stable and trustworthy rapport with an imagined reader who benefits from Amadou’s ethnographic virtuosity. This virtuosity, which moves fluidly between and within both the colonial and “traditional” African social worlds, is shot through with a sense of didacticism that directly engages the (implicitly Western) reader and aims at his/her cultural edification. As we have seen, both the inward- and outward-looking creations of anthropological personae involve and mobilize certain ideas of and relationships to fiction, and it remains to be investigated precisely how fiction and ethnography inflect each other and intermingle in these forms of literary selfhood that are articulated with respect to the colonial situation.

Although I have characterized these contrasting approaches as offering inward- and outward-facing narratives of ethnographic selfhood, it is significant to observe that there is some common ground between Leiris’s and Hampâté Bâ’s approaches. Hampâté Bâ is less outwardly troubled by his relationship to colonialism than Leiris, but this does not mean that he remains blissfully unaware of the ambiguities of his situation. For

example, toward the end of *Oui mon commandant!,* Hampâté Bâ devotes several pages to two brief expository essays on his growing understanding of the subtleties of colonial social relations; these pages do not resemble the other anecdotes that punctuate his narrative and instead are characterized by a lofty and more detached tone. In the first brief essay he explains his understanding of exploitative colonial economics, but he shifts his perspective in the second essay, titled “Face nocturne et face diurne…,” in order to explain why he is unable to reject colonialism as such: “Il faut accepter de reconnaître que l’époque coloniale a pu laisser des apports positifs, ne serait-ce, entre autres, que l’héritage d’une langue de communication universelle grâce à laquelle nous pouvons échanger avec des ethnies voisines comme avec les nations du monde…”68 This act of recognition is in certain respects akin to Leiris’s recognition of colonialism’s potential positive side that he claims was forced upon him by his disappointing research subjects. For Hampâté Bâ, the colonial era did not just leave behind a language (French), but a universal mode of communication that allows for dialogue not only between different African social groups but between former colonized subjects and individuals the world over. An unstated implication and corollary of this idea is that Hampâté Bâ’s vast ethnographic knowledge might not even be available to non-African readers had it not been for the spread of the French language. Further, he begins this second essay by admitting that “Certes, la colonisation a existé de tous temps et sous tous les cieux…,” in a gesture of moral relativism that sets the tone for the rest of the short section. Yet unlike

Leiris, Hampâté Bâ’s recognition of his inevitable involvement (which we could even go so far as to call intellectual complicity) in the French colonial project is not accompanied by the same sort of introspective hand-wringing that infects Leiris’s journal. Instead, Hampâté Bâ draws this act of recognition back into the larger project of his memoir and, by extension, back into his didactic relationship with his readers: he ends the opening paragraph of this essay by asserting of this universal mode of communication, “A nous d’en faire le meilleur usage et de veiller à ce que nos propres langues, nos propres cultures, ne soient pas balayées au passage.”69 From this remark one can infer that the memoir itself, written in this universal language and seeking to transmit knowledge about West African cultures, constitutes an example of just such a “responsible” usage of the colonial linguistic legacy. Since Hampâté Bâ makes the best of what the “universal” French language can do for his ethnographic project (by engaging in an act of recognition similar to that of Leiris), we as readers benefiting from his knowledge are less likely to take his moral relativism to heart and instead appreciate that without this recognized universalism Hampâté Bâ’s didactic relationship cannot exist.

Thus Hampâté Bâ’s awareness of the ambiguities inherent to his analysis of colonialism functions as a methodological expedient, designed to lay bare the goals of his didactic project (i.e., the preservation of local cultures and traditions through their expression in a universal language). This move, as we have seen, stands in stark contrast to Leiris’s realization of his own ambivalence toward the colonial situation which serves

69 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 417.
to shift his gaze inwards. However, we can read this inward turn as the establishment of a certain kind of relationship to the reader that, if it is not characterized by the joyous pedagogical interest we see in Hampâté Bâ, at least allows us to experience for ourselves something of what Leiris was wrestling with at the time. As indicated by the two drafts of a preface that Leiris wrote from the field, *L’Afrique fantôme* is a “journal intime” that was nonetheless composed with imagined readers in mind; in this respect, on a purely formal level Hampâté Bâ and Leiris each begin from an imagined relationship to a readerly public. In the second part of his journal, though, when he is so fed up with ethnography and its perceived limitations Leiris makes an impassioned statement that both indicates his frustration and goes a long way toward explaining why the lengthy Abyssinia section of the text is so difficult to read. During fieldwork with a local spirit possession cult run by an older woman and her daughter, Leiris observes that for all the importance he attaches to their words and explanations, the true value of what his informants have to say is always obscured by the ethnographic method: “*je ne peux plus supporter l’enquête méthodique. J’ai besoin de tremper dans leur drame, de toucher leurs façons d’être, de baigner dans la chair vive. Au diable l’ethnographie!*”70 As readers we are used to such condemnations of the drawbacks of ethnography; however, located as this outburst is in the middle of the dense second part of the journal, in which Leiris’s disappointment with ethnography becomes definitive, its emotional resonance inflicts our reading experience. Just as Leiris laments the fact that he is unable to abandon himself

fully to the lives and cultures of his informants, so we as readers, in this second part of the journal, have trouble abandoning ourselves to the text because our narrator forces us to try to keep up with the very intricate and unfamiliar fieldwork encounters that confound him so thoroughly.

For example, several days after making this emotional remark Leiris actually moves in with the two women who run the local spirit possession cult in advance of several ceremonies to be staged for his benefit. During the course of these ceremonies, Leiris changes the form of his journal entries from *ex post facto* remarks about the day’s events to impressionistic, up-to-the-minute accounts of the ceremonies’ preparations and proceedings. These entries read like unpolished notes from the field, since they contain no contextualization, reference local words whose meanings are partially obscured and involve individuals of whom we are only vaguely familiar. Let us consider some brief notes taken on December 9, 1932, as a sacrifice is being prepared inside the old woman’s hut:

10 heures: reviennent les vieillards de la famille. On leur cède la banquette de droite. Emawayish [the daughter] vient s’asseoir à terre auprès de moi, sur une planche.

Service général de shoumbrà et de café.

L’enfant est emporté dans la cuisine.

Pour prendre part à la discussion des affaires de famille, Malkam Ayyahou [the old woman] devient Abbatié Tchenguerié.

Le frère de Malkam Ayyahou prend la parole le premier. Il est un laboureur, dit-il, « ni qagnazmatch, ni fitaorari » [Abyssinian governmental roles]. Ses fils seront aussi des laboureurs, « ni qagnazmatch, ni fitaorari ».

Emawayish s’essuie les mains à l’herbe qui jonche le sol.

Discours du frère sur les affaires de famille.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 469. Italics in original.
Although we readers are able to follow Leiris’s ethnographic play-by-play on its most basic narrative level, we are as incapable of grasping the cultural/social import of the proceedings as our narrator was when he recorded these notes in the first place.\(^\text{72}\)

Whereas conventional ethnographic narrative places the reader in a foreign cultural environment through careful contextualization and exposition of individuals, traditions and social roles, Leiris’s impressionistic account simply plunges us into the scene and obliges us to follow it as he did at the time. We are clearly a far cry from Hampâté Bâ’s friendly and approachable contextualized vignettes and broader didactic project. Unlike Hampâté Bâ, for whom ethnographic anecdotes unite reader and author in moments of instructive goodwill, in *L’Afrique fantôme*’s second part the reader-ethnographer relationship becomes profoundly negative: as Leiris’s impressionistic and difficult notes continue for several dozen pages, he seems to be demonstrating to us that he is capable of alienating us from his ethnographic narrative in much the same way that ethnography, because of its incapacity to foster true “contact,” alienates him in these moments of fieldwork that are so culturally rich and yet so ultimately frustrating for him.\(^\text{73}\) Thus this relationship, which is created when the reader actually steps into Leiris’s ethnographic shoes and experiences fieldwork in the “real time” of the text, is in part one of non-relation since Leiris’s anthropological persona pushes us away from the content of his

\(^{72}\) For instance, we’re not sure what *shoumbra* is, and we do not fully understand just why the old woman becomes possessed at this moment or why this particular spirit inhabits her. We do not exactly know what role the brother is playing, either, and his declarations are entirely unclear.

\(^{73}\) This is an example of what we might call “negative virtuosity,” in contradistinction to the virtuosity observed in Hampâté Bâ’s anecdotes which serve to draw the reader into the text.
narrative and seemingly proves his point about the type of distancing that ethnographic fieldwork cannot overcome and may even exacerbate.

**Fictional Narratives, Fictional Selves**

The question of narrative in these two texts represents an ideal site in which to intervene and explore the complex interplay between fiction, ethnography and selfhood: both Hampâté Bâ and Leiris capture their travels across colonial Africa using more or less conventional narrative strategies, and yet we would be hard pressed to assert that these narratives proceed entirely unproblematically. Whereas Leiris, for instance, presents us with a relatively straightforward narrative recapitulation of his ethnographic work and the mission’s travels and travails, it is impossible to consider *L’Afrique fantôme* apart from Leiris’s reflections on what ethnography cannot accomplish narratively and on his failed attempts to create a coherent narrative instantiation of his own self. Similarly, we can quite easily see how Hampâté Bâ’s memoir recounts his work as a colonial civil servant before leaving the French administration and joining the IFAN to focus full-time on ethnography. To do so, however, would miss the embedding and embedded stories that function as narrative pit stops along Amadou’s journey and that inject curious fictional elements into his textual representation/safeguarding of local oral traditions and histories. While fiction allows Amadou to integrate his ethnographic vignettes and asides into a larger autobiographical narrative, for Leiris the fictional represents a stumbling block that he would prefer to avoid but with which he is forced to reckon time and again.
Put broadly, then, fiction is indispensable to both of these narratives; however, for Hampâté Bâ fiction operates in the service of ethnography while for Leiris it seems to call the very epistemological viability of ethnography into question.

The question of fiction has indeed been raised before in relation to Hampâté Bâ’s work, although not in the way I am engaging with it here. I am interested primarily in the kinds of narrative work fictional elements perform in Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic memoir, but others have addressed the problem of fiction in order to challenge the very authenticity of Hampâté Bâ’s literary work as a whole. This becomes clear in the two appendices attached to the end of *Oui mon commandant!*, in which the executor of Hampâté Bâ’s literary estate, Hélène Heckmann, sets out to defend the authenticity of both volumes of memoirs as well as of *L’étrange destin de Wangrin*, the 1973 biography of another colonial civil servant and trickster whom Hampâté Bâ knew quite well. It is crucial for us to address one of these documents, which deals with the origin and authenticity of Hampâté Bâ’s written texts, both because in it we come up against the carefully crafted posthumous image of Hampâté Bâ and because a central problem raised by Heckmann allows us to stake out a clear perspective on the role of fiction in *Oui mon commandant!*. Heckmann begins by observing that numerous university scholars and other interested parties have often wondered whether Hampâté Bâ actually “stuck to the facts” when composing these texts, or “les a-t-il plus ou moins romancés?” She treats this question as if it were an accusation and goes about defending Hampâté Bâ’s

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74 Hélène Heckmann, appendix to *Oui mon commandant!*, by Amadou Hampâté Bâ (Paris: Actes Sud, 1994), 479.
knowledge and presentation of oral traditions by asserting that his work must be considered formally as first and foremost an exercise in literary témoignage, and that to pose the question of authenticity in relation to his literary output is thereby to make a rather mean-spirited ad hominem attack on a figure for whom his word was everything.\textsuperscript{75}

To call into question Hampâté Bâ’s presentation of traditional oral cultures, she implies, is also to challenge the so-called veracity of oral culture tout court.\textsuperscript{76}

I am especially sympathetic to this last implication, since the paradoxes involved in representing oral culture in writing are fascinatingly philosophical in nature and should not (at least not in the case of Hampâté Bâ) be dismissed by research on the truth or falsehood of certain ethnographic observations.\textsuperscript{77} However, the terms in which Heckmann makes her point are both telling and ultimately misguided. She writes, “Ce dont je puis témoigner, et ses amis avec moi, c’est que si Amadou Hampâté Bâ a pu, parfois, être trahi par sa mémoire sur tel ou tel point de détail, il était toujours et totalement sincère.”\textsuperscript{78} Heckmann goes on to reiterate that fudging or otherwise embellishing the details of a story was unknown in “traditional” Africa and would have

\textsuperscript{75} Heckmann, appendix to \textit{Oui mon commandant!}, 482.


\textsuperscript{77} Indeed, on a more general level this is akin to wasting time wondering whether any ethnographer is really “telling the truth” in their written representations of culture. Raising these questions can only serve to stifle the creative ways in which we can engage with ethnographic texts and wonder kinds of narrative work they are capable of performing.

\textsuperscript{78} Heckmann, appendix to \textit{Oui mon commandant!}, 483.
thus been out of the question for such an accomplished storyteller as Hampâté Bâ. She
summarizes her position and defense of Hampâté Bâ’s sense of literary honesty in the
following manner: “Le désir profond d’Amadou Hampâté Bâ, c’était d’apporter un
témoignage authentique non seulement sur sa propre vie, mais, à travers elle, sur la
société africaine et les hommes de son temps.”79 This statement certainly captures
Hampâté Bâ’s sense of ethnographic didacticism that he builds through reflections on his
own biography; however, the assertion made here, taken together with the one made in
the sentence cited above, sets up an opposition between fiction and sincerity/authenticity
that is too schematic and simplified to do justice to Hampâté Bâ’s playful formalism. For
one thing, the encroachment of fictional elements on an ethnographic and
autobiographical text does not logically imply that the author of the text somehow
intended to mislead his or her readers. As we can observe in both Hampâté Bâ and Leiris,
fiction is far too supple a narrative and rhetorical device to be soldered conceptually and
haphazardly to insincerity or, worse, to outright deception. Likewise, the presence of
fiction in Oui mon commandant! is entirely unrelated to the truth-value of the
ethnographic observations and explanations Hampâté Bâ makes about traditional cultures
and the French colonial administration.80 In other words, to notice the play of fiction in
this memoir is not to cast doubt on our belief in Hampâté Bâ as an ethnographic narrator.

79 Heckmann, appendix to Oui mon commandant!, 483.
80 The complex relationship between “storytelling,” authenticity and the more or less reflexive subjectivity of
the anthropologist has been addressed in a rich article by Steven Webster. In a concluding paragraph, he
writes that “Insofar as ethnography is necessarily both a literary genre and a critique of culture based upon
a knowledge-constitutive present, it is inevitably liable to [the reincorporation of new forms of storytelling
in the older, conventional mode of ethnographic realism.” See Webster, “Ethnography as Storytelling,”
Thus while Heckmann’s appendix must be dealt with in any critical engagement with this text since it is explicitly intended to inflect our reading of it (as well as our perception of its author more generally), it is also intended to deflect our attention away from Hampâté Bâ’s most interesting formal moves. The fiction-sincerity/authenticity opposition is incapable of accounting for how the textual reproduction of orality also necessarily involves processes of literary recreation and narrativization that enable *Oui mon commandant!* to become more than a dry ethnographic monograph or, alternatively, a straightforward autobiographical *bildungoman*.

These two literary processes (which, to put it more accurately, are in reality interrelated aspects of the same literary device) are most clearly on display in the numerous anecdotes Hampâté Bâ provides throughout his memoir and that deal with the foibles and adventures of French administrators, African chiefs, ordinary villagers and members of his own family. In certain of these vignettes Amadou is the protagonist and in others he is but a marginal character or not present at all. These embedded narratives, however, are reconstructed in the same manner, regardless of whether Hampâté Bâ was an eyewitness to the events they contain or whether he is simply proceeding from hearsay: all of them contain lengthy dialogues or intricate descriptions that force the reader to recognize that it is entirely undecidable precisely what Amadou is reporting from memory and what he is reconstructing from semi-fictional approximations of what occurred at the time. The fact that he rarely admits to readers exactly what comes from memory and what from approximation is a playful move, indeed, since the attentive
reader is well aware that Hampâté Bâ cannot possibly reproduce every dialogue and
description with one hundred percent accuracy.

And yet, this fictional undecidability does not cause us to doubt him as an
ethnographic narrator. Let us take the example of the story of Amadou’s relationship to
the commandant François de Coutouly, who stands out for our narrator because he was a
white French administrator who took an “épouse coloniale,” married her legally, forcing
administrators and Africans alike always to refer to her as “Madame de Coutouly,” and
recognized the children she bore him. He was also the administrator who taunted
Amadou for foolishly trying to dress like a European, but a brief story within this larger
narrative serves to cast him in a different light. This episode, titled “Drapeau en berne,”
tells the story of the death of one of the commandant’s mixed-race children and of his
confrontation with a French army officer who upbraids the civilian administrator for
daring to put the tricolor flag outside his office at half mast as an indicator of the tragedy.

Amadou begins his tale in a manner with which we are already quite familiar: he not only
introduces the protagonist but also provides a contextualization designed to enhance the
reader’s knowledge about the complexities of colonial cultures. Thus François is not just
the administrator who recognized his mixed-race children, additionally “il était bien placé
pour savoir que les enfants issus des ‘mariages coloniaux’ étaient généralement placés
d’office par l’administration dans des ‘orphelinats de métis’ après le retour du père en
France.”81 This comment functions both to shed light on a particular character trait as

81 Hampâté Bâ, *Oui mon commandant!*, 201.
well as to outline the social stakes of the story in a way that informs the reader of a certain practice that was de rigueur in the colonial period. Amadou continues in this vein by linking this embedded story, in which he plays a very minor role, to a broader commentary on the political capital enjoyed by French administrators: “Le jour même du décès de l’enfant se produisit un incident assez grave, qui donne une idée et du caractère de François de Coutouly, à la fois noble et entier, et de la puissance des administrateurs coloniaux dans les colonies françaises.” The commandant here appears as a consummate ethnographic example, since he stands out precisely because he does not resemble other administrators in both character and actions and because his case is fundamentally indicative of the prestige and power wielded by all French administrators. Thus before the story proper even begins we as readers are aware of just what Hampâté Bâ would like us to take away from it, and once this bond with the reader is established he has created for himself some room for free play.

What stands out in the story that follows is more than the sheer power of the commandant that its primary function is to illustrate; indeed, the army captain who attacks de Coutouly ends up being repatriated to France via a trip up through the Sahara, per the orders of the colonial governor in Ouagadougou who knows the commandant well. The narrative also allows Amadou once again to show off his virtuosity as a storyteller, since he deftly moves between several linguistic and dialogic registers in recreating the incident while downplaying his own role in the affair—he appears as but a

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82 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 201.
passive messenger and bystander, having no dialogue of his own, who takes orders from the enraged de Coutouly. We can highlight here three linguistic registers that Amadou reproduces for us as he recounts how the army officer insults the administrator for bothering to commemorate the death, as the captain puts it, of his “petit négrillon.” First, we have the standard, highly formal French used by the captain to address de Coutouly before the former learns why the flag was lowered: “Monsieur l’administrateur, pourquoi pleurez-vous? Que s’est-il passé? Quel malheur nous a frappés pour que le drapeau soit mis en berne?”

Once the administrator informs the captain of his young son’s death, the tone of the scene changes markedly, as does Hampâté Bâ’s narrative reportage of its dialogic shift. Incensed, the army captain insults the commandant who responds with an insult-laden tirade mocking the officer’s Germanic family name: “Espèce de Français de fraîche date! Sale boche! Traître à sa patrie par intérêt matériel!... Foutez-moi le camp d’ici avant que je ne vous administre la volée de coups de pied que vous méritez!” From correct, extremely polite French we have moved quickly to insults with slang words and cultural-political references (“Français de fraîche date!”) that our narrator clearly understands. Finally, the tension in the scene is dialogically dissolved by a lowly indigenous sentry who has the temerity to intervene and shame the two French verbal combatants while addressing them in “français des tirailleurs:” “Ô vous deux grands chefs! Vous n’a pas honte bagarrer devant deux nègres qui regarder vous comme deux

84 Hampâté Bâ, *Oui mon commandant!,* 203.
coqs y faire corps à corps sans baïonnettes? This colorful interjection has a definite function in Hampâté Bâ’s carefully constructed narrative, since it breaks the immediate drama of the episode by turning the white French men’s attention to their linguistic-racial difference from the indigenous bystanders. However, it also allows Amadou to take his recreation in yet another linguistic direction by demonstrating his comfort with the incorrect and marvelously vibrant language of those Africans who occupy the lower strata of the colonial hierarchy. The linguistic triangulation we encounter in this episode serves to remind us that we are dealing with an adept storyteller who can both instruct and entertain his readers by showing them that he can easily inhabit the linguistic life-worlds of any number of characters with disparate social roles. We are, in short, dealing with a narrator who is not only engaged in creating a scene for our enjoyment and edification but who also tells the story of his own virtuosity as an entertainer.

This metanarrative runs alongside the story told in the episode and the vision of ethnographic didacticism whose function it serves. Put another way, it is clear that Hampâté Bâ forces the reader to pay attention simultaneously to the cultural or social questions on which he wants to shed light and to his own qualities as a gifted storyteller. Since these two narrative registers do not coincide seamlessly, we are able to recognize the play of fictional elements in one (i.e., the dialogue may have undergone a more or less thorough process of reconstruction and reformulation in order to give readers an approximate sense of the tenor of the scene in question) without thereby finding

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85 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 203.
ourselves obliged to challenge or otherwise impugn the reliability of the other. Fictionalized linguistic realism does not in this case cause us to abandon our faith in Hampâté Bâ as an ethnographic narrator who wants to teach us something and is perfectly capable of doing so. The goal of this recreated story, as stated at the outset, was to give us an impression of the power of colonial administrators, and Hampâté Bâ reinforces this point in the closing paragraph of the episode after having told us that the army captain was eventually obliged to return to the metropole by way of the Sahara: “Le capitaine ignorait sans doute qu’à la colonie un Blanc pouvait tout se permettre, sauf se frotter à un administrateur colonial. Tout le monde, Blancs et Noirs, étaient à la merci des administrateurs coloniaux.”86 The fact that Hampâté Bâ opens and closes this sequence by stating clearly the “lesson” he wants to impart about colonial French administrative culture allows us to see clearly how his sense of didacticism is overlaid with fictional flourishes in the story that unfolds between these two narrative bookends. As readers, we remain aware that the story has experienced some sort of transformative recreation when it passed onto the written page, yet this awareness, crucially, in no way implies a concurrent loss of belief in the sincerity of the storyteller even as it heightens our understanding of his virtuosity.

Whereas certain semi-fictional elements, in their very undecidability, hold together Hampâté Bâ’s narratives and allow his ethnographic didacticism to traverse the embedding and embedded vignettes and stories that comprise Oui mon commandant!, for

86 Hampâté Bâ, Oui mon commandant!, 204.
Michel Leiris the problem of fiction functions as an epistemological road block that prevents it from proceeding in the way he believes it ideally should, namely as effecting true contact between subject and object, self and Other. In the case of Hampâté Bâ I stressed that we must extricate fiction from concerns over literary sincerity and authenticity; Leiris, by contrast, forces us to tackle the concept of authenticity head on when we draw a relationship between the fictional and the unreal, on the one hand, and ethnography as a fieldwork discipline, on the other hand. This obligation that Leiris thrusts upon us is born from the notion that ethnography for him is a disciplinary ideal-type that makes promises of authentic forms of cultural contact it can never actually keep, condemned as it is to chase the “shadows” of culture: people, places and things that are always more inauthentic than Leiris feels they should be and that are not readily amenable to the sort of contact that fieldwork ought to offer. Thus ethnography for Leiris contains something of the pursuit of the unattainable, a sense that the discipline’s ideal objects are forever epistemologically out of reach. This formulation contains images of perpetual movement and pursuit quite intentionally, for it is in this respect that ethnography and travel are conceptually linked for Leiris. We notice glimpses of this connection in *L’Afrique fantôme* but in *L’âge d’homme* (written between 1930 and 1935 and thus overlapping with the African voyage) the link is more clearly posed: amidst his “auto-ethnographic” reflections on painting, theater and women he compares himself to Wagner’s Flying Dutchman, doomed forever to roam the seas. This figure, he writes, has something to do with “l’attrait magique qu’a exercé sur moi—jusqu’à ce que j’aie fait effectivement un lent et lointain voyage [i.e., the one he makes with the Dakar-Djibouti
Mission]—la notion de vagabondage, d’impossibilité de se fixer et, plus précisément, de s’installer en un point particulier de l’espace où l’on est pourvu matériellement et sentimentalement au lieu d’errer de mer en mer.»87 The fact that Leiris is implicitly speaking about his trip across Africa (which he mentions in the next paragraph of the text) is quite telling, indeed. We can understand travel and wandering in this context as analogous to the status of ethnography in L’Afrique fantôme: just as vagabondage had a magical allure for him before he actually made a lengthy voyage, so ethnography held out the promise of authentic contact with the Other until he actually began conducting fieldwork. Unfortunately, as he comes to learn in L’Afrique fantôme and as he mentions just after this passage in L’âge d’homme, one is incapable of recapturing this magical attraction of anticipation once one has taken the first step, “une fois perdue cette virginité du premier départ.”88

The feeling of restless movement, of diving with Leiris headlong into yet another fruitless departure, permeates the pages of L’Afrique fantôme until one begins to identify with Leiris and, like him, one hopes that authentic contact and ethnographic satisfaction will come in just a few pages’ time, perhaps in a week, or whenever the mission moves to a new location. Leiris is able to convey ethnography’s inauthentic pursuit of fictional cultural objects to such an extent that his frustration infects the reader’s interaction with his journal: we are increasingly aware that the promise of some sort of textual resolution (in which we implicitly believe upon opening a book for the first time) cannot be kept,

87 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, 97.
88 Leiris, L’âge d’homme, 125.
and the fact that the voyage eventually comes to a conclusion is but a meager compensation for our dashed readerly expectations. Even before the journal takes a depressingly introspective turn in its second part, Leiris’s pessimism and disappointment has linked his relationship with ethnography to our own experience as readers. The many weeks Leiris and the other members spend waiting in the British Sudan before being given permission to cross over into Abyssinia give our narrator time to reflect on the ways in which ethnography cannot help him escape into another self, a self possessing true knowledge of others. “Pourquoi l’enquête ethnographique m’a-t-elle fait penser souvent à un interrogatoire de police?” he wonders. “On ne s’approche pas tellement des hommes en s’approchant de leurs coutumes. Ils restent, après comme avant l’enquête, obstinément fermés.”89 Although the Africans Leiris studies “open up” to him during interviews or other fieldwork activities, ethnographic encounters for him have such an air of mutual mistrust and inauthenticity that he feels no closer to his informants than before he started his research. In much the same way, though, remarks like these, which cast doubt on the possibility of him ever constructing an authentic ethnographic sense of self, provoke us as readers to reformulate his provocative observation: we might say that “On ne s’approche pas tellement des hommes en s’approchant de leurs journaux.” Having finished L’Afrique fantôme we as readers ultimately feel no closer to Leiris than we do before we began reading the text, even though the very form of the “journal intime”

89 Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 260.
(which is supposedly what Leiris intends to write\(^9\)) ought to provide us with the very sort of authentic “contact” with another person that Leiris hopes ethnography will provide for him. Although Leiris opens up to his readers in the pages of the journal—in much the same way that his informants open up to him but still remain “obstinément fermés”—his failed attempts to create a new self through ethnographic narrative tie ethnography as a discipline that creates and chases its own fictions to a fictional sort of reading experience that we take away from the text, having come no closer to Leiris the ethnographer in spite of our good faith attempts to do so.

Thus the sense of fiction that emerges in the journal is born of the current of failed expectations running through Leiris’s reflections on ethnography and his introspective investigations of his own lassitude. These two sources take an especially striking form in part two of the journal, which covers the mission’s lengthy stay in Abyssinia where Leiris, Griaule and the team study spirit possession cults while running up against innumerable bureaucratic hurdles as they attempt to cross the country into Eritrea and Djibouti. Although in this leg of the journey Leiris is able to conduct the most sustained, in-depth ethnography of the entire mission, it is also the period when he seems resolutely to turn his back on fieldwork and to resent the disdain it breeds in him of the very people with whom he strives to connect. The mission spends several months based in an Abyssinian village that houses a female spirit possession cult led by a woman named

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\(^9\) He writes in his first draft of a preface that “Ces notes...ne constituent rien autre que...un journal intime qui aurait aussi bien pu être rédigé à Paris, mais se trouve avoir été tenu durant une promenade en Afrique.” See Leiris, *L’Afrique fantôme*, 264.
Malkam Ayyahou and her daughter, Emawayish. These women are the central ethnographic “characters” of the second part of the journal, and Leiris spends quite a few days alternating back and forth between a piteous longing for social acceptance by these informants who, to believe Leiris’s introspective hand-wringing, are all that stands between his success and failure as an ethnographer, and a dark breed of contempt for these impoverished figures who, he suspects, are out to bilk him of supplies and money without ever providing him with genuine ethnographic data. A rather cryptic note from late August, 1932, attests to this introspective “loser wins” game Leiris appears to be playing, which makes one wonder whether Leiris might not actually need both ethnography and his informants to let him down in order for him to proceed with his research and his search for another sense of self. Leiris learns that Emawayish’s second husband has tried to attack her and he remarks that she seems fascinated by the idea of Europe and of leaving Abyssinia for good one day. The opening paragraph of the August 25 entry reads as follows: “Amertume. Ressentiment contre l’ethnographie, qui fait prendre cette position si inhumaine d’observateur, dans des circonstances où il faudrait s’abandonner.”91 At first glance these words appear to cast Leiris’s dissatisfaction with ethnography in an ethical vein, since he seems to feel that his status as a European fieldworker prevents him from protecting Emawayish from her husband and from helping her leave the country and go to Eritrea or even Europe. This concern appears to take us back to the ethnography-solidarity dichotomy that Leiris delineates in his 1951

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91 Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 433
introduction—it will be recalled that his postwar self came down quite strongly in favor of the latter half of this ethical binary. However, once we contextualize this reflection its ambiguity is revealed. For one thing, a secondary preoccupation of Leiris’s in this part of the journal is whether or not he wants to sleep with Emawayish and, if so, how to go about doing it. We also learn, in the paragraph following this one, that Emawayish may have reconciled with her angry husband. Is Leiris, then, simply upset that his ethnographic scruples prevent him from acting on his desires, or that his bitterness is caused by the basest sort of jealousy? To answer these questions in the affirmative would certainly render disingenuous his disdain for ethnographic detachment. Further, it is curious that he would so strongly resent the fact that his fieldwork keeps him apart from people that, by the end of the voyage, he has come to mistrust and despise. These are, after all, the very individuals who cause him to recognize the positive side of colonialism. These ambiguities provoke us to wonder whether Leiris’s bitterness is aimed at ethnography’s dispassionate detachment or, alternatively, at the fact that this detachment is at least partially a product of his decidedly mixed emotions toward ethnographic objects for whom he once had such high hopes. At any rate, our multiple readings of this ambiguous short paragraph demonstrate that Leiris’s introspection both feeds and is fed by what he regards as ethnography’s dubious nature and the numerous illusions that his commitment to this apparently unviable field science forces him to confront.

Leiris’s relationship to fiction in *L’Afrique fantôme* does not only call the viability of ethnography into question from a perspective that is immanent to ethnography itself. Although I have privileged this internal critique of ethnography and its attendant
illusions, Leiris makes an unexpected move late in the journal and temporarily abandons his introspective-ethnographic register by turning to literature and more conventional literary forms of selfhood. For much of the mission’s last few months, Leiris’s journal entries contain obsessive musings on his own masculinity, virility and sexuality (or lack thereof), all with the goal of interrogating what he perceives as his possible impotence and his inability to regard intercourse as fulfilling a human need as he imagines that other men do. Characteristically, he is also unsure that he even wants to conceive of sexuality as having anything to do with biological drives. In late December, 1932, he begins an entry with two terse sentences: “Cafard effroyable. Le vrai cafard: le cafard colonial.”

Struck by this languorous depressive state (which, if anything, is mere boredom), Leiris begins sketching a short story based both on his own experiences during his voyage and on the plot of Joseph Conrad’s *Victory*. “Idée d’un conte,” he suddenly begins, “dont les éléments seraient empruntés, dans la plus large mesure, à la présente réalité. Un personnage dans le genre Axel Heyst (voir Conrad). Aussi gentleman, mais moins aisé. Beaucoup plus timide, encore plus réservé.” In much the same way that individuals humorously wonder which actor or actress would play them in a film about their life, Leiris wonders which fictional character would play him in a fictional story loosely based on his voyage. The character is initially called “someone like Axel Heyst,” Conrad’s protagonist in *Victory*, but Leiris almost immediately assimilates his character to that of Conrad, such that this short story is as much a reimagining of *Victory* as it is a tale

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about” Leiris. We are dealing here with a sense of fiction that has been curiously doubled: Leiris not only undertakes to fictionalize himself in this short story, but also to fictionalize his fictional self by rendering his own character indistinguishable from Conrad’s Axel Heyst. The plot of the story is straightforward enough, and is entirely in keeping with Leiris’s reflections on his masculinity and sexuality: Axel Heyst lives alone in a nameless colony, with few friends and no female companionship. He attempts unsuccessfully to kill himself (as did Leiris in the late 1950s) and ultimately allows himself to perish in an epidemic that ravages the colony. His only friend, a local doctor, finds a “journal intime” among Heyst’s belongings that reads very much like Leiris’s own journal and that allows the doctor to track down an African prostitute with whom Heyst attempted to have intercourse before scaring her away. The story ends abruptly with Heyst’s doctor friend writing to a woman in Europe, presumably Heyst’s romantic interest, to inform her of his friend’s death.

In spite of the slippage of naming, Leiris’s fictional character is not, strictly speaking, Conrad’s Heyst; this new Heyst is less at ease and far more reserved, and Leiris is interested here in recreating Conrad’s character so that he becomes the same sort of “paria sentimental” that Leiris feels himself to be.94 What, then, do we make of this sudden literary-fictional interpolation that reads like a retreat back into Leiris’s writerly comfort zone in the face of all the disappointments ethnography has caused for him? We can answer this question by turning to a correlative problem it raises, namely, what might

94 Leiris, L’Afrique fantôme, 622.
this literary-fictional self have to offer that ethnographic selfhood clearly cannot? In this untitled short story, Leiris can finally become both self and other, Axel Heyst and not-Axel Heyst, by simultaneously assimilating a fictional character to his own self (the writing subject) and by assimilating himself to a fictional personage (the literary object). In short, Leiris attempts to effect in a literary-fictional register the very form of contact that ethnography should have provided but failed to so miserably. Whatever its merits as a story, this embedded narrative constitutes a fictional catharsis, an imaginary resolution to a problem that ethnography cannot solve for Leiris and a literary manner of highlighting all of ethnography’s epistemological shortcomings.

Leiris’s embedded short story illustrates clearly how his sense of fiction is so different from that of Hampâté Bâ: the latter embraces the free play of fictional elements in order to link his abilities as a storyteller to the broader ethnographic “lessons” he wants to convey to his readers, and the former turns to an explicitly fictional register as a palliative, that is, as a way of obtaining some temporary relief from the affective turbulence caused by ethnography’s broken promises. Fiction for Hampâté Bâ serves to enhance the embedding and embedded narratives that punctuate his ethnographic memoir by allowing him to produce a concurrent metanarrative that puts his storytelling virtuosity on display in a way that complements (rather than detracting from) his authority as an ethnographic persona. Leiris, for his part, sees his final literary-fictional grand gesture as the only way to escape from the increasingly desperate act of chasing after fictive illusions and cultural phantoms into which ethnography and fieldwork have forced him.
These two approaches to the fiction/ethnography relationship are significant in their differences because of the ways in which they offer up conceptions of Africa to their readers, with whom Hampâté Bâ and Leiris are constantly in either explicit or implicit conversation. Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic didacticism is predicated upon (West) Africa representing a fundamentally knowable geographic and cultural category, one that can effectively be captured in writing thanks to the talents of the right storyteller. Fiction, from this point of view, is a vehicle and a rhetorical device that narratologically facilitates the transmission of both knowledge about Africa and the knowledge of Africans to readers who simply have to follow the story in order to enter into the pedagogical relationship Hampâté Bâ so clearly constructs in his memoir. For Leiris, as we have seen, Africa is fundamentally unknowable and cannot be subjected to authentic experience, however the terms according to which it might become knowable appear to keep changing. He leaves for Africa convinced that ethnography will foster true “contact” and epistemological satisfaction and, having renounced such fanciful naïveté, proclaims in his postwar introduction that a purer sort of political solidarity might make authentic contact possible. Leiris highlights this epistemological impotence by showing us how easily authentic subject-object, self-Other contact can take place once it is transferred into the realm of the literary-fictional. Crucially, though, not even in this fictional wish-fulfillment do we get a sense of what authentic contact with Africa and Africans might actually look like for Leiris; subject-object fusion as such becomes possible (in the sense that Leiris rewrites himself as a preexisting fictional character), but Africa still seems to remain ghostly and somehow unreal. We might attribute the significance of the
differences between Hampâté Bâ and Leiris to the fact that the former is a cultural insider whereas the latter never seems satisfied with his sense of self or his sense of place—in other words, to a certain degree both of these figures were bound to end up with the ethnographic fictional models they created. If we posit this inevitability, though, we can only do so retrospectively, that is, after taking into account the complexities involved in these two ethnographic projects that rely on contrasting relationships with their imagined readers.

Conclusion

In this comparative analysis of attitudes toward the ethnographic enterprise and incorporations of fiction in *Oui mon commandant!* and *L’Afrique fantôme*, I have highlighted the complex ways in which Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s and Michel Leiris’s relationships to colonialism and French administrative life mediate the textual representations of their anthropological senses of selfhood. Each of these authors is aware of his problematic complicity with the colonial situation writ large, but they approach their complicity in ways that benefit divergent ethnographic and textual projects. Hampâté Bâ’s recourse to fiction is a strategy designed to highlight both his virtuosity as a storyteller and his ability to cultivate a didactic relationship to his readers through rich and occasionally hilarious ethnographic anecdotes and vignettes. For Leiris, by contrast, the incorporation of elements of fiction is no less of a narrative strategy, but it is certainly one that reaches an antithetical goal to that of Hampâté Bâ: by insisting throughout his
journal (in both formal and content-related ways) that ethnography as a discipline produces and pursues cultural fictions and, hence, cannot foster the sort of transcultural contact it promises, he attempts to alienate his readers from his fieldwork in order to render all the more manifest his own alienation from ethnography, Africa and Africans.

It is to this sense of alienation that we can attribute our difficulties in plodding through many of *L’Afrique fantôme*’s dense pages—especially those that comprise the second half of the journal, in which Leiris becomes unbearably depressive and seemingly decides that if the “real” Africa is going to recede endlessly from him, then he will keep his readers forever at bay, too. Hampâté Bâ’s *Oui mon commandant!* is predicated on an entirely different, joyful relationship to a readerly public, one that creatively deploys fictional flourishes in order to transmit oral culture and history via a universal language that, as he recognizes, is West Africa’s colonial legacy. We are dealing, then, with opposing conceptions of ethnography, understood as offering a liberating link to transcultural communication (Hampâté Bâ) and as loftily promising authentic forms of transcultural contact that it cannot possibly deliver in reality (Leiris). To identify and work analytically between these contrasting visions of ethnography and the disparate incorporations of fiction they mobilize is necessarily to recognize that these formulations are fed by notions of Africa as either fundamentally knowable or, in the case of Leiris, as situated squarely outside of ethnography’s epistemological purview. Fiction enables each of these ethnographers to reckon with and represent their ambiguous relationships to colonial cultures while simultaneously tracing contrasting relationships to readers that lay
bare their underlying assumptions about Africa as an ethnographically comprehensible geographic and cultural category.
Narrative, Improvisation, Modernity: Ethnographic Fiction in Jean Rouch’s *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*

Improvised narration and collaborative ethnography are interrelated and provocative problems in two semi-fictional documentary films by French anthropologist and director Jean Rouch: *Jaguar* (1954-1967) and *Moi, un Noir* (1957). Each of these films deals broadly with race and the relationship between colonialism and modernity in francophone West Africa in the period just prior to independence. Like most of Rouch’s films, the works under investigation here grew out of his fieldwork experiences in West Africa, where Rouch, ever the easygoing anthropologist ready to follow a lead, often allowed his research subjects and amateur actors to determine the scope and stakes of a given project. These two films were shot before Rouch’s adoption of synchronized sound, and one of the principal goals of this chapter is to explore how he used the technical limitations of his time to create formal experiments that resonated with his commitment to upend the traditional ethnographic project by turning ethnographic objects (i.e., the Africans with whom Rouch studied) into knowledge producers in their own right. Further, such formal innovations inflect the content of these “ethnofiction” films and I argue that their improvised narratives dealing with race and adjustments to modern life in urban colonial West Africa enable Rouch to stage a larger narrative about modernity itself.
Of Rouch’s film, *Moi, un Noir*, Jean-Luc Godard wrote that “Toute l’originalité de Rouch est d’avoir fait des ses acteurs des personnages.”¹ Although Godard, whose *À bout de souffle* (1960) was influenced by Rouch’s work, only had one of the latter’s early films in mind when making this observation, he nonetheless touched on an important formal question that was to inflect the content of Rouch’s work throughout his long ethnographic career: how do actors play characters at the same time as they play themselves, and how does this role-playing imbue with fictional flourishes the everyday realities of social life that documentary films are supposed to capture? Following Catherine Russell, we can extend this question and ask, how does fiction “[enable] the documentary to be read differently, to be ‘displaced’ and made ambiguous”?² Many of Rouch’s more dramatic and plot-driven films, shot primarily in francophone West Africa and in metropolitan France, can be read on some level as attempts at working out precisely this bifurcated problem of form and genre. Whether they deal with economic migrants in colonial Gold Coast, “reverse” ethnography carried out by Africans on the streets of Paris or with everyday life in the proletarian quarter of Abidjan, Rouch’s plot-driven and feature-length documentaries function in many ways as meditations on the narrative and fictional aesthetics of visual anthropology.

Rouch carried out most of his ethnographic fieldwork in Niger and Mali from the beginning of his career in the late 1940s until his death in 2004. Rouch was born in Paris

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in 1917 and, after studies in engineering, worked in West Africa during the war designing bridges. He became interested in African cultures while working as an engineer and spent time in Dakar at the Institut Français d’Afrique Noire with noted Africanist Théodore Monod. Upon returning to France he pursued a doctorate in anthropology under Marcel Griaule and went back to West Africa after the war to descend the Niger River with two friends by canoe. Rouch shot his first ethnographic footage with an old Bell and Howell 16mm camera on this trip. Many of his shorter films, especially those from the 1940s and 1950s, depict intricate spirit possession ceremonies and hunting rituals in remote villages in Niger among the Songhay but also in Mali among the Dogon; as Paul Stoller has pointed out, in these films Rouch is primarily interested in the ways in which collective historical experience is embodied, performed and recreated through ceremony. Rouch returned to France in the early 1960s to make Chronique d’un été, his most well known film and on which he collaborated with sociologist Edgar Morin. However he returned to Africa shortly thereafter and began conducting intensive fieldwork among the Dogon of Mali, working closely with Germaine Dieterlen to shoot important ceremonies and other Dogon rituals. The 1960s and 70s saw Rouch return to the Songhay to shoot films with synchronized sound and long takes, and at this time he also began making feature-length narrative films, including many in the characteristic “ethnofiction” style whose early development I examine here. In his longer films Rouch often appears to take a different

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tack, turning his camera on bustling colonial and postcolonial urban centers and focusing on how young, usually male, Africans cultivate and negotiate complex and paradoxical relationships to labor and (neo)colonial capitalism, technology and modernity. Since these latter films are both organized around narratives and driven by storylines (however loosely defined or interpreted), they afford Rouch the opportunity to experiment explicitly with the ways fictional elements impinge upon and reshape the techniques ordinary people deploy in order to produce meaningful accounts of their subjective experiences. He continued with these feature films into the 1990s, shooting in both France and West Africa, while still producing more conventional ethnographic documentaries in Niger. According to Steven Feld’s count, Rouch completed over one hundred films, only a handful of which have been distributed in the United States. Rouch died in a car accident in rural Niger in 2004 at a time when his work had been garnering increasing scholarly attention both in anthropology and beyond.

*Moi, un Noir* and *Jaguar* occupy a privileged place in Rouch’s oeuvre not only because they successfully and provocatively encapsulate his enduring commitment to formal experimentation or his enthusiasm for the production of new cinematic realities through the creative intrusions of his participating camera in the lives of his filmed subjects. If these were our only evaluative criteria, any number of Rouch’s works might

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5 While we should, of course, beware of establishing arbitrary dichotomies within Rouch’s oeuvre, we can nevertheless highlight certain thematic divergences in his work and point to several features that characterize his more plot-driven narrative films. *Les maîtres fous* (1955), Rouch’s most controversial film, is an important exception in this regard, being a short film dealing with a particularly violent Hauka possession ceremony held outside of Accra and with the striking contrasts between the participants’ behavior when possessed and their everyday lives as laborers in the Ghanaian capital.

6 Feld, editor’s introduction, 11-12.
fit the bill. What is especially striking about *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*, rather, is that in these films Rouch places his sense of formalism and his ethnographic vision of *ciné-réalité* (that is, a reality that takes on a new kind of truth-value by virtue of its being filmed) into conversation with a particularly thoroughgoing reconceptualization of modernity.

**Rouch as a Thinker of Modernity**

These films constitute Rouch’s early turn toward more dramatic and story-driven filmmaking, a shift that begins with *Jaguar*, continues in *Moi, un Noir*, and culminates with 1959’s *La pyramide humaine*, the last film Rouch shot before he started filming with fully synchronized sound in 1960’s *Chronique d’un été*. As we will see, the matter of (non)synchronized sound is crucial to our understanding of Rouch’s vision of anthropology’s relationship to fiction as well as to his theorization of modernity. In the 1950s, Rouch was commissioned to undertake more sociological and quantitative research on Nigerien migrants in the British Gold Coast, research that led to the rather dry monograph *Migrations au Ghana* (1956) and to the comparatively richer film, *Jaguar*, a composite fictionalization of the results of Rouch’s research starring three young Nigeriens (Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahima Dia and Illo Gaoudel) who had once served as conventional ethnographic informants but had since become amateur actors and
Rouch’s lifelong friends. This film charts the migration cycle of three Nigeriens who travel on foot to the Gold Coast (as their warrior ancestors did), end up starting a small business in the vast market at Kumasi, and who return to Niger with tall tales and gifts to give away to friends and relatives. Several years after completing this work Rouch was commissioned for similar research on Nigerien migrants in Abidjan, and upon showing Jaguar to his ethnographic informants in the Ivory Coast (including Oumarou Ganda, who would go on to become Moi, un Noir’s protagonist) he was urged to make a film about Treichville, the Abidjan slum where the migrants from Niger had settled. Thus “one film gave birth to another,” as Rouch himself characterized his approach, and in keeping with his ethnographic method—what he called “anthropologie partagée”—he conceived and shot these two films in rigorous collaboration with his informants-cum-actors.⁸

Moi, un Noir is very much the conceptual and anthropological sequel to the earlier Jaguar.⁹ A brief sequence from this latter film helps illustrate how Rouch’s theory of modernity is set forth and allows itself to be provocatively revisited and elaborated in Rouch’s next filmic project. At the end of the film, as the three migrants make their way back to their home village in a rickety truck, Rouch refers to his protagonists as “les

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⁷ Stoller’s monograph on Rouch offers an insightful discussion of the dialectical relationship between Rouch’s written work, which often makes for slow, plodding reading, and his more immediately joyful and vivid cinematic productions.
⁸ Cited in Stoller, The Cinematic Griot, 43.
⁹ However, the properly filmic sequel to Jaguar is Rouch’s 1969 film, Petit à Petit, which revisits our three heroes from the earlier film as they develop their business into a successful corporation and send Damouré to Paris, in a brilliant example of anthropology in reverse, to investigate how ordinary Parisians live in skyscrapers—the goal being to collect ethnographic “data” in support of the corporation’s (unrealized) plan to build a skyscraper in the bush that will rival the tallest building in the Nigerien capital of Niamey.
héros du monde moderne;” he does not make this rather grand claim simply for dramatic effect. His statement instead bespeaks a relationship between cinema, anthropology and modernity that underlies many of his films and that is curiously doubled. On the one hand, the ciné-réalité created at the interface of Rouch’s camera and the situations of everyday life in which that camera necessarily participates links ethnographic practice to the sort of formal experiments—that were always already aesthetic discoveries made in constraint—of artistic modernism. This formulation acknowledges Rouch’s intellectual debt to both Dziga Vertov and Robert Flaherty, whose Nanook of the North (1922) was the first film Rouch ever saw.10 On the other hand, though, we can understand Rouch’s claim in narratological terms, that is, as highlighting how his amateur protagonists are the heroes of their own filmic restagings of their relationships to modernity and modern life in colonial West Africa. If this idea lurks below the surface in powerful ways only to burst forth with Rouch’s declaration near the end of Jaguar, it emerges in full narrative force in Moi, un Noir and becomes the structuring principle of the film, both because the film’s subject matter lends itself to more explicit iterations of these restagings and because the technological limitations with which Rouch was forced to contend at the time obliged him to give his actors’ narratological relationships to modern life pride of place in the story.

In interviews, Rouch enjoyed claiming that Moi, un Noir was the first film in which an African spoke on camera about his everyday life in his own words, and while

10 Jean Rouch, Ciné-ethnography, ed. and trans. Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 129.
such an assertion may or may not be true it nonetheless allows us to grasp some of the
more important aspects of Rouch’s early “ethnofiction” style (of which *Moi, un Noir* is
such a striking example). To be sure, in *Jaguar* Rouch’s Nigerien protagonists do provide
commentary about their lives and their travels, however while this film was shot in 1957
it was not finished until ten years later, when Rouch and his actors finally added the post-
synchronized dialogue. Rouch’s ethnofiction, a genre blending semi-fictional narrative
flourishes into ethnographic documentaries in which Rouch’s camera plays a self-
consciously participatory role, came about thanks to what we might call the serendipity of
“technical difficulties.” At the time, no noiseless 16mm cameras existed that could shoot
synchronized sound—and yet, a 16mm Bell and Howell camera was what Rouch used to
create his ambulatory and Vertovian shots. Vertov’s style, perhaps best captured in his
1929 film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, was one that sought to organize the perceptible
world by creating a filmic realism in which the camera becomes a mechanical eye (and
not simply a vehicle for the human one) capable of deciphering reality and creating a
specific type of filmic truth proper to the cinema. Vertov’s camera can be said to possess
its own consciousness and, for this reason, allows us to consider the ways in which lived
experience is both constructed by and constructed through filmic observation. This dual
sense of the filmic construction of everyday life is crucial to Rouch’s understanding of
the potential of documentary filmmaking, and he was forced to reconcile the Vertovian
influence in his shots with the frustrating inability to shoot with fully synchronized
sound.
Taking advantage of this technical setback, in *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*, Rouch and his amateur Nigerien actors improvised scenes based on a mutually agreed-upon storyline that were shot silently. Next, during postsynchronization Rouch showed his actors the rough cut of the film and his participants improvised a dialogue and a narrative that more or less (and sometimes much less!) coincided with the images on the screen. In this way, semi-fictionalized filmic lived experience was produced spontaneously through purely contingent narratives that hinged upon whatever the actors felt like saying about their lives.\(^\text{11}\)

These amateur actors certainly do have much to say about their own lives, but as Godard rightly observes, Rouch’s protagonists are portraying characters as much as (and, crucially, at the same time as) they are playing themselves. Although Rouch’s dramatic assertion that Damouré, Lam and Illo represent the heroes of the modern world comes at the very end of *Jaguar*, this authoritative voice-over retrospectively inflects the way we read the film up to that point. Put another way, if we understand Rouch’s claim in narratological terms, it allows us to posit in hindsight that the film is constructing a narrative of modernity through an investigation of its characters’ adaptations to urban life and in terms of the thoroughly modern(ist) tropes of travel, migration and displacement. *Jaguar* opens with another voice-over by Rouch, in which he interpellates an unknown, 

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\(^\text{11}\) Interestingly, Rouch’s third ethnography film, *La pyramide humaine*, contains scenes that were shot with synchronized sound and were improvised on the spot. This was accomplished by placing the actors around a large, heavy stationary camera. The more characteristically Rouchian shots in the film were created through silent shooting and postsynchronization, very much akin to what we see in *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*. It was not until 1960, with the help of innovative film technicians from Montreal, that a handheld camera was developed for Rouch that could allow him to shoot synchronized sound in the way he wanted.
unseen character, saying “Adamou, nous allons te raconter une histoire…” Playing on the double meaning of the word “histoire” in French, which designates both “story” and “history,” the film from the outset appears to move in two narrative directions: on the one hand, it is the improvised, fictional distillation of Rouch’s quantitative research in the Gold Coast and as such is but a story understood in the conventional sense. On the other hand, though, Rouch is careful to mention at several points throughout the film that what the spectator is seeing is also a sort of cultural history of the present: Nigerien migrants, like our three protagonists, reenact and retrace the southward migrations of their warrior ancestors but, in so doing, they endow these seasonal movements with new historical meaning. Of these modern migrants, Rouch remarks that “Ils ne ramènent pas des captifs, comme leurs ancêtres du siècle dernier. Ils ramènent des bagages, ils ramènent de merveilleuses histoires, ils ramènent des mensonges.” In short, we might use this comment to unite the dual sense of the word “histoire” by observing that the new cultural history filmed by Rouch is what enables his characters to produce fictional stories in the first place.

Rouch’s idea of “histoire” and its dual meaning is crucial for us because it highlights the sense of simultaneity that is narratively produced in the film. His characters partake in a modernist experiment uniting a fictional story and an ethnographic documentary at the same time that they negotiate and reshape their own cultural history by forging relationships to modernity and modern life through travel to the Gold Coast, whose twin urban centers of Accra and Kumasi are imagined by migrants and represented by Rouch as cosmopolitan metropolises. More specifically, though, as Damouré (the
primus inter pares of Rouch’s protagonists in the film) boastfully reminds us, becoming modern in Anglophone West Africa means becoming a “jaguar,” that is, cool, trendy, and in touch with the cosmopolitan currents of colonial urban life. We get a glimpse of what this means in the middle of the film, when Damouré defines “jaguar” for us as Rouch’s camera follows him on a walk through town in a series of low-angle shots that make Damouré’s stylized sense of the modern loom ever larger. As we watch him carefully hang a cigarette from the corner of his mouth, Damouré tells us in postsynchronized voice-over, “Jaguar, c’est le jeune homme galant, qui a la tête bien peignée, qui fume, qui marche. Tout le monde le regarde, il regarde tout le monde, il voit toutes les belles filles, il fume sa cigarette tranquillement. Voilà ce que veut dire ‘jaguar’.” Modernity here is thus understood as both an aesthetic and stylistic imperative as well as a concept produced through geographical displacement: modernity does not exist solely in the metropole, the film suggests, but is created in the cosmopolitan routes leading to and from its privileged position.

While mobility and displacement are also thematic concerns raised by Rouch and his actors in Moi, un Noir, in this film modernity takes a somewhat different spatial and geographical form. As the film’s title indicates, the story is centered on the narrative voice of one migrant, Oumarou Ganda, who plays himself yet goes by the name of Edward G. Robinson (in a conscious nod to the ascendancy of US filmic modernity) since he is fearful of revealing his real identity as a Nigerien migrant in the Ivory Coast. The other major character in the film, Robinson’s roguish friend, goes by the name of Eddy Constantine or, alternatively, Lemmy Caution, a self-styled “agent fédéral
américain.” During the week the migrants look for work and do whatever odd jobs they can find and, on the weekend, we see Rouch’s protagonists going to the beach, practicing boxing and flirting with girls in Treichville’s bars and nightclubs. The film presents the colonial city of Abidjan as a metropole in its own right and as a logical destination for young economic migrants from other French colonies: in the voice-over that opens the film, Rouch states, “[Ces jeunes gens] ont abandonné l’école ou le champ familial pour essayer d’entrer dans le monde moderne…Cette jeunesse, coincée entre la tradition et le machinisme, entre l’islam et l’alcool, n’a pas renoncé à ses croyances, mais se voue aux idoles modernes de la boxe et du cinéma.” Rouch and his narrators, though, are careful to remind us that city life for these migrants also draws heavily on French and US modernities. Thus, for example, Robinson presents Treichville as “le Chicago de l’Afrique noire,” and Rouch’s camera gives us a quick succession of cuts to various storefronts whose names link Treichville’s modernity to French and American cultural referents: we see the Cordonnerie Chicago, a restaurant called À la ville de Paris, the clothing store Aux St. Germain des Prés and another called the Boul’ Mich, a hair salon called Hollywood and any number of black cowboys pained mural-style on the walls of local businesses. In a similar vein, when we watch Robinson at boxing practice, the name on his training jacket humorously reads “Edward G. Sugar Ray Robinson.” Thus the “modern life” to which Robinson and his compatriots must adapt themselves is simultaneously local, in that Abidjan is a cosmopolitan metropole in its own right, and always already triangulated since the ideas and ideals of modernity travel transatlantically between West Africa, France (specifically, Paris) and the United States. This ideational
triangulation is captured in Robinson’s narrative which is a mixture of ethnographic thick description and impressionistic reflections on his return from Indochina where he fought and lost with the French army.

Rouch’s theory of modernity and his protagonists’ struggles with and adaptations to modern life are elaborated most clearly and provocatively on the level of filmic and ethnographic narrative. The sort of modernity enacted in these films is not limited to the tripartite geography traced by Rouch in the peripatetic shots he constructs while following his actors around the dusty streets of Treichville or the bustling market at Kumasi, teeming with prospective vendors and consumers. The kind of modernity at play here is instead characterized by how Rouch’s protagonists locate themselves within the triangulated cultural space—created within and between these two films—that they occupy along with the ethnographer. For one thing, if in *Jaguar* modernity is conceptually linked to adventure, story-telling, and the aestheticized adoption of colonial urban chic, Robinson’s translation of US and French modernities into the cultural idiom of cosmopolitan colonial Abidjan in *Moi, un Noir* is anything but uncritically celebratory. While on a number of occasions he proudly and jokingly suggests ways in which Treichville’s residents are modern like Americans (in relation, for example, to the number of cars wrecked on a regular basis in both places, or in his observation that nightclub dancers are just like cowboys), these rather ambitious assertions are undercut by his almost obsessive references to his sadness at his proletarian status and to his desire to consume the products of a capitalist modernity that, he realizes, must keep him on the outside looking in. On the contrary, in *Jaguar* our heroes dabble in the cosmopolitan
colonial capitalism that attracts migrants to the Gold Coast from throughout West Africa, only to return home to Niger penniless and happy, having either sent home all their earnings or given them away in the form of presents. In this earlier film the question of proletarianization, which plays such a prominent narrative role in *Moi, un Noir*, is for the most part unthinkable. Robinson’s distress, by contrast, is compounded by the fact that he understands all too well that he is more acutely aware than others of his marginalization and of his relegation to the very margins of the colonial economy.

The vision of modernity produced within and between these two films is thus different from Paul Gilroy’s notion of a modernity that travels throughout the black Atlantic world and relies on a DuBoisian double consciousness that holds in tension national identities and transnational (read transatlantic) modes of subjectivity. Although Rouch’s modernity does look at the black Atlantic world from intensely local perspectives in West Africa, his sense of the modern is predicated upon a different idea of the transnational than the one expressed in Gilroy’s well known notion of overlapping racial ontologies expressed in his “roots/routes” formulation: the modernity created in *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir* appears to foster an affective form of transnationalism in which the modern is less linked to the problem of national identity and, instead, paradoxically does double duty as both a triangulated ideational beacon and as the referent for a dystopian cultural present in which the truly modern remains forever out of reach. While this dystopian aspect of Rouch’s modernity certainly is echoed in *The Black Atlantic’s*
analysis of black political culture as in but not necessarily of the modern West (and we can read Robinson’s distress as expressing the same concern), Rouch’s broader theory has more in common with a later formulation of Gilroy’s, one that he makes in Against Race: “Although it is not acknowledged as often as it should be,” Gilroy suggests, “the close connection between ‘race’ and modernity can be viewed with special clarity if we allow our understanding of modernity to travel, to move with the workings of the great imperial systems it battled to control.”13 This idea is less caught up in questions of national identity and “roots” and instead, like Rouch’s theory, urges us to conceive of the modern as a concept whose racialization depends on its ability to travel within an imperial/colonial network in which West Africa is clearly an important site. Although in Rouch’s two films the idea of transnational travel is understood affectively it does offer us a way of thinking through both of Gilroy’s formulations at the same time.

Fredric Jameson, in A Singular Modernity, offers an ideological unpacking of the word “modernity” that begins from the elaboration of four maxims that place modernity as a concept in a seemingly endless dialectical series of alternating breaks and periods that elucidate both contemporary repackagings of the modern as well as the narrative gears that keep the concept of modernity running. In so doing, his project is as much revelatory (insofar as it unveils the narrative underpinnings of modernity) as it is methodological, and his analysis of the “narrative return of the repressed” functions as a “recommendation to search out the concealed ideological narratives at work in all

seemingly non-narrative concepts, particularly when they are directed against narrative itself.”¹⁴ Jameson’s second maxim of modernity is especially relevant in our context, since his methodological and critical work leads him to consider modernity as a rhetorical effect and as a trope that is inherently susceptible to rewriting, displacement and defamiliarization. He writes that

The trope of “modernity” is always in one way or another a rewriting, a powerful displacement of previous narrative paradigms. Indeed, when one comes to recent thought and writing, the affirmation of the “modernity” of this or that generally involves a rewriting of the narratives of modernity itself which are already in place and have become conventional wisdom.¹⁵

Jameson distills this point into his second maxim of modernity: “Modernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category.”¹⁶ This formulation dovetails with the theory of modernity deployed in Jaguar and Moi, un Noir, since what Jameson calls the rewriting of the trope of modernity is recast in these works as filmic restagings of everyday negotiations of the modern through purely contingent forms of narrative improvisation. In fact, a Rouchian rewriting of Jameson’s maxim might take the form of another methodological question: if modernity is a narrative category, what happens when we conceive of narrative as contingently and improvisationally constructed? This phrasing rightly conjures up images of experimentation, since much of Rouch’s oeuvre consists of cinematic thought experiments developed and improvised collectively with the people he filmed. Thus the triangulation of modernity we see in

¹⁵ Jameson, A Singular Modernity, 36.
¹⁶ Jameson, A Singular Modernity, 40.
these films is produced at the point of conjuncture between narrative improvisation (including a dialectic of narrative voices in the film) and collaborative participation in ethnographic praxis conceived of as a shared knowledge game. As *Moi, un Noir*’s title indicates, and as will become clear in what follows, blackness also appears as a narrative category in these films, one that is assumed contingently and that cannot but inflect our reading of Rouch’s reconceptualization of modernity. In this regard I consider Rouch’s restaging of the modern, namely, as a racialized narrative operation of rewriting (or “refilming,” as it were) that is produced contingently and improvisationally and relies on a geographic triangulation of modernity as such. For Rouch, this rewriting operation is also inseparable from his method of “shared anthropology,” a sort of *mise en abîme* of ethnography and of its epistemological projects and aspirations that proceeds through critical feedback loops between ethnographer and subject such that anthropological authority only exists in its continuous displacement.

While critics engaging with Rouch have often remained sensitive to the convergence in his work of the seemingly disparate formal imperatives of the fiction film and the documentary, such scholarly approaches have not, for the most part, explicitly

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sought to locate modernity within this curious filmic nexus. Such work links Rouch’s adventurous sense of experimentation and his imaginative vision of emerging social forms in West Africa to a willingness to tackle head on the most pressing political issues of his time, namely European colonialism and everyday instantiations of its attendant racist ideologies. Scholars such as Laura Marks and Michael Taussig have also pointed to Rouch’s ability to explore how ordinary Africans confront their own alienation through mimicry of European social norms and creative sorts of wish-fulfillment—indeed, this is how critics have conventionally read Rouch’s controversial 1955 film, *Les maîtres fous*, depicting a ceremony during which ordinary African workers become possessed by

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Michael Laramee and William Rothman have all written essays dealing more or less directly with the fictional elements of several of Rouch’s films in William Rothman, ed., *Three Documentary Filmmakers* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2009). From a different perspective, Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner point to the ways in which *Moi, un Noir* uses fiction to gain access to the realities of everyday life as they situate Rouch as a provocative figure in the pre-history of what they call the “fake documentary.” See Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner, eds., *F is for Phony: Fake Documentaries and Truth’s Undoing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 29.

18 Interestingly, although commentators have noted this willingness on the part of Rouch, one of his films in which colonialism and racism is dealt with most directly, *La pyramide humaine*, has received comparatively little critical attention. This 1959 work is the third film in what I have periodized as Rouch’s ethnfictional turn and deals with the relations and emergent friendships between Europeans and Africans at an elite French school in Abidjan. This film, which takes up explicitly race and class consciousness at the end of French colonial rule in Ivory Coast, was improvised by Rouch and the students and was conceived as posing a simple hypothetical question (i.e., What would happen if whites and blacks established friendships in West Africa?) to be treated filmically and improvisationally. The film represents a response by Rouch to critics who saw his work, and especially *Moi, un Noir*, as overly concerned with the African lumpenproletariat. Parts of this film were shot with synchronized sound, but these were limited to stationary shots in which the participants were seated around an unseen, cumbersome microphone/tape recorder apparatus. The more classically Rouchian shots and scenes in *La pyramide humaine* were shot silently and postsynchronized improvisationally, since Rouch would not begin shooting with fully synchronized sound until a special prototype camera was developed for him by Michel Brault of the Canadian Film Board for 1960’s innovative *Chronique d’un été*. 

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European colonial spirits, foam at the mouth and kill and eat a dog. This scholarship evokes many important aspects of Rouch’s oeuvre, including, as William Rothman puts it, the ways in which his sense of collaboration and shared anthropology impels “these ‘ethnographic others’ [Africans]—the traditional objects of ethnographic study—to become subjects who [share] in the observer’s pursuit of ethnographic knowledge.” Yet it also leaves open the question of how such innovative and collective ethnographic work allows for filmic restagings of the narrative of modernity. Revisiting Jaguar and Moi, un Noir, the most provocative and formally challenging of Rouch’s early “ethnofiction” films, speaks to the need to engage with Rouch as a thinker of modernity (the “director of modern life,” we might say, à la Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin) and to view the production of narratives of the modern as of a piece with the development of collective forms of participation in what, following Pascale Casanova, we might call the “world republic of anthropology.”


20 Rothman, “Jean Rouch as Film Artist: Tourou and Bitti, The Old Anaï, Ambara Dama,” in Three Documentary Filmmakers, 197.

Improvised Narratives and the “Powers of the False”

Having examined rather broadly how a thematics and aesthetics of modernity are elaborated and staged in these two significant early films of Rouch’s, I would like to turn to the ways in which *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir* construct in properly narrative terms modernity and negotiations of the modern in everyday life. We can accomplish this, I think, by turning to the micro-level, that is, by examining how narrative is constructed in these films at the level of the shot and the scene, and by investigating how these filmic narrative building blocks inflect the sense of fictional storytelling that underpins Rouch’s approach to these works. This strategy allows us to consider the crucial work that improvisation and postsynchronized sound do for Rouch’s ideas concerning the complex interplay between ethnography and fictional filmmaking. Moreover, it also allows us to explore how these two categories commingle and function as indispensable elements for the narrative of modernity that Rouch stages within and between these films. By examining such filmic elements as camera movements, voice-overs and improvised commentary, we can observe how both fiction and ethnography for Rouch rely to a large extent on the proliferation of voices within a film, voices that often challenge, misdirect or outstrip that of the professional anthropologist. This polyphonic filmmaking thus acts as a conceptual hinge linking Rouch’s ethnographic methodology to the turn toward a fictional aesthetic in his own cinematic *oeuvre*. Put another way, this hinge appears to serve a provocatively paradoxical function in both *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*: it allows fictional elements to sustain each film as an ethnographic documentary at the same time
as it forces the spectator to acknowledge the ways in which fiction can be born of the very messiness of everyday life that conventional ethnographic realism takes for granted.

In *Jaguar*, the fictional imperative goes far beyond the simple fact that, although they are playing themselves, Lam, Damouré and Illo are characterological distillations of the Nigeriens Rouch met while undertaking his more quantitative research in the Gold Coast. This tension allows for a good deal of improvisational free play in the film, and our three heroes incessantly switch back and forth between the characters they are playing on screen and their “real” selves who are engaged in postsynchronized commentary or metacommentary. These moments of narrative slippage occur throughout the film and serve to highlight how the ethnographic and the fictional slide into one another and become indistinguishable. In other words, by endlessly reiterating the founding tension of the film, our protagonists constantly point to the fluidity of the categories of genre with which Rouch is concerned.

These reiterations begin quite early in the film, once Rouch has introduced his characters via voice-over and set the stage for the long journey from Niger to the Gold Coast. Rouch’s camera follows Lam the cattle herder around the market in the Nigerien town of Ayorou as he goes to meet Damouré who is sitting under a tree filling out tax forms for illiterate townspeople. Rouch tells us that it is under this tree that they all decided to leave for the Gold Coast. As Lam and Damouré shake hands they verbally great each other in “real time,” as in conventional filmic narrative (“Comment ça va, Lam?” Damouré inquires of his friend.). Immediately thereafter, however, Damouré begins telling the viewer what he is doing in the scene, thus departing from the very
narrative conventions he has just established: “Maintenant on écrit…Alors j’ai lu le papier d’impôt, je gagne dix francs, quinze francs…Regarde par exemple ce père de famille. Il doit payer quinze mille huit cents francs d’impôt. Eh, mon vieux, ce qu’il est riche! Il a beaucoup de bœufs!” Thus the narrative has shifted from conventional filmic dialogue to descriptive commentary that explicitly takes advantage of postsynchronization in order to formulate observations about the footage on the screen. The narrative will shift again as well since after we hear voices from the crowd around Damouré grumbling that there is no money to pay taxes, Rouch’s voice-over returns to confirm these remarks before nudging the film’s narrative along: “Mais, à côté de notre arbre, il y a les joueurs de cartes,” Rouch observes as the camera cuts to a card game going on at the next tree. “Les jeunes gens qui sont partis à Kumasi. Ceux que nous rêvons d’imiter: les Kourmisé. Il faut que nous partions, nous aussi.” On the face of it, the return of Rouch’s voice-over at this early moment does not come as a surprise, since he has been providing introductory commentary (albeit with little in the way of general contextualization, which is not his style) since the beginning of the film. What does surprise the viewer, though, is that Damouré responds to Rouch without missing a beat: “Ah oui, il faut partir, hein? La Gold Coast, là, il faut aller, hein?” The anthropologist’s voice-over, which often preserves its authority by standing above and beyond the filmic narrative, is drawn into the immediacy of the scene when Damouré responds to Rouch and agrees with him. In just under a minute, then, the film’s mode of narration has moved between several different registers. What begins with a more or less “objective” ethnographic introduction, in which Rouch sets the scene for his viewers without giving
too much away, shifts to the narrative real time of the film as two of our heroes greet each other before Damouré takes it upon himself to engage in a bit of ethnographic commentary of his own; he does so by retrospectively discussing the scene via postsynchronization. Rouch’s voice-over returns, only this time his ethnographic authority is undercut: not only because he uses “nous,” and so includes himself among the group of travelers, but also because Damouré actually responds to him and bridges the gap between filmic real time and postsynchronized commentary which takes place in a different filmic present altogether. Thus an important way that the fictional imperative operates for Rouch is by presenting the viewer with a proliferation of filmic presents that are equally valid but that cannot fit together seamlessly. In both Jaguar and Moi, un Noir, as we will see, fiction seeps into the ethnographic film through these temporal seams.

In one of Moi, un Noir’s opening sequences, just before the opening credits, the camera locates Robinson at night, standing beneath a sign marking the entrance to Treichville, and Rouch’s voice-over reminds us that the film deals as much with Robinson’s own self-discovery as it does with any ethnographic portrait of everyday life as an economic migrant in Abidjan. Like many of Rouch’s voice-overs in this and other of his films, it exudes a narrative authority that cannot but be self-effacing when juxtaposed with Robinson’s own descriptions and reflections. 22 Robinson’s improvised and contingent narration does not only take place in an introspective tone, however, but is

22 Also, like many of his voice-overs, it simply and playfully does not give the viewer the whole story since Rouch omits the fact that his protagonist’s haunting, improvised introspection was born of a formal innovation that was itself brought about through technical limitations and frustrations.
fundamentally tripartite: in addition to being introspective, especially when referencing his profound sadness about his precarious condition as a day-laborer at Abidjan’s docks (yet another semi-fictional element of the film, since Oumarou Ganda was employed full-time as Rouch’s research assistant at the time of shooting), his narration is also dialogic—or apostrophic—and ethnographic-descriptive, such that the viewer wonders who the “real” anthropologist in the film actually is. We can glimpse these intertwined narrative registers in two early sequences: in the first, Robinson returns to Treichville by ferry, unsuccessful in his search for work, crossing the river that divides this newer neighborhood from the city’s relatively wealthier commercial districts. Robinson begins by telling us that he’s getting in the boat to return to “his” side of the river, in perfect, one-to-one narrative correlation with the footage we see on the screen. During the ferry trip we are afforded a close-up of Robinson’s face as well as a wider-angle shot of a well-kept, two-story building from the side of the river our hero has just left. In the juxtaposition of these two shots, Robinson improvises and comments on how hard his life is since he has so little money and cannot afford to live “closer to God” in a multi-story building. The shift in this sequence is striking: at the beginning Rouch’s images appear to provide Robinson with easy content for his narrative (i.e., he is boarding the ferry and narrates accordingly), but in the juxtaposition of the close-up and the shot of the well-kept building there is nothing that inherently lends itself to Robinson’s commentary on class and labor in colonial Abidjan. This is one of many productive disconnects between Rouch’s imagery and Robinson’s narration, and in more cases than not it is thoroughly undecidable which one acts as the cinematic prime mover.
In a second early sequence, we are provided with several three- or four-second shots of other Nigerien laborers, who we learn are Robinson’s friends. In these shots we hear Robinson greeting his friends and chatting with each one in turn. However it is crucial to point out that in each of these shots Robinson is nowhere to be seen. In fact, he is taking advantage of postsynchronization to apostrophize friends who are “present” only in two dimensions, and even then only after the fact. This next disconnect, then, is inseparable from the problem of Moi, un Noir’s narrative temporality, for if Robinson uses his narration to produce *ex post facto* dialogues that are in no way given by Rouch’s images, we must raise the question, when exactly is the narrative present of the film? Such a temporal break between represented filmic space and the narrative strategies that only appear to coincide with it is part and parcel of what Gilles Deleuze (in a chapter of his second volume on cinema in which Rouch’s work plays no small analytic role) calls “crystalline narration.” In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze repeatedly deploys the figure of the crystal (crystal-image, crystalline description, etc.) to illustrate not only the collapse of various kinds of “organic” sensory-motor linkages in the cinema, but also to point to the indistinguishability of the actual and the virtual, the real and the imagined, in the direct, pure presentation of time. The types of spaces that correspond to crystalline narration, writes Deleuze, “cannot be explained in a simply spatial way. They imply non-localizable relations. These are direct presentations of time.”23 These direct presentations are not, for all that, straightforward; on the contrary, in the direct time-image “[w]e no longer have a

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chronological time which can be overturned by movements which are contingently abnormal; we have a chronic non-chronological time which produces movements necessarily ‘abnormal,’ essentially ‘false.’”

What this assertion implies for Deleuze’s larger argument is especially profound and serves to unearth another layer of fiction in Rouch’s work: since crystalline narration implies that time is “out of joint” (as Deleuze himself, following Shakespeare, puts it in his short book on Kant25), we are dealing with a form of narrative that relies on what he calls “the powers of the false.” This does not imply the existence of different types of truths but rather, in a nod to Leibniz, the proliferation of presents coupled with the multiplication of undecidable alternatives for the past.26 Thus, to return to the short sequence examined above, although Robinson and his Nigerien friends are objectively “real” individuals, they exist in presents which are incommensurable, the one visual and the other purely auditory, and the narrative that holds them together is ultimately falsifying since it functions to preserve this incommensurability. The same can be said of the sequence from the beginning of Jaguar discussed above: in less than a minute, and with only one cut, the purely visual present of the film (i.e., the immediate visual image, insofar as it can be considered in isolation from the forms of sound that complement it) is crisscrossed by any number of auditory

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24 Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2, 129.
26 Gilles Deleuze, Cinema 2, 130-31. As D. N. Rodowick points out, this is not a nihilistic argument about the impossibility of truth or the omnipresence of fiction and falsehood. Rather, what Deleuze wants to do is to have done with the opposition between the true and the false as a predetermined choice that thought must be forced to make. See Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 84-86. We can even go so far as to say that this emptying out of the epistemological and philosophical primacy of all predeterminations and preconditions is a major component of Deleuze’s philosophical oeuvre.
presents that approach each other, cut each other off, and advance the story of the film without any one of them ever taking the narrative reins for good. Thus, aside from the obviously fictional elements in the stories of these films *writ large*, the shots and scenes are constructed from falsifying narration whose fictional powers (understood in Deleuze’s sense) present the viewer with impossible choices and undecidable alternatives for narrative progression.

If Deleuze’s “powers of the false” rely to no small extent on such contingent audiovisual linkages, the same holds true for Rouch’s characters’ relationships to their own blackness and the ways in which blackness appears as a narrative-ontological category inflecting their relationships to modern life. Even in the more properly ethnographic aspects of these films, outside of Robinson’s more overtly introspective reflections on his time with the French army, Rouch’s protagonists make scant mention of their relationship to France and their status as black colonial subjects. Aside from the fact that these characters narrate in French, French colonization is often referred to only obliquely in the improvised narratives. Yet the presence of the hexagon and the colonizer/colonized relationship haunts the symbols of modernity that comprise our characters’ most immediate experiential referents: for example, when we watch Robinson and one of his friends loading sacks of coffee onto a ship bound for France, the former matter-of-factly remarks that these products are destined for metropolitan consumption and then proceeds into a more personal ethnographic commentary, saying “Pour nous la vie c’est comme ça, les sacs. La vie des sacs.” We can posit that these sacks of coffee synecdochically stand in for the inevitably racialized colonial relation *par excellence*, and
we can also take Robinson strictly at his words and observe his acute awareness of the relationship between his own alienated labor and his participation in the increasingly globalized networks of modern colonial capitalism. Likewise, this curiously detached or depersonalized relationship to colonial capitalism appears in *Jaguar* when Lam leaves Accra to sell robes in the countryside and meets a friend, Douma, who works with other West African immigrants in one of the country’s many gold mines. The narrative of the film is bracketed at this point in favor of a roughly five-minute sequence in which our three heroes, with the help of Douma, comment on footage Rouch has taken from a ramshackle mining village (and from down in the mine itself) before the story abruptly resumes and we learn that Lam has convinced Douma to work for him as a porter instead of risking his health and his life in the mine. During this interlude, in which Rouch’s characters fully assume the roles of ethnographic commentators, we observe Douma and other miners walking to work and descending into the mine, where we watch miners produce gold ingots to be exported to Britain. Damouré remarks that the gold is destined for safes in London and Lam interjects, saying “C’est pour vous couillonner!” As Rouch’s camera cuts to a wide shot of the mine and the lush countryside, Damouré continues in the same register: “Voilà, les Anglais ont couillonné les Africains. Ils viennent enlever leur or et puis ça y est, ils l’emmènent chez eux.” Thus although our protagonists engage in a direct critique of colonial exploitation, this rhetorical move is accomplished through several degrees of remove: the characters are not commenting on a situation in which they are involved personally (indeed, during the entire sequence none of the three heroes appear on screen), and because of this it is rhetorically impossible for
them to engage in a critique of specifically French colonialism. Further, they do not insist that this economic relationship is necessarily cast in an explicitly racialized mold and instead allow the spectator to infer colonial racism from our three characters’ damning treatment of the transnational gold economy.

Neither Lam, Damouré, nor Illo suffer direct encounters with colonial racism in *Jaguar*, despite the fact that British colonization and Ghana’s transition to independence (complete with shots from political rallies and from Kwame Nkrumah’s swearing-in ceremony as leader of the newly independent state) hang heavily over the otherwise playful and adventure-filled narrative. A rather curious improvisational moment does bring blackness and racism to the forefront, however, and serves as an ephemeral contextualizing reminder that, in spite of the freewheeling innocence that characterizes much of the film’s story, we are dealing with social actors and social relations that cannot be extricated from colonial histories and structures of power. After the three adventurers arrive in the Gold Coast, they go their separate ways and we learn that Damouré has taken a job with a Nigerien-owned timber firm in Accra. He starts out as an unskilled laborer but, thanks to his quick wit and literacy, is swiftly promoted to the rank of *chef d’équipe*. From one shot to the next, we see Damouré go from pushing wagons and counting planks to donning oversized sunglasses and humorously letting what little

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27 Rouch was a close friend of Nkrumah’s, and he made another film in 1957, *Baby Ghana*, dealing with Nkrumah’s election.

28 Experienced viewers of Rouch’s work will take note of moments like this, since there is often precious little work of ethnographic and/or historical contextualization that takes place in his films. The question of how to produce “context” and, by extension, of how to formulate an ethnographic narrative with the spectator explicitly in mind, is an important one that needs to be raised in relation to Rouch’s œuvre but it falls outside the scope of this chapter.
status he has go to his head. He’s beginning to “faire le galant,” he explains (as we have seen, an important step in becoming a thoroughly modern “jaguar”), and Rouch’s camera cuts to Damouré upbraiding a group of workers who are standing around instead of loading wood into a wagon. He shouts, “C’est moi qui vous commande! Méfiez-vous! Qu’est-ce que ça? Cette brouette qui n’est pas chargée, c’est impossible, nom de Dieu! Quoi! On ne peut pas travailler avec des nègres!” One can tell from the smiles on the workers’ faces that this outburst is obviously only made in jest, and yet it is not entirely clear whether Damouré is mocking white colonists or African évolués (and why not both at once?). This distinction, though, is less important than the observation that this brief moment pushing racism and blackness to the thematic foreground links an act of narrative contextualization to the improvised production of affect (i.e., mock anger and silliness). This this moment acts as a sort of narrative catharsis, since it finally allows the film’s colonial context to burst forth from where it had been lurking just beneath the surface, and the type of racialized production of affect we encounter in Moi, un Noir takes on a much darker and more intensely personal tenor.

At first glance, it may seem curious that the protagonist of a film titled Moi, un Noir does not describe his relationship to his own labor at the docks in explicitly racialized terms. It must be kept in mind, however, that Moi, un Noir was not the original title of the film; Ganda and Rouch intended to make a film called Treichville (or, according to Stoller, Le Zouzouman de Treichville29) and later agreed to change the

29 Stoller, The Cinematic Griot, 46.
This anecdote serves to throw into stark relief the moment late in the film when Robinson actually does assume his blackness as a narrative and ontological category. Given the localized nature of the film’s subject matter, it is perhaps unsurprising that Robinson’s encounters with colonial racism writ large are few and far between. Indeed, the only significant incidence of racism occurs toward the end of the film, when a white Italian man, full of promises of cash (played by André Lubin, Rouch’s French sound technician, and postsynchronized with the voice of Italian ethnographic filmmaker Enrico Fulchignoni, in yet another playful fictional move by Rouch\(^{31}\)), moves in on the beautiful Dorothy Lamour whom Robinson is wooing at a nightclub. The Italian leaves with Dorothy after racially abusing Robinson, leaving the latter to sulk in front of his beer until he runs out of money. The next morning Robinson, still visibly drunk, pounds on the door of Dorothy’s house only to be chased away by the Italian after more insults and after the two men exchange blows in the dirt, a fight scene characterized by extremely short point-of-view shots in which Rouch’s camera and Robinson’s narrative consciousness are momentarily fused together. This sequence does not so much illustrate a coming to (racial) consciousness, as the film’s title might lead us to suggest, as it acts as a vehicle for the production of affect: this is the moment in the film where Robinson’s blackness explicitly occupies his narrative consciousness, and it is surely no coincidence that after

\(^{30}\) Rouch, Ciné-ethnography, 140.

\(^{31}\) Scheinfeigel, Jean Rouch, 158. Scheinfeigel helpfully points out that this fictional move of Rouch’s (which is little more than an inside joke of post-production) continues the neo-realist tradition of dubbing a character’s voice with that of another actor entirely. Additionally, in another move linking Rouch to Godard, we might observe that the latter, in his Charlotte et son Jules (1960), substituted his own voice for that of Jean-Paul Belmondo during the dubbing process since Belmondo had been called away to serve in the army.
this moment, for the remaining ten minutes of this seventy-minute film, his narrative becomes noticeably angrier. It is as if the emergence of blackness as Robinson’s narrative focal point offers him some sort of catharsis: for it is only after this encounter with European racism that he is able, in the final scene of the film which we will consider below in the broader context of Rouch’s shared anthropology, to speak about his childhood in Niger and the violence of the colonial war in Indochina where he fought with the French. These latter were ungrateful for his services and left him in the most precarious of positions in Abidjan.

In short, while blackness does appear as a narrative category in the film that is contingent upon Robinson’s chance encounter with the Italian, this contingency appears inextricably tied to the affective register of his narrative, in which expressions of anger and sadness at being left out of modernity’s idealized grand narrative of progress (which he desperately tries to consume, to which his Americanized moniker attests) have been present since the beginning. In a similar vein, the moment in Jaguar when Damouré tries to “faire le galant” and mock colonial racism with a spontaneous joking remark about “les nègres” allows the colonial context of the film to unveil itself while still remaining congruent with the affective tone of the three migrants’ humorous improvised ethnographic commentary. Put another way, race and affect appear to mediate and hold contingency and necessity together, without ever letting the one pass over into the other, as two sides of the same narrative coin. As I want to explore in what follows, the narrative give-and-take that produces such profound moments of filmic collaboration also raises significant questions concerning methodological approaches to fieldwork and
ethnographic filmmaking: in what ways, I would like to ask, do matters of ethnographic methodology resonate and intersect with restagings of modernity as a contested narrative category?

**Shared Anthropology and Collaborative Productions of the Modern**

As has become apparent in the preceding pages, ethnographic filmmaking for Rouch is an aesthetic enterprise that always already implicates thorny matters of cinematic representation and politically tinged problems of anthropological knowledge production. In order to bring these problems to the fore, Rouch places the question of collaboration at the methodological and thematic heart of so many of his films. Indeed, two of his works from this early period, *La pyramide humaine* and the well known *Chronique d’un été*, actually contain scenes in which the informants/actors informally discuss with Rouch how various improvisational roles will be played, how sociological and anthropological fieldwork might be represented on screen, and, at the end of the films, which improvisational approaches worked for the actors and which of these worked less well. These collaborative techniques both enable and encourage us to link Rouch’s treatment of modernity and modern life in his early ethnofiction films to his relationship to filmic modernism as Fredric Jameson describes it in *Signatures of the Visible*. Jameson examines modernist cinema as the moment of emergence of the *auteur* and points out that this term was initially deployed in the 1940s and 1950s as a way of aesthetically papering over the multiple forms of technical expertise that went into
making films as well as the stylistic flexibility of the best directors. He concludes that “The concept of the *auteur* is then a heuristic concept or methodological fiction, which proposes that we treat collective texts...as though they were the work of a single ‘artist’ [...].” Rouch’s films, especially *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*, both allude to the *auteur* figure (who takes the role of the European ethnographer exercising his authority through such techniques as voice-overs) and thoroughly undermine its heuristic efficacy by highlighting their intensely collective conditions of possibility. To view Rouch’s relationship to modernist cinema this way is to translate into filmic language his methodological commitment to what he called “anthropologie partagée,” a polyvocal ethnographic undertaking that sought to redefine the hitherto passive role that conventional ethnographic “objects” played in anthropological knowledge production.

Thus, if the manifold types of contingency at work in *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir* illustrate Rouch’s playful, improvisational and carefree approach to filmmaking, they also raise the related methodological question of this doctrine of “shared anthropology” and its implication in the production of a narrativized modernity. Two photographs that appear in a recently published volume of Rouch’s newspaper writings from his first three research trips (1946-1951) offer an especially striking pictorial representation of his collaborative ethnographic methodology: in them, Rouch has his back to the camera, facing a group of Nigeriens of all ages from the village of Wanzerbé, and is filming the

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33 Although, as I have pointed out above, the question of the voice-over in Rouch’s films (which deserves more attention than I can give to it here) also undermines the authority of the ethnologist since Rouch’s voice-overs conceal as much filmic content as they elucidate.
slaughter of a young white bull. The photos were taken by Damouré Zika who was Rouch’s informant and research assistant at the time and who would go on to appear in many of Rouch’s films as the two developed a lifelong friendship. These pictures, then, represent not only a collaborative imperative in research and fieldwork, according to which ethnographic “others” can and must produce anthropological knowledge. They also represent a *mise en abîme* of anthropology as such, since the research practices of the (Western) ethnographer are always already caught up in feedback loops that subject these practices to the scrutiny of those (non-Western) objects of the ethnographic gaze.

Another anecdote—one Rouch loved recounting in interviews—is especially poignant in this regard: in 1951 Rouch shot *Bataille sur le grand fleuve* (1952), a film about Sorko hippopotamus hunters in Niger, and inserted a traditional hunting song that played at the moment of the great chase. Two years later, when he returned to the village where the film was shot and screened it for its participants, the chief of the hunters demanded that the music be removed on the grounds that hippopotamus hunting must take place in absolute silence. Rouch duly complied and cut the music from the film. Thus even an “authentic” aesthetic flourish was undercut by the imperative to allow Rouch’s research subjects to determine the form taken by the filmic knowledge produced about them.

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35 This comment is fairly widely cited in scholarship on Rouch. See, for example, Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, 42 and 157; Scheinfeigel, *Jean Rouch*, 108; and Stoller, *The Cinematic Griot*, 43.
Such an important early moment in Rouch’s career indicates the extent to which he was able to depart from Dziga Vertov’s conception of the camera as an apparatus capable of absorbing and making coherent the entirety of social life. Vertov’s 1920s Soviet film collective was called the Kinoks, from the Russian *kino-oki*, or “cinema-eyes,” and in an early manifesto Vertov defined these Kinoks as “organizers of visible life.”³⁶ Rouch’s vision of shared anthropology, by contrast, does not grant this same kind of organizational priority to the camera lens; if for him the camera is an ethnographic *agent provocateur* in the sense that its presence is capable of setting off social situations that might not otherwise occur, it does not follow from this that the camera alone is able to organize and capture social life taken as a totality. Rather, Rouch’s experimental and improvisational style wonders what kinds of representations might be produced if the anthropologist’s camera divests itself of some of its authority and enters into dialectical and dialogic relationships with the people being filmed.

Scenes from both films under investigation in this chapter offer provocative filmic instantiations of how these relationships operate within a commitment to anthropology as a shared epistemological enterprise. I would like initially to examine a sequence from *Jaguar* in which Rouch’s characters take on the roles of ethnographers during their journey to the Gold Coast and create a parody of anthropological representations of so-called “exotic” cultures. This sequence is in keeping with Rouch’s ongoing fascination with “reverse” ethnography, in which traditional ethnographic others become

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ethnographic knowledge producers or study Western societies in ways that caricature conventional anthropological research methods. After examining that scene I turn to the compelling final sequence in *Moi, un Noir*, in which Robinson finally vents his spleen at his treatment by the French army and at how he feels abandoned after returning home from Indochina. These scenes open up a productive avenue for asking how Rouch’s methodology reorganizes participation and belonging in anthropology as an academic discipline.

As we have seen, Lam, Illo and Damouré make their journey southward to the Gold Coast as much for modest economic gain as for the possibility of adventure and the collecting of experiences to be recounted upon their eventual return to Niger. Their postsynchronized commentary, then, allows for the narrative production of micro-narratives, adventurous short stories the boys make up on the spot in order to impress their friends and relatives at a later date. This generation of second-order narratives also enables our heroes to play the role of anthropologists who provide ethnographic narrative commentary on the various groups of social actors with whom they come into contact during their travels: these groups range from Hausa merchants from Nigeria in the Kumasi market to members of Kwame Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party at a rally in support of their leader. One of the boys’ more poignant encounters, though, occurs early in the trip when they cross into northern Dahomey (contemporary Benin) and enter the lands of the Somba. As Rouch’s camera cuts to a group of huts, Lam exclaims, “Ils ont les cases des souris, là!” Damouré explains that he learned in school that the Somba do not wear clothes, and our protagonists dissolve into hysterical laughter when Lam
walks up a ladder to meet an elderly Somba man and remarks with embarrassment, “Je vois quelque chose en bas blanc, blanc, blanc,” in reference to the man’s white penis sheath. This exoticizing commentary reaches its high water mark when Damouré tells Lam that the bloody bones attached to the huts are fetish objects, finally prompting the latter to say that although he’s heard about the Somba, now that he sees them, “je ne suis pas sûr si ce sont des hommes.”

While we do not know enough to conclude that Rouch’s protagonists are knowingly mocking the dehumanizing rhetoric that characterized much of Western colonial ethnography, it is nonetheless apparent that Rouch is gesturing here toward a parody of contemporary anthropology since his sequence depicts his ethnographic “others” negotiating an encounter with their own “others.” This sequence undergoes a marked shift in tone, however, and what began as an exoticizing set of observations morphs into a primer on cultural relativism: as Rouch’s footage of his protagonists meeting the naked Somba continues, the three suddenly agree that “quand tu arrives dans un pays, c’est le pays qui te change. C’est pas toi qui change le pays.” Humorously, as Damouré finishes explaining this principle Rouch cuts to a shot of a nearly naked Damouré who, “toujours galant au milieu des femmes,” has stripped down to his underwear in order to accommodate himself to his hosts’ culture. There follow several shots of varying length of dancing at a Somba market before Damouré closes the discussion on relativism: “Lam et Illo, vous voyez, c’est pas parce qu’il sont nus qu’il faut se moquer d’eux. Le bon Dieu a voulu qu’ils soient comme ça. Comme chez nous, le bon Dieu a voulu que nous portions des vêtements…C’est des frères comme nous.”
The positive note on which this sequence ends encourages us to read it as a narrative of what an idealized anthropological encounter might look like to Rouch, since skepticism and dehumanization make way for cross-cultural understanding. Such an approach would certainly be consonant with Rouch’s propensity for filming improvised idealizations of fraught social relations. Overemphasizing this perspective, however, risks obscuring a more fundamental observation that directly implicates Rouch’s idea of shared anthropology: his filmic representation of an (idealized) anthropological encounter involves the transformation of ethnography’s traditional objects into active, knowledge-producing ethnographic subjects.

This question of how anthropology films itself is a crucial one for Rouch (even if it is not always explicitly thematized), and in many of his films it is inseparable from the question of ethnography understood as a collaborative enterprise that often involves the traditional objects of ethnography looking back at those who study them. In *Petit à Petit*, the 1971 sequel to *Jaguar*, for instance, a much older Damouré flies to Paris to conduct a crudely caricatured sort of fieldwork in order to ascertain how Parisians cope with living in skyscrapers. Thus we see him accosting passers-by in the street, taking cranial measurements and counting teeth, in a hilariously awkward parody that harkens back to colonial anthropology’s roots as a racist pseudo-science. Interestingly, Manthia Diawara, for his part, imagines himself to be re-enacting Damouré’s fieldwork trip as he flies to

37 Such is the premise, for example, of *La pyramide humaine*: As Rouch explains, he and his protagonists’ goal in this film is to improvise an examination of what life might look like if blacks and whites could communicate and become friends in francophone West Africa.
Paris and meditates on reverse ethnography from a meta-anthropological point of view in his 1995 documentary, *Rouch in Reverse.* In a similar vein, some of Rouch’s African friends from the Ivory Coast join him in Paris for the filming of 1960’s *Chronique d’un été* and provide reverse ethnographic commentary on French modernity while working with a research team interviewing ordinary Parisians and asking the question “Êtes-vous heureux?” What these examples have in common with our sequence from *Jaguar* is that they demonstrate how, for Rouch, the filmic representation of anthropology is both framed by and in dialogue with the ethnographic gaze of those whom anthropology has hitherto conceived as passive objects to be studied. Visual anthropology, then, only “succeeds” as an epistemological endeavor if it produces its own *mise en abîme* at the same time that it purports to document the everyday lives of social actors through the medium of film. While our sequence from *Jaguar* elucidates this process at the level of content, the poignant final sequence from *Moi, un Noir* addresses this complex anthropological relationship through the dialectical relationship of narrative form between Rouch and Robinson that reaches its dramatic crescendo at the end of the film.

Turning now to the final sequence of *Moi, un Noir*, we learn that Robinson’s friend Eddy Constantine, the “agent fédéral américain,” has been thrown into prison for three months for fighting with the police. After paying him a visit, Robinson and his friend Petit Jules stroll along the shore of Abidjan’s lagoon. Robinson asks Petit Jules to

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Diawara was Rouch’s student in Paris, and his compelling short film asks questions of the vestiges of colonialism that haunt Rouch’s work while engaging with the director in his own terms. What results is a filmic text that mobilizes a thoroughly Rouchian form in order to interrogate problems in the content of Rouch’s most well-known works.
imagine the lagoon as the Niger river passing through the country’s capital, Niamey, and, after a fictionalized flashback (which doubles as a dream-sequence or an instance of wish-fulfillment, since Rouch has obviously spliced in footage from Niger, as Maxime Scheinfeigel helpfully reminds us\(^3\)), he reminisces about fighting in Indochina in a narrative turn that is as suddenly grim as it is dark. He remarks bitterly, “J’ai tout fait, tout, tout, tout, tout, mais rien ne m’a servi.” The scene progresses with Robinson acting out the part of a soldier, launching imaginary grenades, crouching in imaginary bunkers and going into graphic detail about the carnage he has witnesses: “J’ai vu couler le sang,” he tells us while running his hand under his neck; he has had comrades blown to pieces two meters from him (he mimics the explosions), and he mentions how he has killed Vietnamese. Whether this commentary is intended as a sort of confessional or as so much on-camera braggadocio is impossible to discern and, at any rate, is unimportant relative to the broader point that both the form and content of his rhetoric in this sequence do not seem to be consonant with his narrative style before his highly racialized encounter with the white Italian man—an encounter which, as we have noted, was provoked by Rouch who always enjoyed playing the directorial gadfly.

This scene is crucial because in it we can observe quite clearly the narrative dialectic at play that we examined earlier, whose terms (Robinson’s spoken narrative and

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\(^{3}\) See Scheinfeigel, Jean Rouch, 162. While my work in this chapter is concerned primarily with fictionalized and “falsifying” (in Deleuze’s terms) narrative forms and contents in Rouch’s work, Scheinfeigel’s analysis of Moi, un Noir focuses on a number of dream sequences in the film in order to highlight the relationship between documentary and fiction. Another of these sequences, for example, is when Robinson imagines that he and Dorothy Lamour are married as Rouch’s camera creates fictional shots of Dorothy playing the dutiful, seductive wife in Robinson’s fantasy. See Scheinfeigel, Jean Rouch, 159-160.
Rouch’s cinematic-technical narrative) are held together in uneasy tension in the totality of the sequence. Once again, it is entirely unclear just who is taking the narrative reins here: on the one hand, Rouch himself has remarked that for much of this sequence he was editing without any cutaways or connecting shots, which lends viewers the impression that he is trying to catch up to his protagonist and follow his narrative lead. On the other hand, when Rouch finally does cut away to a shot of a European water-skier whizzing by in the lagoon, which affords the viewer precious respite during a remarkably tense sequence, Robinson interrupts himself in order to catch up to Rouch’s image and he comments on it accordingly. Between these two narrative moments that more or less bookend the sequence in question, we can observe that for several seconds Robinson’s narrative and Rouch’s technical flourishes coincide with the introduction of gunfire and explosion sound effects (seemingly out of place in conventional ethnographic documentary) that match up with Robinson’s description of shelling and battle in Indochina. Taking into account that the only other moment in the film when Rouch uses artificial sound effects is when he overlays shoot-out style gunfire—akin to what we find in US Western films—onto his earlier shots of cowboy murals on the walls of Treichville’s shops, we can conclude that Robinson’s “performance” in this sequence (which, paradoxically, purports to be neither more nor less than his everyday life) is of a piece with the forms of cinematic modernity that function as such important cultural referents for all of Moi, un Noir’s protagonists. Similarly, the only moment in Jaguar

40 Rouch, Ciné-ethnography, 165.
where Rouch overlays artificial sound effects is during a long point-of-view shot from the perspective of Damouré who has hitched a ride on a truck as he makes his way to Accra. Already showing signs of the cool, “jaguar” persona he will soon be adopting, Damouré triumphantly looks out as he stands in the bed of the truck as Rouch’s camera cuts to Ghanaians standing on the side of the road and we hear the sounds of a raucous crowd fade in as a sort of imaginary welcome for our protagonist. From this point of view, the artificial sound effects, coupled with the point-of-view shot taken from atop a truck, serve to liken Damouré to the modern politician who travels around his country currying favor with the populace.

In the important final sequence from Moi, un Noir, Robinson is not only (or not simply), rewriting the trope of modernity in his image. Such an observation is undoubtedly correct, but it does not tell the whole story; we must, rather, go further and pose the question of the relationship between cinematic modernity, which Robinson both consumes and produces, and anthropological knowledge production, of which Robinson (the research subject) is the object and (as improvised narrator) also the subject. As we have seen, Rouch’s model of “anthropologie partagée” is preoccupied with converting notions of co-authorship, reflexivity and self-criticism into the epistemological sine qua non for anthropology—understood as a circular process of knowledge production—to take place. In fact, these were important components of Rouch’s ethnographic methodology decades before they took center stage in ethically-tinged debates about the politics of representation and anthropology’s disciplinary complicity with colonialism
that were played out in significant texts such as James Clifford and George Marcus’s *Writing Culture* and Talal Asad’s *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*.\(^ {41} \)

To speak of restagings of the narrative of modernity in the same breath as anthropology conceived as a collective epistemological enterprise is to pose the question of disciplinary belonging in much the same way that Pascale Casanova raises the problem of literary belonging in her “république mondiale des lettres.” As Casanova explains, world literary space is a realm that contains forms and structures of domination that are wholly proper to it and is semi-autonomous from, yet inextricably linked to, actually existing political and national spaces. One consequence of this semi-autonomy (or semi-heteronomy) is that there is often some degree of overlap, especially in countries that have experienced colonialism, between literary domination, loosely understood as enforced aesthetic distance from the norms established by a literary center that holds the powers of consecration and defines what is “modern”, and linguistic or political dependency.\(^ {42} \) Casanova argues that we can actually complicate this model and take into account a peculiar ambiguity of the relation of literary domination and dependence, namely, that writers in dominated spaces may be able to convert their dependence into an instrument of emancipation and legitimacy. To criticize established literary forms and genres because they have been inherited from colonial culture, for instance, misses the point that literature itself, as a value common to an entire space, is not only part of the legacy of political domination but also an instrument that, once reappropriated, permits writers from literarily deprived areas to gain recognition.\(^ {43} \)


The observation of this striking ambiguity, which goes some way toward accounting for how writers from spaces with few literary resources force their way into world literary space, compels us to draw a parallel with how Rouch’s method of shared anthropology allows the hitherto passive objects of ethnographic discourses not only to produce knowledge about themselves on their terms, but also to critique the ethnographer on his own disciplinary turf. This shift is observable initially in the number of Rouch’s actors and research subjects who went on to work in African cinema, most notably Oumarou Ganda who helped internationalize West African cinema, had his first feature shown at Cannes in 1968, and who completed four films before his death in 1981. In Rouch’s own films, his anthropological method evinces simultaneously narratives of cultural difference and metanarratives that reveal the blind spots of these first-order ethnographic knowledge claims. This occurs both during significant moments of critique, such as when Rouch’s actors demanded the removal of music from his film about hippopotamus hunting or when our protagonists from Jaguar take a parodic look at the anthropological encounter, or in more subtle instances of dialectical back-and-forth, as in Moi, un Noir’s provocative crescendo. Thus one implication we can take from the analogy established with Casanova’s formulation is that just as writers from literarily (and often politically) dominated spaces, writing in dominant languages, struggle to earn what Casanova calls “literary capital,” so do individuals in anthropologically dominated spaces (such as 1950s French colonial Abidjan, or even Africa more generally, if we take into account

anthropology’s legacy as the handmaiden of colonialism) earn what we might call epistemological capital. They do so by becoming anthropological knowledge producers, as we have seen, for example, in how Robinson narrates in tandem with Rouch to create a film about his and his friends’ lives in Treichville and to angrily discuss his war exploits, and in how Damouré explains to us precisely what it means to be a modern, hip “jaguar” in colonial Accra. What becomes clear, then, is that this production of epistemological capital by ethnographic “objects” through narrative techniques like the ones at stake in *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir* serves in effect to determine what kinds of knowledge a European ethnographer may produce about them.

Although Rouch’s shared anthropology allows for the production of provocative new filmic reiterations of the trope of modernity, his approach does not offer any methodological panacea that would finally settle venerable and quite thorny debates within anthropology about the politics and ethics of “responsible” fieldwork. Inasmuch as shared anthropology became an explicitly elaborated research strategy for Rouch, it still leaves important problems unaddressed: for instance, in his writings on the subject, Rouch does not adequately tackle the loaded problem of authorship in collaborative anthropology, although he points out that the medium of film contains radically democratic possibilities that would allow the Third World to speak back to the West using the West’s own technical innovations.\(^\text{45}\) In this respect, we might follow Rouch and observe that ethnographic film contains within itself the prospect of a visual and

\(^{45}\) Rouch, *Ciné-ethnography*, 160.
epistemological Utopia. Additionally, there remains the matter of thinking through Rouch’s own entanglement with colonialism: he began his career in West Africa as a colonial engineer, overseeing indigenous African laborers, and critics of his films (including Ousmane Sembene, who (in)famously remarked that Rouch films Africans “comme des insectes”⁴⁶) have questioned what colonial residue remains in his work. These blind spots, however, are not necessarily at odds with Casanova’s formulation that has such strong analogical ties to Rouch’s vision of anthropology’s disciplinary space as one that can be occupied via the creative reappropriation of the very tools used to erect the boundaries of that space in the first place. As an extension of Casanova’s metaphor, if we can follow her model and speak of a “world republic of anthropology,” we might also point out how Rouch’s ethnographic method allows for the development of citizenship in this republic through the accumulation and use of epistemological capital by those who have traditionally been only the objects of ethnographic forms of knowledge production.

Conclusion

In a passage from *Cinema 2* dedicated to the fictional poetics of the invention of collectivities in Third World cinema, Gilles Deleuze writes that

> It may be objected that Jean Rouch can only with difficulty be considered a third world author, but no one has done so much to put the West to flight, to flee himself, to break with a cinema of ethnology and

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say *Moi, un Noir*, at a time when blacks play roles in American series or those of hip Parisians.  

The context of this passage is entirely consonant with the avenues this chapter has explored, concerned as Deleuze is with the ways in which both Rouch and his “real” characters become-other in a seemingly endless proliferation of stories. We might also point out, taking up Deleuze’s observation that Rouch’s work contains individuals playing roles while also playing themselves, that in this respect Deleuze shares the same concerns as Jean-Luc Godard who, it will be recalled, raised this very issue in his review of *Moi, un Noir*. However, although characteristically provocative, there are two ways in which Deleuze’s comment appears to be only half correct. On the one hand, Deleuze does not account for the ways in which the narratives of both *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir* belong as much to Rouch’s amateur protagonists as they do to the professional ethnographer himself. As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, this collaboration, which occurs on the level of narrative form as well as on that of narrative content, is what allows Rouch and his actors to restage the trope of modernity, understood here in the Jamesonian sense of an unstable category always susceptible to new and varied iterations. This operation of restaging, though, relies on geographic forms of identification that are always already triangulated between the US, France and West Africa—and, indeed, in this instantiation of the narrative of modernity colonial Abidjan and Accra appear as centers and the two Western poles are somewhat marginalized and are themselves reformulated through their...
importation into Africa (as, for example, in the shot of Damouré getting drunk in the Weekend in California bar in Accra). Improvised narratives, then, constitute aesthetic by-products of Rouch’s shared anthropology and function to triangulate and re-center—or center differently—the trope of modernity. On the other hand, making our way back to Deleuze, his comment misses the notion that this operation of restaging, which relies on an improvisational narrative aesthetic, creatively de-centers the production of anthropological authority. This occurs not because Rouch breaks with ethnographic cinema strictly speaking, but instead it comes about because Rouch forces ethnographic cinema to sow the seeds of its own creative reappropriation. Thus we can amend Deleuze’s assertion and claim that, rather than breaking with ethnographic cinema, Rouch allows it to become indistinguishable in many ways from the cinema of fiction just as Robinson, Damouré and his other protagonists join anthropology once he redefines the discipline as a shared epistemological venture.
Ethnography, Policing and Utopia in Jean-Claude Izzo’s Fabio Montale Trilogy

This chapter examines how experimental ethnographic methods are incorporated and woven into Jean-Claude Izzo’s 1990s crime fiction trilogy, a group of novels set in postindustrial and postcolonial Marseille and starring the disaffected detective, Fabio Montale. It is tempting, when thinking about Izzo’s crime fiction, to take the statements that punctuate his novels about Marseille as a utopian site of métissage in an increasingly fragmented France for idealized attempts to explain away or otherwise render more palatable the gritty and complex interplay between policing, citizenship, racism and immigration that serves as the textual prime mover in the Fabio Montale trilogy. This temptation, however, should not draw our attention away from the ways in which Marseille as an imagined postcolonial utopia (an urban space with purposefully ill-defined boundaries that for Izzo has always been ground zero for immigration to France) might be properly coterminous with the Marseille Izzo indicts as being home to far-right politics, police racism, and the kind of urban ghettoïsation that made headlines during the 2005 riots in French suburbs, nearly a decade after the trilogy was completed. I argue that Izzo ethnographically represents a utopian Marseille as a palimpsest, one that is written over more conventionally realist descriptions of everyday life in the city. He does so by arriving ultimately at an innovative form of “dual” citizenship, that is, one that relies on the relationship between an imagined, utopian Marseillais citizenship and actually existing, highly contested conceptions of French citizenship. I make my way to this point
through a broader discussion of the relationship between policing and ethnography that obtains in Izzo’s trilogy. Reading Montale’s detective work as providing an ethnography of policing serves less to emphasize the maintenance or rhetoric of “law and order” as a function of the state apparatus (if only because Montale no longer works for the official police after the first volume) and instead asks what distribution of urban spaces, racialized social roles, and (in)visible citizens is being policed in Izzo’s Marseille? By taking up this question, I suggest that Izzo ends up describing a utopian Marseille that is written into the cultural present as an imagined response to the political problems that, for him, policing both attempts to solve and ultimately fuels.

Jean-Claude Izzo’s crime trilogy saw him rise from a career in literary obscurity, full of false starts, to publication in France’s famous Série Noire and a position at the forefront of what anthropologist Michel Peraldi and journalist Michel Samson remind us is now called the “néopolar marseillais.”

Born in 1945 and raised in the working-class centre-ville of Marseille, Izzo, the son of an Italian father and French mother of Spanish descent, wrote the novels that comprise his trilogy (Total Khéops, Chourmo, and Solea) and star the damaged but likeable detective Fabio Montale between 1994 and 1998, finishing Solea only two years before his death in 2000. The sudden success of Total Khéops, which was adapted in 2001 into a three-episode television miniseries starring Alain Delon, came toward the end of a literary career that had hitherto been unremarkable at best: he began writing for the cultural pages of Marseille’s communist

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newspaper *La Marseillaise* in 1969 and spent much of the 1970s as a journalist while publishing several volumes of poetry (some at his own expense) on the side, as well as one book, a biography of Clovis Hugues, the poet and socialist politician who came to prominence during the 1871 Marseille Commune. Journalism took Izzo to Paris in the 1980s, and he spent much of the next fifteen years trying unsuccessfully to get various literary and screenwriting projects off the ground before working with Michel Le Bris as the press correspondent for the *Etonnants voyageurs* literary festival held at Saint-Malo. It was in this festival’s magazine that an early version of the first chapter of *Total Khéops* was published in 1993 and Patrick Raynal, then director of the *Série Noire*, encouraged Izzo to write a book-length manuscript that was quickly accepted for publication in the collection.

In the trilogy, Izzo’s hero Montale confronts the mafia, corrupt cops with ties to the far-right *Front national* (FN) and forms of social marginalization in the urban *banlieues* where he has his beat as a social worker/cop with little actual authority. As is often the case in detective fiction, the crimes Montale investigates are both set against and involve more painful aspects of his personal life: in *Total Khéops*, for example, Leila, the young Algerian girl with whom Montale is romantically linked is raped and murdered by young FN members connected to both the police and the mafia who want to use dirty money to fund gang wars in the *banlieues* as a way of scaring Marseille’s residents into voting the FN into power. In *Chourmo* (a title that references the Provençal word for the French *galère*), Montale is charged with tracking down his cousin’s missing son, Guitou, who came to Marseille to visit his Arab girlfriend that his racist parents refused to let him
date. Finally, in *Solea* (from the Miles Davis song of the same name), Montale comes face to face with the mafia for the last time, after his journalist friend and ex-lover, Babette, returns to France from Italy having compiled documents that link French politicians to organized crime. Thus in addition to first-order narratives of crimes that must be solved the trilogy contains related narrative threads in which Montale makes his peace with figures from his past, such as the two boys turned criminals who were murdered and who Montale was unable to protect and the gypsy girl, Lole, with whom they were all in love but who runs away from a relationship with the adult Montale. The city (and social space) of Marseille is a richly developed character in these narratives of crime and masculine vulnerability, and Montale makes endless observations about the city’s changing demographics and about the cultural and political implications of the forms of urban renewal that Marseille was undergoing throughout the 1990s. What makes my reading of this trilogy possible, then, is the fact that these texts are not run-of-the-mill police procedurals whose popularity and commercial success would derive from their representations of local color. Marseille, in other words, is more than Mediterranean window-dressing for narratives that represent more than conventional detective-story boilerplate. The same goes for Izzo’s characters, and especially his protagonist: jaded and faded, like Anny in Sartre’s *Nausea* the characters in these texts seem to have all outlived

2 Romantic impotence and failed idea(l)s of masculinity are particularly powerful thematic concerns of Izzo’s. Montale constantly bemoans his lack of success in love but, by the same token, seems to have little trouble attracting female companionship, as it were. He has a brief affair with an Antillean prostitute in addition to Leila, who he was incapable of loving, in *Total Khéops*, In *Solea*, the narrative proceeds via the killing of a woman Montale has just met but is nonetheless sure he loves, and he ends up falling for a female police officer who helps him investigate her murder.
themselves (we might also say they have outlived a Marseille that no longer exists), and yet Montale, who expounds for paragraphs on Provençal cuisine or the poetry of Saint-John Perse, is more than another iteration of the gruff and disaffected noir investigator. As will become apparent in the pages that follow, this is because he holds together the narrative imperatives—and the formal expectations they generate—of both the detective and the fieldworker and nudges these two figures toward indistinguishability.

Considering Izzo’s crime trilogy as a work of ethnographic fiction involves, first, pointing toward the ways in which the detective and the fieldworker represent figures who mobilize similar methods, the one in order to solve a case and the other in order to engage critically with social/cultural processes and formations (Montale, for his part, unites both of these tasks). Writing in response to anthropology’s crisis of representation in the 1980s (of which they were key instigators), George Marcus and Michael Fischer offer a definition of fieldwork that both encompasses anthropology’s mode of inquiry in a contemporary globalized world and allows us to observe a parallel with the work of the noir detective. They suggest that “fieldwork should be recognized as a complex web of interactions in which anthropologists in collaboration with others, conventionally conceived as informants and located in a variety of often contrasting settings, track connections amid networks, mutations, influences of cultural forces and changing social pressures.”

salt must be able to negotiate multiple and complex networks of interactions in order to obtain information, pressure suspects or follow leads if they are to crack a case and, by extension, resolve a given narrative. The second half of the formulation, though, complicates the first: while most any detective from nearly any crime novel moves between multiple social worlds in order to track down information necessary to narrative resolution, we do not always get a clear picture of the “cultural forces and changing social pressures” that impinge upon the more immediate context of the investigation. For Izzo’s Montale, however, this sense of social and cultural impingement is very present, both because it culturally contextualizes Montale’s detective work and because these forces and pressures are also intimately bound up in the investigations themselves. Thus questions of race, immigration, French universalism and the changing urban landscape of Marseille not only serve to enrich Izzo’s narratives but are also part and parcel of the very crimes Montale must solve.

In addition to identifying Montale as both a detective and a fieldworker we can broaden our analytic scope and observe that Izzo’s crime fiction is ethnographic in its form. Marcus and Fischer’s work is again quite useful since it is concerned with critically delineating the characteristics of ethnography as a written genre in a moment in which anthropology and literary studies have much to say to one another:

a ‘good’ ethnography, whatever its particular arguments, is one that gives a sense of the conditions of fieldwork, of everyday life, of microscale processes (an implicit validation of the fieldwork method that itself indicates the anthropologist ‘was there’); of translation across cultural and linguistic boundaries (the conceptual and linguistic exegesis of indigenous ideas, thus demonstrating both the
ethnographer’s language competence and the fact that he has successfully captured native meanings and subjectivity); and of holism.  

This enumeration of the salient features of ethnography as a genre allows us to read Izzo’s trilogy as ethnographic precisely because, in the light of this rich definition, Izzo himself appears to situate his literary project in this way. Each volume of the trilogy is preceded by a “note de l’auteur,” in which Izzo reminds us that while his texts are works of fiction he does borrow from reality (and in Chourmo’s note he goes so far as to explicitly request that we not go searching for resemblances between characters in the text and real-world individuals) and from the everyday life of the city. As an example, we can take the following lines from his prefatory comments to Total Khéops: “À l’exception des événements publics, rapportés par la presse, ni les faits racontés ni les personnages n’ont existé. Pas même le narrateur, c’est dire. Seule la ville est bien réelle. Marseille. Et tous ceux qui y vivent. Avec cette passion qui n’est qu’à eux. Cette histoire est la leur. Échos et réminiscences.” This prefatory comment does more than just remind readers that they are encountering a work of fiction (if this were all it did, an author’s note would hardly be necessary since any novel is in itself just such a reminder and the reader is expected to know this upon opening one); it also serves to highlight Izzo’s

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4 Marcus and Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 24-25. The sense of holism to which they refer must not be read as an anthropological imperative to produce a totalizing (and, hence, reductive) account of an “entire” culture or people, as was the case in so many ethnographies written before the crisis of representation in the 1980s which repudiated such totalizing accounts. Rather, Marcus and Fischer stipulate that holism in this case refers simply to the ethnographer’s duty to “contextualize elements of culture and to make systematic connections among them.” See *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*, 22-23.

5 Jean-Claude Izzo, author’s note to *Chourmo* in *La trilogie Fabio Montale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006 [1996]), n. p. Further references to Izzo’s novels will refer to this 2006 collection published by Gallimard. I will give the novel title followed by the page number in the 800-plus page anthology.

6 Izzo, author’s note to *Total Khéops*, n. p.
authority as a writer capable of representing the everyday life of Marseille and his attempt to capture textually the subjectivity of the city’s “indigenous” peoples. Further, it signals to readers that the narratives of investigation the novels contain are always already embedded in cultural contexts and, broadly, in the everyday life of the city—in other words, this is an example of the translation across cultural boundaries that plays a key role in Marcus and Fischer’s definition. Although the question of language is not raised in the author’s note, Izzo demonstrates his own language competence through the representation of the Marseille accent in several of his characters, notably Montale’s elderly neighbor, Honorine (“Mon pôvre, z’auriez pas fait fortune, comme pêcheur, vé!,” she exclaims upon seeing Montale return home from a fishing trip with a meager catch7). Thus what is at stake in these texts is more than just a healthy dose of realist representation mixed into detective fiction; what makes Izzo’s novels ethnographic is the fact that he specifically sets out to tell the story of everyday life in Marseille according to conventions that we can recognize, thanks to the influential work of Marcus and Fischer, as broadly anthropological.

More specifically, we can also relate my argument (that Izzo’s novels represent an ethnography of policing and that he sketches a Utopian ethnographic solution to the social problems policing responds to and causes) to two requirements that Marcus lists in a later essay on experimental ethnographic writing and ethnography’s shift from a strictly realist to a modernist aesthetic. For Marcus, since one consequence of anthropology’s

7 Izzo, Total Khéops, 144.
crisis of representation was to force ethnographers to realize that the Other they studied was as embedded in modernity as the (Western) ethnographer, traditional realist modes of representation—predicated on the detached observer producing a holistic account of an entire isolated people—no longer suffice and we must turn to the aesthetic strategies of literary modernism “[t]o show the entanglement of homogenization and diversity without reliance on the positing of purer cultural states ‘before the deluge] of an exogenous modernity [..]”

Marcus enumerates six features that a properly modernist ethnography ought to contain, and we can retain two of them here for our purposes. First is what Marcus calls “bifocality,” that is, a strategy that “demands looking for the kinds of connections that allow one to construct difference in full recognition of the already constituted relationship that exists between observer and observed and that historically or personally precedes the moment of fieldwork and ethnography.” Montale’s numerous asides and observations about the changing urban environment in 1990s Marseille are made from the viewpoint of just such a strategy, since he is resolutely “of” the city and closely linked to its residents (a relationship that, as indicated in Izzo’s author’s note, precedes the narrative itself) while remaining somewhat marginalized since he is a policeman with little actual authority. Marcus’s second feature is helpful for explaining how Montale moves from examining the distribution of urban spaces and social roles in the city to a present-focused rewriting of Marseille as a postcolonial Utopia: this feature

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9 Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility,” 44.
consists of “critical juxtapositions and [the] contemplation of alternative possibilities.” It is this sense of critical juxtaposition that enables us to view Utopia in the trilogy as a palimpsest written over a grim or even dystopian cultural present. “This involves critical thought experiments,” Marcus continues, “whereby the ethnographer poses possibilities—the roads not taken, repressed possibilities documentable on the margins of the cultures studied—to those that seem to be dominant [.]”\(^{10}\) We can observe this modernist ethnographic imperative at work in the way Izzo highlights the peculiar co-presence of a Marseille that is overrun by the mafia and that threatens at any moment to fall into the hands of the FN with another Marseille that is radically and joyfully hybridized and open to everybody—a city about which Montale can conclude that it is “L’unique utopie du monde.”\(^ {11}\) Thus Izzo’s crime trilogy can be read in terms of broad ethnographic genre conventions as well as in terms of more experimental and explicitly literary-minded “anthro-aesthetic” strategies which are of particular concern to an important figure like Marcus, much of whose anthropological work is devoted to rethinking the traditions and possibilities of ethnography as a written genre.

To a certain extent, detective fiction in general lends itself well to an ethnographic reading, given how the detective \textit{qua} fieldworker moves through and links disparate and fragmented social beings and spaces in his investigation\(^{12}\); my approach to Izzo’s trilogy

\(^{10}\) Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility,” 44.
\(^{11}\) Izzo, \textit{Total Khéops}, 257.
\(^{12}\) This point stands out in Fredric Jameson’s account of Raymond Chandler’s fiction. See Jameson, “On Raymond Chandler,” in \textit{The Critical Response to Raymond Chandler}, ed. J. K. Van Dover (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 72-73. Kristin Ross begins from this point about “the detective as social geographer” and goes on to investigate how \textit{polar} authors negotiate alternative forms of historiography. See
in this chapter begins from the premise that his work is particularly well disposed to the
genre of ethnographic fiction. Several critical essays on Izzo and the Fabio Montale
trilogy also point in this direction: as Edmund Smyth argues, Marseille and social space
for Izzo do not just constitute what he calls a “noir cityscape” in the style of Chandler’s
Los Angeles or Montalbán’s Barcelona. For him, “The Izzo trilogy emerges not only as a
landmark in contemporary French crime writing, whose literary importance has extended
far beyond the genre of the polar, but as a sustained enquiry into the sociology and
political culture of this alternative French capital.”

My reading is entirely consonant
with this assertion although Smyth goes on to investigate Montale’s personal crises and
the traces of Albert Camus that he sees lingering over the trilogy whereas I am more
concerned with extending his observation into a discussion of the underlying problem of
genre in these texts. In fact, of the handful of critical essays published on Izzo most
focus precisely on this relationship between his representation of Marseille and the

her “Parisian Noir,” New Literary History 41, no. 1 (2010): 95, 95-109. Also illuminating is her earlier essay
“Watching the Detectives,” in Postmodernism and the re-reading of modernity, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme,
and Margaret Iversen (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), 46-65.


14 Izzo is, in my view, quite notable in his absence from a 2005 issue of Yale French Studies on crime fiction in
France in which Didier Daeninckx, a similarly politicized crime novelist who offers an interesting contrast to
Izzo, features rather prominently. The only reference to Izzo in the journal issue comes in David Platten’s
essay on the modern noir novel as fairy tale where he dismissively casts Izzo’s trilogy aside as not
authentically noir enough for consideration. See Platten, “Into the Woods: The Contemporary Roman Noir as
detective as a “psychologizable” figure. Nicholas Hewitt departs from this trend in order to analyze the twinned thematics of departure and diaspora in Izzo’s Marseille, in a reading that sees Izzo’s grim representation of the city as a space of social exclusion and growing racism as paradoxically offset by his faith in Marseille as a site of homecoming and productive cultural assimilation. This formulation comes close my own reading of an idealized Marseille that is coextensive with Izzo’s bleaker rendering of the city, but I argue here that to recast these elements as representing a Utopian palimpsest is conceptually much richer and does more justice to the complexities of Izzo’s novels.

We can further elucidate these complexities by situating the Fabio Montale trilogy in relation to the broad shift in French crime fiction brought about by the Série Noire. Toward the end of the first volume of the trilogy, *Total Khéops*, Izzo’s hero Montale meets up with a semi-retired parrain from the local mafia (what in France is referred to as “le Milieu”) at a bar near the Vieux Port and bluff his way into coaxing information from the mafia boss, Batisti, concerning the entanglement of highly personal and, more broadly, politically volatile questions that serve as the basis for his investigation in the text: Who kidnapped and murdered the young Arab girl that Montale was incapable of loving? Why was Montale’s childhood friend, Manu, killed after working for Batisti, and

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why was another of Montale’s friends, Ugo, shot down by the police after he avenged Manu’s death by assassinating another local parrain, Zucca? What is the relationship between the police and the far-right Front national in Marseille, and why would the FN go through police officers to establish contacts with young Arab drug dealers in Marseille’s banlieues (called the quartiers nord)? While the actual answers to these questions effectively allow the novel to resolve itself, what I think is more revealing (both for Montale’s own consciousness and in terms of Jean-Claude Izzo’s relationship to the Série Noire) is how Montale describes his reaction upon learning that these questions are in fact all interrelated:


Already on the outs with his colleagues for not adopting a hard-line, violence-first approach to policing and relegated by his superiors to meaningless beats in Marseille’s quartiers nord (working-class suburbs, full of HLMs and high unemployment and home to many first- and second-generation North and West African immigrants), Montale ends up handing in his badge at the end of the novel and for the remainder of the trilogy will work as an independent investigator. This passage, I think, is also indicative of the new relationship established between crime fiction and social reality in the Série Noire, France’s most famous polar collection.

17 Jean-Claude Izzo, Total Khéops, in La trilogie Fabio Montale (Paris: Gallimard, 2006 [1995]) 254. All subsequent textual references to the trilogy will be made by referencing the novel in question and the page number in the 800-page 2006 edition collecting all three of the texts.
In a short article written in 1966 in celebration of the one thousandth text in the series that novelist Marcel Duhamel founded in 1945 and directed until 1977, Gilles Deleuze writes that, in contrast to the older style of drawing-room whodunits that mirrored French and English philosophy’s metaphysical and scientific searches for truth, what was new about the Série Noire was that it showed readers that the activity of policing was hardly concerned with any “recherche du vrai.” Rather, he argues, “La Série noire nous a habitués au type de policier qui fonce à tout hasard, quitte à multiplier les erreurs, mais croyant qu’il en sortira toujours quelque chose.” In a similar vein, echoing Deleuze’s observation, Fabio Montale diagnoses his own shortcomings as a cop: “Comme enquêteur, je ne valais toujours pas un radis. Je fonçais à l’intuition, mais sans jamais prendre le temps de réfléchir.” While it is certainly true that the Série Noire was nudged in this direction by the hard-boiled British and American authors whose translations into French constituted the bulk of early publications in the series, Deleuze’s broader point is that Duhamel’s new series helped substitute a literary mirror, in which society sees itself reflected in its police and its crimes, for the metaphysical reflections of earlier crime novels in which detectives uncover “true” data points whose existence is taken for granted at the outset. It is in this vein that we can read Montale’s apparent

19 Izzo, Chourmo, 443.
20 Deleuze, “Philosophie de la Série Noire,” 117. Some of the ideas in this early article receive fuller treatment in Deleuze’s later text, Proust and Signs, in which he argues that the search for truth cannot proceed from any “benevolence of thought” that predisposes us toward a truth whose existence is pre-established and must simply be uncovered. Proust’s novelty, then, is that he renders the search for truth
fatalism in the passage above: although the information revealed to him during his meeting with Batisti has truth-value in the sense that it allows both his investigation and Izzo’s narrative to come to some resolution, the satisfaction of these formal requirements is thoroughly undercut by the fact that they are dissolved in a larger meta-narrative that society has created about itself and in relation to which the detective finds himself powerless. What Deleuze refers to as the mirror-effect of the new Série Noire, then, is actually the dialectical creation of social meta-narratives formed via the confrontation and transcendence of first-order narratives of investigation and the formal requirement that these narratives be resolved one way or another.

While this example serves to situate Izzo’s work within one fundamental shift inaugurated by the Série noire, we can also place the trilogy into conversation with a major figure in post-1968 French crime fiction, Didier Daeninckx. As Claire Gorrara has pointed out, the events of May ‘68 provided the impetus for younger writers to emerge onto the French polar scene, invigorating and politicizing a genre that had become fairly moribund.21 The 1980s novels of Didier Daeninckx are especially salient in this respect, since they explicitly seek to upend dominant historical and political narratives by exposing the complicity of state representatives in crimes and scandals. We can elaborate on Izzo’s ethnographic aesthetic by highlighting some of the ways in which his work contingent upon random encounters that force thought to occur. See, for example, Proust and Signs, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) 16-17.

contrasts with that of an emblematic figure like Daeninckx, whose writing is seen to have problematized in new ways the often ambiguous relationship obtaining between crime fiction and politics.\textsuperscript{22} Two textual examples are particularly pertinent here.

On the one hand, this relationship for Daeninckx appears intensely mediated by history and the contestation of prevailing historical narratives through the form provided by the \textit{roman noir}. Thus his famous 1984 novel, \textit{Meurtres pour mémoire}, sees Daeninckx’s Inspector Cadin investigate the murders of father and son historians who are killed twenty years apart.\textsuperscript{23} Roger, the father, is shot point-blank at the October 17, 1961 demonstration in Paris in favor of Algerian independence that was violently broken up by French police forces. We learn later that his death was commissioned by a high-ranking civil servant. Bernard, Roger’s son, is murdered in Toulouse after completing research in the local archives while seeking to finish his father’s project on the history of Drancy, their home town. It becomes clear to Cadin that both father and son were killed after having unearthed documents relating to the French state’s complicity in the Holocaust (indeed, the civil servant responsible for the killings, André Veillut, is a textual stand-in for Maurice Papon), and the figure of Inspector Cadin lends the text a historical conscience at the same time that he demonstrates how the writing of official History is fraught with political choices indissolubly linked to the saving of institutional and administrative face.

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\textsuperscript{22} Andrea Goulet and Susanna Lee gesture in this direction in their introduction to a special issue of \textit{Yale French Studies} devoted exclusively to crime fictions. See their “Editors' Preface” in \textit{Yale French Studies} 108 (2005): 1-7.
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On the other hand, however, Daeninckx’s lesser-studied 1987 novel, *Lumière noire*, sees the author’s analytic gaze shift from uncovering alternative historical narratives to exposing state collusion in human rights violations in contemporary French society. In the wake of the 1985-86 terrorist attacks in Paris, policemen shoot and kill a man driving a car in a secure section of Roissy airport. Yves Guyot, who had been riding in the passenger seat, finds his version of the events dismissed as an official (and questionable) police inquiry determines that Gérard, the car’s driver, failed to stop as requested and made threatening gestures toward the police officers through his open window. Guyot is murdered before the findings of his amateur counter-investigation can be revealed, and superintendent Londrin takes over the case before being murdered as well after shedding more light on the police cover-up of the events. Of more importance than “what actually happened” on the fateful night at Roissy, however, is the manner in which Guyot discovers before his death evidence that inculpates the police. While the police feed a story to the press involving two fictional French tourists who happened to witness the shooting from an airport hotel room, Guyot discovers that the witnesses in question were in fact undocumented Malian immigrants who the police had forcefully locked in a hotel room in advance of their deportation by charter flight. Guyot secretly travels to Mali shortly before his death and records the testimony of one of the witnesses, evidence that eventually goes unused. Although this text does not possess the same sort of organizing narrative conscience that we see in *Meurtres pour mémoire*, the narrative of

social exclusion it uncovers serves to reveal spaces, people and transnational itineraries that state policing needs to keep hidden in order to maintain an appearance of lawfulness and a concern for human rights.

These two examples suggest that Daeninckx’s narrative politics could best be described as journalistic, concerned as it is with the ways an investigator/”reporter” follows leads in order to stumble on a big “scoop” that takes the form of social wrongs committed by the state that must be brought to light. Such a politics finds its culminating point in the act of revelation, the moment when the detective (and the reader along with him) puts in place the final puzzle piece that illuminates a narrative running counter to official state discourses and through which, it is implied, state wrongs might be redressed. By contrast, Jean-Claude Izzo’s narrative universe is entirely postlapsarian, in the sense that institutions, police practices and the state’s rhetoric about itself (especially when this rhetoric concerns universalism, immigration, racism or security) are presented as always already suspect. From the opening paragraph of the first chapter of Total Khéops, where Montale crouches over the body of his friend, Ugo, recently killed by the police, Izzo makes us aware that the Marseille he’s describing is one in which the cracks in the foundations of official state narratives are plainly visible: \“Je m’accroupis devant le cadavre de Pierre Ugolini. Ugo. Je venais d’arriver sur les lieux. Trop tard. Mes collègues avaient joué les cow-boys. Quand ils tiraient, ils tuaient. C’était aussi simple. Des adeptes du général Custer. Un bon Indien, c’est un Indien mort. Et à Marseille, des Indiens, il n’y
avait que ça, ou presque.”\textsuperscript{25} This is not to say that there are no revelations in Izzo’s texts—indeed, crime fiction as a genre cannot function without revelatory moments, whether or not a given investigation is ultimately successful—but rather that Izzo’s narrative politics does not rely on the unveiling of some fundamental wrong in the same way that Daeninckx’s journalism takes the detective and the reader from a state of ignorance to an ultimately edifying moment of illumination.

Instead, and in keeping with the broader theme of this chapter, we can conceive of the politics of narrative in Izzo’s trilogy as ethnographic, since Fabio Montale appears to be as concerned with examining how the breakdown of official state discourses is negotiated and redefined in the everyday life of the city as he is with investigating the crimes that ostensibly serve as the texts’ prime movers. This shift in focus, from a journalistic to an ethnographic politics, opens up several more distinctions between Izzo and more conventional \textit{romans noirs engagés} like those by Daeninckx. First, the detective’s relationship to the city and social space has changed: in Izzo the city is no longer urban space to be traversed and revealed by a detective following leads. For Daeninckx, social space seems only to exist insofar as it is potentially or actually useful to the investigator, while Izzo’s Marseille appears above all as possessing a daily life independent of Montale’s movements and, in fact, independent of the text itself (this point is crucial, since it brings us back to Marcus’s discussion of ethnographic bifocality mentioned above). What this means is that urban life encompasses and exceeds the

\textsuperscript{25} Izzo, \textit{Total Khéops}, 71.
figure of the detective-cum-fieldworker and does not exist solely through his organizing and investigative gaze. This textual transformation of social space is intimately bound up with a second, correlative transformation of the consciousness of the detective, for Montale ceaselessly interrogates and problematizes his (real and imagined) relationship to Marseille such that these reflections comprise no small amount of his interiority as a character and narrator.

**Izzo and the Ethnography of Policing in Marseille**

Although Montale only officially works for the police in the first of the three volumes of the trilogy, in all three novels he remains in close contact with police officers and meditates on the relationship between his own detective work and the marginalized spaces and citizens with whom this work puts him in touch. Montale spends a good deal of his time in Marseille’s *banlieues*, both because of his personal connections to immigrant families and working-class residents and because, while on the force, he was assigned to these neighborhoods in order to quell growing social unrest. The representations of these gritty social spaces that are generally excluded from conventional imaginations of the city are certainly consonant with trends in crime fiction of all types, since a detective displays his authority to readers in part by his ability to negotiate with some amount of cool nonchalance spaces or city neighborhoods that are marginalized or dangerous. In Izzo’s trilogy, though, Marseille’s *banlieues* do more than provide us with the belief that Montale has the requisite street smarts and shady connections to allow him
to solve the crimes at hand. Throughout the trilogy Montale reveals marginalized spaces and excluded citizens in an implicit relationship with readers who would otherwise have no contact with them. This strategy is somewhat akin to Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s sense of ethnographic didacticism that I explored earlier; in the case of Montale, however, his relationship to the reader is characterized less by pedagogical impulses and more by a desire to make visible certain spaces and individuals that conventional policing has hitherto kept out of sight. This becomes possible in the trilogy because Montale seems to adopt what for George Marcus is the experimental ethnographic strategy of bifocality, according to which the ethnographer can represent forms of (socially and politically constructed) cultural difference only by embracing and laying bare the preexisting connections that exist between subject and object, observer and observed. Montale establishes this sense of connectedness through references to his earlier work in the banlieues, which puts him in a privileged position to comment on how cultural difference is spatialized in these neighborhoods and on how official police work in these marginalized sites actually adds to the sorts of social problems it attempts to eradicate.

Montale’s relationship to Marseille’s banlieues deserves close attention, both because these are the parts of the city where Montale the cop is on duty and because, once he leaves the force in disgust at the end of Total Khéops, they become more broadly the spaces in the texts where state policing is most visible. To recognize this point is to observe the distinction in Izzo’s trilogy between policing, which is understood as the racialized and classed ways in which “law and order” is maintained and as the discourses on security underpinning these often repressive techniques, and the investigations that
drive Izzo’s narratives. If the two coincide in *Total Khéops*, where Montale is still (more or less) on the force, it is because his more personal, off the books investigations of Leila’s murder and of his friends Ugo and Manu’s ties to the mafia boss who had them both eliminated happen to overlap with his beat in the working-class *quartiers nord*, during which he and his team finally manage to pin a crime on a young Arab drug dealer, Mourrabed, that reveals this latter’s seemingly incongruous links to Marseille’s FN and, in turn, reveals the extent to which the FN has infiltrated Marseille’s police. In *Chourmo* and *Solea*, however, Montale’s investigations take place very much outside the purview of the “official” police, and our hero takes pains to stay at least one step ahead of his former colleagues who either hold a grudge against Montale for his history of insubordination or who become exasperated at the way he coyly withholds information from them (and, at times, from the reader). In many respects, then, what holds Izzo’s narratives together is this dialectic between the police and the investigation—the very fact that Montale mediates between the two elements, makes them antithetical and prevents their coincidence is what, formally speaking, allows Izzo’s narratives to “succeed,” that is, to reach some resolution. The *banlieues* are representationally productive spaces in the trilogy precisely because they function as the textual terrain upon which this dialectic (whose effects are formal but yet whose constituent terms are content-based) plays out.

Montale’s initial break from the force, which results in him being “promoted” to a beat in the quartiers nord that offers him increasingly less actual authority, is thrown back into the prehistory of the text; as readers, we are only privy to Montale’s retrospective
reconstructions of this break as they pertain to the critiques of policing in Marseille he elaborates throughout the trilogy. Although we are never offered a complete reconstruction of Montale’s past as a cop, already in the first chapter of *Total Khéops* Montale creates a distinction between policing and his job in the working-class *quartiers d’immigration*. Brooding and sullen, having returned to his home in the picturesque neighborhood of Les Goudes among the famous *calanques* (steep, ancient limestone cliffs overlooking the Mediterranean) and after reminiscing about his childhood friends Ugo and Manu, who we have just learned were both killed in suspicious, mafia-related shootouts, Montale sips wine straight from the bottle and declares: “Encore une de ces nuits où je ne savais plus pourquoi j’étais flic.”

He goes on to explain that, in the wake of two shootings “accidentally” committed by the police in the *banlieues* which saw the deaths of a young Arab and a French boy, he was named to the head of a special surveillance brigade whose goal was to prevent further police mistakes and to quell popular unrest in Marseille’s suburbs. In reality, however, he admits that


Quite clearly, then, Montale is conscious that his relationship to the official police becomes more tenuous as he is charged with policing spaces that are outside of the public imaginary—in fact, in a certain sense he appears to be making the case here that he’s not

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26 Izzo, *Total Khéops*, 86.
27 Izzo, *Total Khéops*, 86.
actually “policing” these spaces at all, since he has begun to “slip” into the role of a social worker, a role his colleagues tell him is antithetical to that of a bona fide cop. Montale notes that when his superiors have singled him out for critique, “on me reprochait de ne pas être assez ferme à l’intérieur des cités. De trop négocier avec les délinquants, surtout immigrés, et avec les Gitans.”28 Even though these events take place before the narrative present of the text, we as readers are given to understand that Montale was marginalized as a cop because he sought to cultivate positive relationships with individuals and social groups that the official police needed to maintain in exclusion.

This contrast is brought into stark relief in the second volume of the trilogy, *Chourmo*, when Montale reveals a bit more about his work in the *quartiers nord*. Although *Chourmo*’s narrative focus is on Montale’s investigation of the murder of his cousin’s teenage son, a strong sub-plot in this novel is Montale’s secondary investigation of the killing, in broad daylight, of a social worker friend of his from his work in the *banlieues*. This killing takes place early in the novel, in a *cité* just outside the *quartiers nord*, and Montale happens to be on the scene while following a lead in his main investigation. The police arrive a few minutes after the murder, and the kids with whom Montale has been speaking instantly scatter as our hero sarcastically likens the theatrical and caricatured arrival of his erstwhile colleagues to an overly faithful reenactment of a *Starsky and Hutch* episode. When superintendent Pertin gets out of the car and asks

Montale what he’s doing there, the latter introduces the former as a political and textual foil and, in so doing, presents another philosophy of policing in the *banlieues*:

Dès les premiers jours, c’était la guerre entre Pertin et moi. « Dans ces quartiers d’Arabes, répétait-il, y a qu’une chose qui marche, la force. » C’était son credo. Il l’avait appliqué à la lettre pendant des années. « Les beurs, t’en chopes un de temps à autres, et tu le passes à tabac dans une carrière déserte. Y a toujours une connerie qu’ils ont faite, et que t’ignores. Tu tapes, et t’es sûr qu’elle saura pourquoi, cette vermine. Ca vaut tous les contrôles d’identité. Ca t’évite la paperasserie au commissariat. Et ça te calme les nerfs que ces crouilles t’ont foutu. »

The violent racism expressed in this more official attitude toward policing is not included in the text for any sort of literary shock value, nor is it necessarily intended to unveil structural racism to readers who might hitherto have been unaware of it. Although crime fiction, as I have pointed out above, relies on revelatory moments to hold narratives together, Izzo’s work does not attempt to link narrative revelation to political didacticism. What Montale wants to convey in this brief anecdote is the sense that the conventional rhetoric of “law and order” has given way to something more odious; even though his status as more of a social worker renders him unable to effect any real change in marginalized neighborhoods, the official police is certainly no longer able to right social wrongs and, in fact, appears instead to perpetrate them as a matter of course. Since Montale’s ethnographic relationship to the reader is predicated upon making (often uncomfortable) elements of social life visible, this passage serves to highlight the breakdown of conventional narratives of security and the rule of law by making visible the sort of violent philosophy that has precipitated it.

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Izzo, *Chourmo*, 351.
More powerful than Montale’s revelation of how the traditional police institutions fail to provide a sense of justice in marginalized neighborhoods are his vivid descriptions of these neighborhoods themselves and of the people who live there. Since, as we have seen, the police seems to conceive of its role as entirely antithetical to that of “éducation de rue” like Montale, we come to understand how he is in a privileged position to recount the stories of individuals who might otherwise remain invisible. As an example we can consider an early scene in Total Khéops when Montale drives to a “cité maghrébine” after receiving a message from Leila’s father who will subsequently inform him of Leila’s disappearance. Once he arrives on the scene, after telling a young Arab boy to watch his car carefully, he describes the entryway of the decrepit building where Leila and her father, Mouloud, live: “Le B7 ressemblait à tous les autres. Le hall était cradingue. L’ampoule avait été fracassée à coups de pierres. Ça puait la pisse. Et l’ascenseur ne marchait pas. Cinq étages. Les monter à pied, c’est sûr qu’on ne montait pas au Paradis.”

This type of realist description would not be out of place in many a noir novel, but what stands out here is the way in which Montale goes on to link the visibility of such excluded urban sites to the stories of ordinary citizens who live there and to a broader cultural context. “Mouloud, c’était à lui tout seul le rêve de l’immigration,” Montale tells us of Leila’s Algerian father who came to Marseille to work on a grand construction project that famously failed before it even began. “Il fut l’un des premiers à être embauchés sur le chantier de Fos-sur-Mer, fin 1970. Fos, c’était l’Eldorado…Il était

30 Izzo, Total Khéops, 92.
fier de participer à cette aventure, Mouloud… Il n’obligea jamais ses enfants à se couper des autres… Seulement à éviter les mauvaises relations. Garder le respect d’eux-mêmes… Et réussir le plus haut possible. S’intégrer dans la société sans se renier. Ni sa race, ni son passé. "31 From the grim portrayal of a dingy apartment hallway grows a narrative about the ideals of immigration gone awry as seen through the case of an elderly Algerian man who came to France for work, wanted to integrate, and was cast aside when the work dried up. “Au premier lingot d’acier coulé, Fos n’était déjà plus qu’un mirage. Le dernier grand rêve des années soixante-dix. La plus cruelle des désillusions. Des milliers d’hommes restèrent sur le carreau. Et Mouloud parmi eux.”32 That Izzo has Montale spend several pages telling the story of an otherwise anonymous Algerian man (who could hardly be considered even a minor character in the narrative) indicates that we are dealing with more than noir realism or a way of demonstrating that Montale can navigate effortlessly in a number of different social milieus. Montale recounts Mouloud’s story as a sort of counternarrative running against what he sees as dominant racist and anti-immigration discourses emanating from the police and from French political culture more generally (we see an example of this discourse as early as the prologue to Total Khéops: “La France républicaine avait décidé de laver plus blanc. Immigration zéro. Le nouveau rêve français.”33). In particular, Mouloud’s embodiment of “le rêve de l’immigration” is explicitly set against this newer antithetical aspiration of

31 Izzo, Total Khéops, 92-93.
32 Izzo, Total Khéops, 94.
33 Izzo, Total Khéops, 55.
French society and its political and state representatives such as the racist police officer with whom Montale clashes. The story of Mouloud, then, functions as a way of making visible ordinary residents of marginalized and disadvantaged social spaces and, more broadly, as a way of ethnographically critiquing prevailing discourses in French culture that for Montale conceives of individuals like Mouloud as either disposable or, worse, as inherently criminal. The stakes of this counternarrative are high for Montale and for Izzo. One of the major themes throughout the trilogy is the very real possibility of urban guerrilla warfare breaking out in the banlieues among Islamist immigrants and “ordinary” immigrant gangs, and between these immigrants and the police (and, by extension, the FN). “Ça péterait un jour, si on ne faisait rien,” Montale muses once he has finished telling the story of how he met Mouloud and his family. “C’était sûr. Je n’avais pas de solution. Personne n’en avait. Il fallait attendre. Ne pas se résigner. Parier. Croire que Marseille survivrait à ce nouveau brassage humain. Renaîtrait. Marseille en avait vu d’autres.” 34 Although there is no explicit political program offered by Montale or by Izzo, we can conclude from stories like the one under investigation here that Montale attempts to use his ethnographic perspective to construct an oppositional narrative of cultural difference that might forestall further gains made by the far right and its political imperatives

In addition to these ethnographic vignettes that produce new forms of visibility in marginalized spaces, we can read Montale’s investigative strategies in these texts as

34 Izzo, Total Khéops, 96.
careful negotiations not only of his own position in relation to dominant narratives of policing, but also in relation to the forms of criminality and sociality that the more invidious forms of state policing actually produce. These negotiations take an especially striking (and, I think, properly ethnographic) form in Montale’s relationship to the banlieues north of the city center, where as we know he was assigned to keep peace and, interestingly, through which all his independent investigations must pass in order to reach some resolution. In other words, the quartiers nord are presented in the trilogy not only as thematically consonant with the texts’ broader critiques of racism and failed discourses of universalism in France, but they also become, on a formal level, indispensable narrative sites. Thus in Total Khéops Montale cannot avoid passing through the banlieues in order to investigate Leila’s disappearance or to inform her father about her murder, even though the investigation is purely personal. Likewise, in a more official capacity, in order for the police’s relationship with the FN to be sketched out more fully, Montale must travel to the quartiers nord to arrest a young, Arab drug dealer who, we learn, was being funded by the FN under the watchful eye of corrupt police officers doubling as FN members. Additionally, in Chourmo, for example, Montale is obliged to return to the banlieues some time after handing in his badge in order to track down his cousin’s son who, it is initially presumed, has run off with an Arab girl who his racist parents had forbidden him to see. What appear as contingencies of plot (and which we recognize after the fact as narrative necessities) allow Montale to link his role as a police officer who “makes things personal” to his role as a sort of ethnographic flâneur characterized precisely by a refusal of dispassionate observation, or, alternatively, by a critique of the
perceived dispassion of others.\textsuperscript{35} Hence, for example, the ethnographic aside Montale makes early in \textit{Chourmo} as he describes his first trip back to the \textit{quartiers nord} since leaving the force:

\begin{quote}
Il fallait habiter là, ou être flic, ou éducateur, pour traîner ses pieds jusque dans ces quartiers. Pour la plupart des Marseillais, les quartiers nord ne sont qu’une réalité abstraite. Des lieux qui existent, mais qu’on ne connaît pas, qu’on ne connaîtra jamais. Et qu’on ne verra toujours qu’avec les « yeux » de la télé. Comme le Bronx, quoi. Avec les fantasmes qui vont avec. Et les peurs.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

His humorous comparison to the Bronx notwithstanding, this short observation appears to move in two directions. On the one hand, Montale appears to imply that the social space of these \textit{banlieues} is only representable insofar as it can be forced into some kind of discursive consonance with one of the two principal narratives of state policing (\textit{flic} versus \textit{éducateur}) that emerge in the trilogy and at whose intersection is located Izzo’s main character. On the other hand, however, we must also notice that these neighborhoods are not, for all that, entirely invisible spaces. As Montale points out, they become abstractly real as they are converted into visible, mediatized simulacra that people can consume passively on television (the irony being that Montale/Izzo critique the consumption of such simulacra via a novelistic-literary copy of “real” life). At issue, then, is not necessarily the fact that police practices and their attendant narrative logics require certain spaces and citizens to remain invisible, but rather the question of what kinds of visibility these forms of policing distribute (in the same way that Jacques Rancière speaks of a “distribution of the sensible”).

\textsuperscript{35} As I suggested at the outset in my discussion of Marcus, what makes such a critique possible is the fact that Montale adopts Marcus’s “modernist experimental” perspective of bifocality, which implies that his observations about everyday life begin from a reflexive acknowledgement of his own involvement in city life and his lifelong connections to its residents.

\textsuperscript{36} Izzo, \textit{Chourmo}, 346.
We can reformulate this problem and observe how Montale approaches it by returning to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter, namely, what kinds of spaces and (racialized) social roles are being policed in the trilogy? In the second chapter of *Total Khéops*, we are presented with a lengthy passage that serves as a classificatory enumeration of the sorts of people Montale came across when he began his job as cop stripped of authority in the *banlieues*. This passage not only offers a rich typology of the social roles created by state policing and the forms of marginalization it fosters; it also allows Montale to show off his ethnographic authority, to display his intimate knowledge of the difficulties of growing up young (and Arab or black) in these neighborhoods, and to make visible a distribution of social types with which readers may not be familiar.

Montale arrives at the La Paternelle *cité* where, as we come to learn, Leila’s father lives. Montale parks his little Renault and remarks, “Je me souvenais qu’Aznavour chantait *La misère est moins dure au soleil*. Sans doute n’était-il pas venu jusqu’ici. Jusqu’à ces amas de merde et de béton.”

Montale then proceeds to reflect on the initial impressions he had of work in the *banlieues* and sketches a vivid portrait of the personalities he has encountered: “Quand j’avais débarqué dans les cités, je m’étais frotté tout de suite aux voyous, aux toxicos et aux zonards. Ceux qui sortent du rang, qui jettent le froid. Qui foutent la trouille aux gens…Braqueurs, dealers, racketteurs.” Montale shows us, first, that he is as “hard” as the next detective, but also that as more of an “éducation de rue” he runs up against a fixed distribution of social types that was created by his predecessors.

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who, unlike him, did not seek dialogue as an initial tactic. The passage takes on a more empathetic tone as Montale speculates on the very uncertain future in store for many of the kids he came across during his work: “Puis il y a tous les autres, que j’ai découverts après. Une flopée de gosses sans autre histoire que celle d’ètre nés là. Et arabes. Ou noirs, gitans, comoriens…Leur adolescence, c’était comme marcher sur une corde raide. À cette différence qu’ils avaient presque toutes les chances de tomber.”

Although this passage lacks the personal narrative tone that characterizes Mouloud’s story, for example, it serves a similar ethnographic function since it initially poses a typology that preexists Montale’s arrival in the banlieues (voyous, toxicos, zonards…) that is subsequently humanized as Montale causes these negative social roles to dissolve into “une flopée de gosses” whose biggest crime was to have been born into a marginalized community. This humanization, which is born from Montale’s intimate knowledge of everyday life in the banlieues (effectively conveyed to the reader in a display of ethnographic virtuosity of which Hampâté Bâ would be proud!) is set against the rhetoric of delinquency that we see in the initial typology and in comments like those made by superintendent Pertin who stands in, like a synecdoche, for the official police as a whole. We are dealing, then, with another ethnographic observation in which Montale seeks to oppose prevailing discourses and established social roles by making visible certain citizens who only exist as criminal statistics and by establishing his authority as a sympathetic ethnographic commentator.

39 Izzo, Total Khéops, 89.
As indicated in several of the passages analyzed here, many of Montale’s observations on everyday life in the banlieues have their roots in the prehistory of the texts, which, as George Marcus points out, is crucial for creating the type of ethnographic authority that is reflexive and that highlights certain connections between the observer and the observed while simultaneously allowing the ethnographic subject to produce narratives of cultural difference. Montale takes this ethnographic strategy and develops it into a critique of the very discourses and typologies that “official” policing relies on in order to marginalize certain spaces and their inhabitants. In effect, by critiquing ethnographically forms of urban marginalization and alienation, he also takes aim at the police practices that produce them. This critique is significant because it highlights Izzo’s rather grim depictions of Marseille and the sense of urban decay fed by the breakdown of “law and order,” the rise of racism and the FN, as well as Montale’s own sense of powerlessness in the face of it. Although we as readers are aware of Montale’s persistence in assuring us that he has no effective solution to the bleak realism he ethnographically critiques, these assurances nonetheless prompt us to read the texts in the trilogy attentively, looking out for hints of a response to the disenchantment that hangs over so many of Montale’s observations and reflections. It is this prompting that allows us to notice that even though Montale is unable to offer a politically prescriptive solution to everyday alienation he is more than capable of imagining another sort of belonging that is woven into the present but that rejects alienation by viewing Marseille as radically open to the world’s diversity.
Utopia as an Ethnographic Thought Experiment

The alternative form of cultural belonging for which Montale forces us to search as we engage with his ethnographic critique of dominant French discourses on race, immigration and crime is an idealized and Utopian rendering of the city, one that exists at the same time and in tension with the other Marseille whose present and immediate future appear bleak. Alongside the more conventionally realist representation of Marseille in the trilogy as a fractured social space, marked by exclusions and marginalizations is another version of the city whose residents are inextricably linked through generations of exile and (post)colonial immigration, creating an imagined sense of belonging that precludes exclusions of all kinds. Toward the end of Total Khéops Montale makes a brief remark that, in its ambiguity, unites both of these versions of the city: “Nos anciennes colonies maintenant étaient ici. Capitale, Marseille.” Marseille appears at one and the same time as a colony internal to the French nation-state and, in a more hybridized and celebratory vein, as the de facto capital of the French postcolonial world, uniting people in their movements to and from the metropole. We can examine many of Montale’s reflections

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40 Izzo, Total Khéops, 279.
41 I use the word “hybridized” here quite purposefully, since cultural hybridization for Izzo is what Marseille has to offer France and the French language. For instance, although we only meet the character Leila in Total Khéops after her murder, in Montale’s recollections of her she appears as the embodiment of this idealized, Utopian version of Marseille (Marseille’s hybridized Marianne, as it were). Before her death Leila was completing a maîtrise on poetry and identity and Montale tells us that her conclusion specifically touched on the question of hybridity: “Pour elle, enfant de l’Orient, la langue française devenait ce lieu où le migrant tirait à lui toutes ses terres et pouvait enfin poser ses valises. La langue de Rimbaud, de Valéry, de Char saurait se métisser, affirmait-elle...À Marseille, ça causait déjà un curieux français, mélange de
that appear to map an entirely different and Utopian sense of spatiality and mode of belonging in the city onto the grittier, realist representations that he wants to critique. To recognize this juxtaposition and tension is to tie Izzo’s trilogy to the second of George Marcus’s experimental ethnographic imperatives I mentioned earlier: in order for anthropology to become a form of cultural critique the ethnographer must pose alternative possibilities to dominant cultural trends and discourses.\(^{42}\) We can thus follow Montale’s ethnographic lead and explore the ways in which a Utopian reimagining of Marseille is a palimpsest written over Montale’s other ethnographic representations of lived experience that situate the city in a corrupt present, where the marginalized banlieues allow for the normalization of state violence or, as Etienne Balibar puts it, “the invasion of public space by practices of non-right,”\(^{43}\) where the police is in bed with the FN, and where the mafia is in bed with just about everybody. However, the Utopia that emerges in the trilogy is not set in a spatially or temporally distanced realm; it appears, rather, as an alternative imagining of the present that, while not prescriptive in the sense that it would represent a blueprint for futurity, is diagnostic in the sense that it makes visible the limitations inhibiting collective experience and democratic citizenship in contemporary French society.

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\(^{42}\) Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility,” 44.

We can begin to approach this complex formulation with an example from *Chourmo* that demonstrates well this type of conceptual stratification. Montale wanders into a historic and working class neighborhood called le Panier and comes across an archeological site that was hastily constructed when plans for an underground parking garage hit a snag after workers discovered they were digging into the fortifications of the ancient city of Massilia. Recognizing that this site was examined by the Algerian historian who was killed at the same time as Guitou, Montale reflects on how new building projects (and especially parking garages) are inexorably paving over Marseille’s archeological patrimony: “Au Centre Bourse, la négociation fut rude, et longue…L’immonde bunker de béton s’était quand même imposé…Place du Général-de-Gaulle, à deux pas du Vieux-Port, rien ni personne ne put empêcher le parking de se réaliser…J’étais prêt à parier ma belle chemise à pois que, ici encore, le béton serait le grand vainqueur.”

Montale follows up these observations by moving into a different discursive register, asserting that “Tout serait perdu, sauf la mémoire. Les Marseillais s’en satisferont. Ils savent tous ce qu’il y a sous leurs pieds, et l’histoire de leur ville, ils la portent dans leur cœur. C’est leur secret, qu’aucun touriste ne pourra jamais voler.”

What we see here is a certain idealized ineffaceability of belonging and being-together in the city that exists over and against “actually existing” attempts to refashion that belonging in postindustrial urban renewal projects. As Montale’s reflections on this archeological site in downtown Marseille show, the Utopian gestures in the texts do not

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44 Izzo, *Chourmo*, 436.
run parallel to critical evaluations of everyday life but are actually superimposed on them. The idea of Utopia as a palimpsest, then, represents a rewriting that is also a writing-over, one that, in the words of Fredric Jameson, throws into relief “the mud of the present age in which the winged Utopian shoes stick.” Thus, while I do not disagree with Jameson’s suggestion that the Utopian text, writ large, is more or less nonnarrative what we can observe in Izzo’s crime trilogy is that the idea of Utopia as a palimpsest relies on the non-coincidence of temporal claims on futurity and narrative claims on the production of Utopian desires.

Even though these claims are not coextensive in Izzo’s trilogy, there does exist a sense of futurity (a grim future, in fact, that is even bleaker than the present) in all three novels that runs parallel to Fabio Montale’s Utopian musings in the present. This point is important, for it helps us to see more clearly how the dystopian near-future that lies just slightly beyond the trilogy’s narrative horizon (but that Izzo still lets us glimpse because it is crucial to his sense of plot) represents an indispensable element in the production of the textual present.

Although the trilogy is explicitly set in the “present” of late 1990s Marseille, Izzo’s narratives and Montale’s investigations rely to no small extent on a foreboding dystopian near-future that moves in two directions. The first of these, which emerges

46 Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 75. Jameson is referring in this passage to the “epistemological value” of the idea that Utopias are inextricably linked to their own failures as imaginative projects. While the failure of Utopian projects is slightly outside the scope of my discussion, I think that the presentist temporality of Izzo’s Utopian imaginings in his trilogy performs the same sort of diagnostic epistemological work.

most clearly in *Total Khéops* and *Chourmo*, involves urban guerrilla race warfare originating in Marseille’s *banlieues* and provoked by the police (via the FN) and/or by Islamic fundamentalists trained in North Africa or the Balkans who return to France and recruit an army from among the disaffected youth of Marseille’s *quartiers d’immigration*. In *Total Khéops*, for instance, we learn that the two cops who shot down Montale’s childhood friend, Ugo, and raped and murdered his pseudo-love interest, Leila, were working for the Italian mafia who had been trying to gain a foothold in Marseille and were using their connections to funnel weapons to drug dealers in the *banlieues* who in turn were to distribute them to young Arab men. As the local mafia boss, Batisti, puts it when he reveals this information to Montale toward the end of the narrative, “*Y pensent qu’ils vont nettoyer Marseille. Y rêvent de foutre le feu à la ville. D’un grand bordel, qui partirait des quartiers nord. Des hordes de jeunes se livrant au pillage.*”\(^{48}\) As Montale explains it, “*La violence d’un côté. La peur, le racisme à l’autre bout. Avec ça, ils espéraient que leurs copains fascistes arrivent à la mairie.*”\(^{49}\) Similarly, in *Chourmo*, during Montale’s investigation of his social worker friend Serge’s murder, our hero comes across one of the latter’s notebooks containing the names of people involved in Islamist terrorism in the *banlieues*, information the police wants to keep under wraps, not least because, as it turns out, they were involved in sending Islamist militants to murder Serge in the first place. At the end of this second text we learn that thanks to the information that Montale ensured was placed in the right hands, trustworthy police

\(^{48}\) Izzo, *Total Khéops*, 253.
\(^{49}\) Izzo, *Total Khéops*, 253.
officers were able to break up terrorist cells in the quartiers nord and, in so doing, discovered a large weapons cache in a makeshift mosque. By the end of the first two volumes of the trilogy, then, we learn that Montale’s investigations have narrowly prevented such urban warfare from erupting (indeed, the verb Izzo uses is “exploser”), but this investigative and narrative success does not serve to diminish the texts’ sense of futurity. If anything, the possibility of a violent, dystopian near-future, where racial and religious warfare has been ignited and where the FN sweeps to power, has simply been deferred until another day.

Whereas this dystopia, in which the state appears to have orchestrated the very urban violence that would see it delivered into the hands of the FN, is imagined in the first two volumes of the trilogy in terms of the everyday practices of corruption that could make this possible, the trilogy’s final volume, Solea, offers a second dystopian direction that plays out on the grander stage of the nation-state, global capitalism and the relationship of both of these with transnational forms of organized crime. While Montale must protect his journalist friend and erstwhile lover, Babette, from the mafia who has learned that she possesses sensitive documents linking many French government officials to organized crime, neither Montale nor the reader remains unaware that Izzo’s characters in this volume are nearly eclipsed by more abstract politico-economic issues. The reader easily notices how Solea is marked by a deep sense of anxiety since the texts’ millennial concerns about the near future (the reader will bear in mind that this final novel was published in 1998) are also effectively channeled into the narrative present. This occurs through Izzo’s extensive “citations” of Babette’s journalistic writings that diagnose the
mafia’s infiltration of contemporary French political life and, in so doing, sketch a relationship between transnational money laundering, world debt and economic austerity policies that threaten to plunge the mafia-run first world into a terrible economic crisis that may be just around the corner.\textsuperscript{50}

The fact that both of these dystopian directions, as well as the attendant sense of futurity they produce, emerge most forcefully at the end of Izzo’s novels (that is, paradoxically, at precisely the moment when the success of Montale’s investigation has ensured their temporary deferral) sheds light on how extratextual dystopian futures might be involved in the retrospective production of narratives of Utopian desires in the very present of the text. Put another way, we might say that in some respects Montale’s Utopian reimaginings of Marseille gain political salience and narrative significance only after the texts’ sense of futurity has reached a crescendo that serves to anchor the desires for Utopia more fully in the present. To pose this peculiar temporal relationship allows us to move beyond overly simplified Utopia/dystopia distinctions and to conceive of futurity in such a way that it becomes an imperative urging us to rewrite the present in Utopian terms. I understand this point as a temporal reworking of a claim Jameson makes

\textsuperscript{50} At the beginning of this novel, in one of the “notes de l’auteur” I mentioned above that do interesting conceptual work, Izzo includes a literary “disclaimer” indicating that a good amount of what he writes here is based on official documents from the UN or newspapers like Le Monde and Le Canard enchaîné. While Izzo leaves it up to us to speculate on just how much these fictionalized citations rely on real-world journalism, I think the more compelling problem lies elsewhere, namely in the ways in which these citations allow us to see how the text begins to blur temporal distinctions between a corrupt present and a dystopian near future.
about Utopias more generally, namely that “Utopia as a form is not the representation of radical alternatives; it is rather simply the imperative to imagine them.”\textsuperscript{51}

Leaving aside the matter of futurity for the moment, we can notice that these Utopian rewritings of the city are both “presentist” and deeply concerned with the ways in which an imagined, alternative present necessarily puts multiple temporalities into play. A moment from late in \textit{Total Khéops} illustrates this point quite strikingly. Montale has just left his crucial meeting with the mob boss, Batisti, who answers many of the questions holding the narrative in place, and wanders into yet another bar where he overhears a conversation between several young Arabs about French national identity and the fact that Arab youth are “the least French of all the French people.” When one of them declares that he doesn’t care, that he’s Marseillais before anything else, Montale begins to reminisce about his own experiences negotiating belonging in the nation-state and in the (imagined) space of the city: “Ils étaient de Marseille, marseillais avant d’être arabes…Comme nous l’étions Ugo, Manu et moi il y a quinze ans. Un jour, Ugo avait demandé: ‘Chez moi, chez Fabio on parle napolitain. Chez toi, on parle espagnol. En classe, on apprend le français. Mais on est quoi, dans le fond?’ –‘Des arabes,’ avait répondu Manu.”\textsuperscript{52} The word “arabe” here is resignified and refers not to the excluded citizens of the Marseille Montale describes when he critiques police practices and anti-immigrant discourses, but to a universalist and hybridized sense of belonging in a

\textsuperscript{51} Fredric Jameson, \textit{Archeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions} (New York: Verso, 2005), 416.
\textsuperscript{52} Izzo, \textit{Total Khéops}, 257.
Marseille that is conceptualized as a Utopian melting-pot. Montale proceeds to think about his Italian father telling him that when he arrived in Marseille with his brothers they hardly ever had enough to eat but still managed to make do thanks to an unspoken sense of solidarity in the city. “C’était ça, l’histoire de Marseille,” Montale concludes. “Son éternité. Une utopie. L’unique utopie du monde. Un lieu où n’importe qui, de n’importe quelle couleur, pouvait descendre d’un bateau, ou d’un train, sa valise à la main, sans un sou en poche, et se fondre dans le flot des autres hommes. Une ville où, à peine le pied posé sur le sol, cet homme pouvait dire: ‘C’est ici. Je suis chez moi.’ Marseille appartient à ceux qui y vivent.” Initially, we might consider this passage as offering a vision of French universalism grafted onto an idealized sense of belonging in the city or as an elevation of French democratic republicanism to the level of narrative fantasy. However, Montale’s reflections demand that we pay attention to how different senses of time and history are enmeshed in the production of his present-based Utopian desires. For one thing, what stands out here is the intentional folding of history into a timeless Utopian fantasy: for Montale, Marseille’s past is also always already its “eternity,” and it follows from this that the development of such a historical consciousness is part and parcel of an alternative conceptualization of the present. We can humorously rework Marx’s famous dictum from The Eighteenth Brumaire here and observe that while men make their own history under preexisting circumstances, when

53 Izzo, Total Khéops, 257.
54 If this is the case, then we would need to wonder why a Utopian dimension is necessary for this political universalism to be fully realized, and whether the existence of this dimension itself implies a critique of republican universalist ideology.
history and Utopia are conceptually linked men are free to reimagine the present as they see fit. This is exactly what Montale does in this passage, even though his Utopian desire is re-routed through a meditation on Marseille’s history and the only positive characteristic he gives to his Utopia is the idea that “Marseille appartient à ceux qui y vivent.” Returning to Marcus’s strategy, we can note that an ethnographer’s imagining of alternative possibilities need not contain a concrete program, but instead constitute thought experiments by virtue of which one can ethnographically critique the present. Following this line of argumentation we can note that Montale is still responding directly to this modernist ethnographic imperative.

Rather than indicating its imaginative powerlessness, a rewriting of the present that lacks a full, positive descriptive program is especially useful precisely because it resists spelling out in any concrete or prescriptive detail just what this alternative present must look like. Instead, what we might refer to as descriptive “blind spots” in the palimpsest can be taken to indicate potential avenues for Utopian thought that simply have not been imagined yet. It is in this sense that the presentist Utopian text is both descriptively “closed” and radically, imaginatively “open” at one and the same time. We can approach this unique situation from another angle by taking up the question of the geography of Izzo’s Utopian Marseille and thinking through the ways in which its sense of spatiality exceeds the cartographic boundaries of the city itself. Often, an actually existing site in the text affords Montale inspiration for his Utopian reflections: the first

55 Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility,” 44.
chapter of *Solea*, for instance, sees our hero shrug off premonitions about his own demise (the chapter opens with the sentence, “La vie puait la mort”) by heading out for drinks at one of his favorite hotspots: “J’étais bien dans son bar, à Hassan. Les habitués se côtoyaient sans aucune barrière d’âge, de sexe, de couleur de peau, de milieu social. On y était entre amis. Celui qui venait boire son pastis, on pouvait en être sûr, il ne votait pas Front National, et il ne l’avait jamais fait.”

This actually existing ideal space appears to open up a virtual geography for Montale, as he indicates in the observation that follows.

“Ici, dans ce bar, chacun savait bien pourquoi il était de Marseille et pas d’ailleurs, pourquoi il vivait à Marseille et pas ailleurs. L’amitié qui flottait là, dans les vapeurs d’anis, tenait dans un regard échangé. Celui de l’exil de nos pères. Et c’était rassurant. Nous n’avions rien à perdre, puisque nous avions déjà tout perdu.”

In Montale’s pastis-fueled observations, this virtual geography is expressed in two ways that are intimately linked to one another: first, in an idealized common knowledge, according to which the imagined contours of this other Marseille can be said to extend as far as people are capable of recognizing and affirming the forms of contingency that tie together what Izzo calls the *brassages humains* of the port city. The second way this geography is articulated is in relation to the “placeless place” of exile which serves to locate Marseille at the (virtual) center of a multiplicity of displacements from somewhere else. This intense geographical diffusion stands in stark contrast with Thomas More’s early

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57 Izzo, *Solea*, 598.
conception of Utopia, whose *limes* is formed through geographical scission and which relies fundamentally on such manufactured isolation to succeed as an imagined country. More writes, “They say, though, and one can actually see for oneself, that Utopia was originally not an island but a peninsula. However, it was conquered by somebody called Utopos… The moment he landed and got control of the country, he immediately had a channel cut through the fifteen-mile isthmus connecting Utopia with the mainland, so that the sea could flow all round it.” Following this, we can understand More’s early Utopia as relying on geographic limitations and a clear sense of inside and outside. Thus this well-known formulation stands in contradistinction to Izzo’s Utopia which relies on flux, expansion, and boundaries that shift to accommodate different modes of identifying with exile.

Clearly, then, we are dealing with a geography that also articulates a mode of belonging. Exile allows for a potentially unlimited expansion of the fictive borders of this imagined Marseille since it can accommodate virtually every sort of geographical displacement. As Montale puts it during a conversation with his friend Félix in *Chourmo*, “C’est Marseille qui appartient à l’exil. Cette ville ne sera jamais rien d’autre, la dernière escale du monde. Son avenir appartient à ceux qui arrivent. Jamais à ceux qui partent.”

Yet, taken in conjunction with the passage I cited above, we notice that exile also operates as an assumed ontological category that functions as a criterion for inclusion within Izzo’s Utopia: if everyone is living the exile of their forebears, then it suffices to

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60 Izzo, *Chourmo*, 394.
recognize this status (in much the same way that Sartre’s Saint Genet chooses to be who he is) to be able to participate in this collective reimagining of the city. Montale himself appears to agree with this idea of exile as a linchpin holding together geography and belonging: a few dozen pages after his conversation with Félix he asserts, “J’appartenais à l’exil. Les trois quarts des habitants de cette ville pouvaient dire la même chose. Mais ils ne le faisaient pas. Pas assez à mon goût. Pourtant, être marseillais c’était ça. Savoir qu’on n’est pas né là par hasard.”

This idealized form of belonging is thus written over what Montale perceives to be a sort of indifference (that is, a mode of belonging in the city that is thoroughly dehistoricized) on the part of many of his fellow city-dwellers. Whether Montale’s diagnosis is correct is less important than the fact that his reflections produce an interplay between two forms of belonging in the city that correspond to the two visions of Marseille that emerge in these introspective field notes. This interplay takes an especially striking form if we resituate it under the rubric of citizenship and observe that what Izzo accomplishes in writing an alternative Marseille over the Marseille that appears in his often gritty ethnographic realism is an articulation of “dual citizenship” that is lived in relation to two political communities (one of which is “real,” the other of which is imagined) that are always interdependent.

Citizenship offers a particularly provocative lens through which to think through these disparate forms of belonging, for although modalities of inclusion and exclusion in the French nation-state are always thematically lurking in Izzo’s trilogy, the horizon of

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61 Izzo, Chourmo, 434.
the political community Izzo outlines is at once “below” and “beyond” the nation-state. It is below the nation-state because the “real world” of the text is a Marseille presented as a culturally autonomous polis, and it is beyond it because the Utopian Marseille written over this first one is formed through radical diffusion and is always already imagined as exceeding the geopolitical confines of France. The idea of Utopia as a palimpsest implies a certain simultaneity, coexistence, and a holding together of written representations, and it is for this reason that the idea of a dual citizenship stands out because it maps a bifurcated conception of membership onto a community whose horizon is itself doubled.

Etienne Balibar’s conception of a dialectically doubled community of citizens is helpful for thinking about how our palimpsest holds a coherent vision of citizenship together. In his essay “Citizenship Without Community?,” Balibar is concerned primarily with interrogating the ways in which social and political modes of exclusion jointly constitute the founding moment of citizenship and suggests that the democratic power founded paradoxically at the juncture of these processes of exclusion can be taken beyond itself and allow us to democratize citizenship by rethinking the borders of the community to which citizenship refers. But it is Balibar’s conclusion that I would particularly like to retain for our purposes at this point, since it explicitly poses the question of a community of citizens that cannot be “solved,” as he puts it, either in terms of an ideal community or an empirical one. The community of citizens, rather, has “a moving historical site that is both sociological and symbolic,” and “[i]ts domain is a dialectics and not a constitution, a sociology, or a logic…A dialectic of ‘constituent’ and ‘constituted’ citizenship…it is a contradictory process, fed by permanent conflicts
between several types of subjectifications or identities, some cultural or prepolitical, others political. Balibar’s provocative formulation, with which he ends his essay, encourages us to focus on the abstract formal dialectic of citizenship in which clashes over specific political or cultural identities might be inscribed. Balibar’s dialectic thus offers a powerful analog to the interplay of modes of belonging that we can observe the Fabio Montale trilogy and that I call Izzo’s sense of “dual citizenship.” This sense of citizenship is effectively produced (and is never definitively resolved) in the textual alternation between “empirical” forms of belonging in 1990s Marseille and the idealized, Utopian belonging that Izzo writes over the empirical and the everyday and that, crucially, always surpasses it. Such a dialectical alternation between constituent and constituted citizenship stands out all the more clearly precisely because Izzo’s Utopian palimpsest allows for these terms to be grasped in their aesthetic simultaneity.

It seems that it is in terms of this dialectic that we can understand the succession of chapter titles in Izzo’s trilogy. With the exception of his brief prologues and epilogues, each chapter title offers a sardonically empirical or, alternatively, an idealized “situating” of Marseille according to a recurring formula. Some examples include: “Où même pour perdre il faut savoir se battre,” “Où les aubes ne sont que l’illusion de la beauté du monde,” “Où l’on côtoie l’infiniment petit de la saloperie du monde,” “Où ce sont souvent des amours secrètes, celles qu’on partage avec une ville,” or “Où est posée la question du bonheur de vivre dans une société sans morale.” From chapter to chapter,

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62 Etienne Balibar, “Citizenship without Community?,” 77.
then, we shuttle back and forth between modes of belonging and spatial (re)iterations of
the city that are alternatively pessimistically empirical and idealized (or, as Balibar might
put it, we experience the permanent conflict within the dialectic of constituted and
constituent citizenship), and Izzo’s trilogy “happens” in the succession and surpassing of
these dialectically organized moments.

Thus the Utopian Marseille that Izzo writes over and against the bleaker depiction
of the city as home to all sorts of exclusions and as prey to the nefariously racist designs
of the FN actually encourages us to take this critical juxtaposition in more abstractly
provocative directions and, in so doing, corresponds well to an equally provocative
modernist ethnographic strategy outlined by George Marcus. For Marcus, the
experimental ethnographer should engage in critical thought experiments in which
alternative or repressed cultural possibilities go head to head with the dominant political
or discursive trends that would otherwise marginalize them. However, Montale’s Utopian
reflections do more than simply allow us to point toward the ways in which experimental
ethnographic trends are at play in the trilogy; additionally, they provoke us to return to
Marcus and to complicate his formulation. Marcus stops short of declaring this modernist
strategy to be Utopian in the strict sense of the word because, as he sees it, these thought
experiments “might be thought to border on the Utopian or the nostalgic if [they] were
not dependent, first of all, on a documentation that these traces do have a life of their
own, so to speak.” Marcus’s sense of empiricism seems to hold him back from

63 Marcus, “The Modernist Sensibility,” 44.
embracing more properly Utopian thought experiments, and yet this is precisely what Montale’s Utopian palimpsest accomplishes in the trilogy. We can account for this complication of a very useful ethnographic strategy by observing that it takes place in a literary medium that, on the one hand, both responds to ethnographic concepts and deploys ethnographic strategies and, on the other hand, is nonetheless still resolutely fictional. Since the texts in the trilogy are obviously fictional we are not as bound as Marcus (who adopts a standpoint from within anthropology) to respect strict rules concerning empirical observation, if only for the simple reason that the author of a novel can do whatever he or she likes in the name of fiction. The major implication of this point, and one that we observe in Montale’s Utopian musings, is that thought experiments are easier to come by and easier to extend in many different directions in fictional texts. Izzo’s Fabio Montale trilogy stands in such a privileged relation to this ethnographic strategy of Marcus’s because it is a work of ethnographic fiction, one that draws on experimental “modernist” strategies in anthropology and uses its fictional status to its advantage in order to push critical thought experiments in more properly Utopian directions.

**Conclusion**

In this reading of Jean-Claude Izzo’s Fabio Montale trilogy as an example of ethnographic fiction in the form of the novel, I have examined how Izzo’s *noir* hero mobilizes fieldwork strategies in his investigations in order to arrive at a Utopian
imagining of social space in the city that is in tension with the gritty depictions of Marseille that comprise the more conventionally hard-boiled aspects of his narratives. Montale’s Utopian reflections on the radically hybrid ethos of Marseille function as a response to the multiple forms of social exclusion and urban marginalization that, for him, policing seems to cause and that also appear to be the result of insidious racist and xenophobic discourses characterizing the French political culture of his time. Thus even though for Izzo the city of Marseille finds itself “toujours à mi-distance entre la tragédie et la lumière,” as he puts it in Solea’s “note de l’auteur,” the Utopian vision of Marseille that emerges in the pages of the trilogy carries so much emotional weight for Montale that we cannot help but conclude that Izzo in reality leans slightly to the side of “la lumière.” 64 Izzo places ethnography, then, in the service of his Utopian belief in the city, which serves to hold fundamentally redemptive rhetoric in tension with the unmistakably noir narrative themes of alienation, corruption and the breakdown of important forms of social solidarity and cohesion.

This chapter has also explored the significance of how experimental ethnographic strategies, which explicitly borrow from the strategies deployed by literary modernism in its reworking of realist modes of expression, travel and function when they are seen to operate in works of fiction. George Marcus, as we have seen, makes a point of importing literary concepts into anthropology in order to push the discipline away from conventional and wholly inadequate realist representational devices and forms. However, 

64 Izzo, author’s note to Solea, n. p.
as Izzo’s Utopian thought experiments demonstrate, literary appropriations of (already literary) ethnographic strategies can be reinserted back into anthropological contexts and used to nudge these original conceptual contexts beyond where they were intended to go. Although in certain respects detective fiction in general lends itself well to ethnographic critical attention, Izzo’s trilogy is an especially privileged example of ethnographic fiction because it allows us to reshape experimental ethnographic methods derived from literary fiction itself—in much the same way that Izzo’s Montale reworks and resignifies dominant French cultural trends in 1990s Marseille.
Conclusion: Raphaël Confiant’s *L’Allée des Soupirs* and a Rereading of Ethnographic Fiction, or, Éloge de la Créolité Ethnographique

In the foregoing chapters I have examined the genre of ethnographic fiction as it has developed in disparate geographic conditions and in relation to changing historical circumstances throughout the twentieth century in France and the Francophone world. Further, I have paid special attention to the complex relationship obtaining between the metropole and West Africa in what we have identified as the broad interdisciplinary conceptual field offered by France’s century-long conversation among literature, literary studies and anthropology. This special focus represents more than just an organizational strategy: following the institutionalization of the discipline of anthropology in France and the concurrent professionalization of fieldwork as a necessary method of ethnographic inquiry, Africa (and, in particular, West Africa) became the anthropological terrain of choice for many who sought to make careers in the discipline.¹ Thus this dissertation has broadly sought to trace the emergence of ethnographic fiction in relation to Africa’s shifting status in the French political and ethnographic imaginary: we have moved from ethnographic interactions with and representations of colonial Africa (in the case of Michel Leiris and Amadou Hampâté Bâ) to emergent cinematic narratives of decolonization and African independence in the case of Jean Rouch and, finally, to Jean-

Claude Izzo’s crime fiction in which postindustrial Marseille functions as the capital of the French postcolonial world.

From these chapters and their historical and geographical movements we can also distill three important thematic markers in terms of which ethnographic fiction’s manifold aesthetic strategies have been articulated. First, the primary focus for Amadou Hampâté Bâ and Michel Leiris is the subjectivity of the ethnographer and the form of narrative authority that subjectivity confers upon written ethnographic texts. Hampâté Bâ, as we have seen, revels in a sense of ethnographic authority born from the relationship established between himself and his readerly public; for him, the ethnographic subject is also the subject of a pedagogy. Leiris, by contrast, is thoroughly uncomfortable with his subjectivity as an ethnographer, in part because this subjectivity never quite seems to deliver on the transcultural promises it makes. In each case, a sense of ethnographic subjectivity speaks to forms inherited from literary narration and from literary-fictional narrative strategies. Second, the concept of modernity is central to Jean Rouch’s fictional films and its cinematic representation allows us to see clearly how modernity is both produced as a narrative category and negotiated as a geographic idea(l) that travels between West Africa, metropolitan France and the United States. As we see in Rouch’s works (and especially in Moi, un Noir), modernity is a triangulated transatlantic cultural space whose referents inform the everyday lives of ordinary West Africans, but it also refers to an ideal of capitalist prosperity from which, as Robinson so forcefully demonstrates, they are structurally excluded. Additionally, in Jaguar and Moi, un Noir blackness operates as an improvised narrative category that facilitates the re-staging and
re-centering of the trope of modernity, a process that takes its cue from Rouch’s understanding of ethnography as a fundamentally collective knowledge project. Finally, in Jean-Claude Izzo’s Fabio Montale trilogy we can observe a crucial thematic dialectic between social disaster and Utopian modes of belonging in a postcolonial urban space that threatens at any moment to fall into the hands of the forces of institutional racism and political exclusion. This dialectic encourages us to investigate how ethnographic strategies that owe a debt to literary narrative devices might be reconceptualized and transformed once they are imported back into the sort of literary context from which they emerged.

In what follows I would like to explore a text which sees our three thematic problems of subjectivity, modernity and disaster/Utopia converge around the literary-ethnographic representation of everyday life in Martinique, a location that has yet to feature in my reading of French and Francophone ethnographic fiction and whose geographic specificity pushes our definition of the genre in provocative ways. Raphaël Confiant’s 1994 novel, *L’Allée des Soupirs*, tells the story of the December, 1959 riots in the island’s capital, Fort-de-France, that began after a European man knocked over a black man’s motorbike and initially refused to apologize. Once the C.R.S. intervened, ordinary residents of the island fought back for several days in clashes with the police that left several young Martinicans dead.² Confiant’s novel approaches the riots through a

² A detailed history of these riots, their causes and their legacy is outside the scope of these brief concluding remarks. For an interesting historical text that examines the December riots and relies (ethnographically) on the firsthand testimonies of Europeans and Martinicans, see Louis-Georges Placide, *Les émeutes de décembre 1959 en Martinique: un repère historique* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2009).
multitude of narrative perspectives and subject positions, since his characters occupy a
number of social positions and racial categories—not to mention disparate racial(ized)
ideologies in a newly postcolonial context in which decolonization for Martinique meant
assimilation into the political life of the metropole. The 1959 riots thus do not so much
“happen” in the novel as they are written into existence via an ever expanding
multiplicity of narrative subjectivities; and from this point we can make the crucial
observation that while the text does contain several central characters, it lacks a “hero”
understood in the conventional sense as an organizing and/or totalizing narrative
perspective. This narrative device is not specific to Creole storytelling, and in fact a
European text, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, may be its most well known example. What is specific

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3 In 1946, Martinique, along with the other *vieilles colonies* of La Réunion, Guadeloupe and French Guiana, became a full-fledged French overseas department.

4 Roy Caldwell, Jr., views this and other aspects of Confiant’s formalism as indications of the “decidedly non-Western aesthetic” operating in the novel. Although I am less concerned with geographically locating Confiant’s formalism (insofar as this is even possible), I would suggest that this aesthetic is predicated more on demonstrating how creole literary production is in, but not necessarily of, Western artistic and literary traditions. This formulation borrows, of course, from Paul Gilroy and his reading of blacks in the Atlantic world. See Roy Chandler Caldwell, Jr., “Créolité and Postcoloniality in Raphaël Confiant’s *L’Allée des Soupirs*,” *The French Review* 73, no. 2 (1999): 303, 301-311.

5 One cannot help but think of the Wandering Rocks episode in *Ulysses*, for instance. This episode unmoors us as readers, leaving us with little choice but to acknowledge Joyce’s writerly autonomy from his characters since the only predominant “subjects” of this episode are the concepts of simultaneity and movement. Joyce examines these concepts from a perspective that is at once totalizing, in the sense that he takes pains to synchronize the movements of even the most minor characters in the unified space/time of the “Hibernian metropolis,” and diffuse in its inexorable shifting between disparate peripatetic trajectories in a seemingly centerless city. Framed by the figures of Father Connem and the viceregal cavalcade—naturalistic instantiations of Stephen’s abstract concerns about serving two masters—the Wandering Rocks is cinematic in its splicing of threads of information together in a textual juxtaposition of characters and actions that are spatially distant. This montage effect not only collapses time and space by allowing us to glimpse the episode as a whole, it also highlights Joyce’s own increasingly apparent position as the organizer of the text, a position he will occupy with even greater authority in the episodes that follow. See Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990 [1934]), 219-55. Although it is outside the scope of this conclusion, we could certainly create a productive and profound comparative reading of *Ulysses* and *L’Allée des Soupirs* that relies upon both texts’ sense of the cinematic effects of montage to form narratives that proceed from the
to Confiant’s approach, though, is that he deploys this technique in order to link an exposition of Creole culture in Martinique to the ethnographic reconstruction, from an array of subject positions, of events that significantly marked the social and political landscape of the postwar Caribbean. This is a move that none of the previous texts at stake in this project accomplishes, and it serves to push our conceptualization of ethnographic fiction in directions that did not appear available to us at the outset.

Confiant’s sense of plot alone is enough to provoke us to read *L’Allée des Soupirs* as offering an ethnographic reconstruction of a significant event in the island’s recent history that also doubles as a rewriting of the event into the everyday cultural life of the city. However, a significant leitmotiv in the novel obliges us to take this observation even further: also at stake in the text is the search for a mode of expression capable of capturing the linguistic, cultural and racial particularities of *Créolité* in literature. We can read this novel in certain ways as an ethnographic allegory of its own conditions of production, a move Confiant seems to encourage since two of his principal characters, Jacques Chartier (a white Frenchman and amateur novelist bent on aesthetically tapping into Martinique’s Creole culture) and Monsieur Jean (a black ex-teacher who loses his position after minor acts of collaboration during the war and who turns to poetry), symbolize two aesthetic positions in a debate on poetics that takes place throughout the linkages between characters and social spaces, rather than on the totalizing consciousness of one hero in particular. This potential comparison would have the added advantage of allowing us to juxtapose two very different (post)colonial literary contexts via a consideration of two formal effects that certainly have much to say to one another.
novel concerning just how Martinique’s Créolité ought aesthetically to be rendered. The terms of this debate, in addition to the way in which it plays out in Confiant’s wonderfully creolized French, intersect with the major thematic concerns that I have investigated in this dissertation: in Chartier and Jean’s debate (and in the novel more generally) there arise the interrelated questions of what Creole subjectivity looks like, what kind of modernity a valorized Créolité would produce (“L’homme moderne sera créole ou il ne sera pas, je vous dis!” exclaims Chartier at one point⁶), and how Créolité might constitute a cultural Utopia coexisting with the decidedly dystopian and disastrous cultural present of the text. In less abstract terms, though, this debate turns on the more obviously anthropological questions of how Creole culture in its hybridity and the everyday life of Martinique can be represented literarily, and it is in this respect that we can allow these major concerns of Confiant’s novel to dovetail with the very aesthetic precepts that comprise ethnographic fiction as a genre.

Confiant is well aware that his novel both allegorizes debates on the literary representation of Creoleness and constitutes in its own right an intervention in the field of aesthetic possibilities that it sets out to describe. This is why we can observe a relationship between Confiant and his imagined (European) readerly public that is characterized by a sense of ethnographic didacticism akin to what we have observed in Hampâté Bâ’s memoirs. For Confiant, the task of representing Creole culture in literature is of a piece with instructing a heterogeneous public in the forms of cultural difference

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that make a specifically Creole literature aesthetically necessary. For example, throughout the novel he presents multiple local perspectives and accounts of a given event or situation (some more plausible or “magically realist” than others), such as when one black woman asserts a certain superiority over her Creole compatriots because, unlike them, her ancestors came to the island from Africa after slavery had ended and for this reason she does not share their low extraction. Illiterate, she brandishes a slip of paper she claims to be her ancient relative’s work contract with a plantation owner but which, upon inspection and in an amusing moment of intertextuality, turns out to be a page from France’s Code Noir she had simply torn out of a history book. Confiant provides several other possible explanations for what might really have been written on the woman’s yellowed piece of paper, but it is his parenthetical justification for why he includes these alternate possibilities that demonstrates his sense of didacticism: “(Mais comme chez nous, les nègres, une histoire possède toujours plusieurs portes d’entrée et de sortie, contrairement aux Blancs pour lesquels la droite est le plus court chemin entre deux points, d’autres versions de cet épisode sont également dignes d’écoute.)”

Confiant goes on to indicate what these other versions could be, but it is enough for our purposes to observe that he carefully explains how a Creole method of approaching storytelling might reshape what we can refer to as a literary Cartesian geometry (from which it nonetheless borrows) because it seeks to imbue its sense of narrative with a pedagogy highlighting Caribbean cultural specificities.

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7 Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 460.
This sense of ethnographic didacticism, according to which Confiant explains how Creole literary culture differs from that which is easily recognizable to white Europeans, represents only one aspect of Confiant’s literary intervention. *L’Allée des Soupirs* is also in implicit dialogue with a broader Creole literary cultural project that Confiant, along with Jean Bernabé and Patrick Chamoiseau, sought to outline at the end of the 1980s in their now famous treatise, *Éloge de la Créolité*. In this text Confiant and his collaborators confidently proclaim that “La littérature antillaise n’existe pas encore,” that what amounts to Caribbean literary production is a form of writing that neither calls upon nor constitutes a unified and bounded national community. Following from this proclamation the central questions preoccupying these writers are, how does the writer approach Creoleness as a question to be lived but never definitively resolved? And how can Caribbean texts create visions of community and literary sociality without seeking solace in static forms of “identity politics?” This text certainly demands to be considered as a theory of Caribbean and Creole ethnographic fiction, but when we take it in conjunction with Confiant’s *L’Allée des Soupirs* it becomes clear that the latter work represents a provocative instantiation of the earlier theoretical intervention, one that gestures toward what a properly Creole novel might look like. From this perspective the novel is an ethnographic thought experiment that describes the everyday life of Martinique and the complex racialized logics of Creole culture while simultaneously

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articulating a vision of an idealized literary culture that might be mapped onto Confiant’s rich ethnographic representations.

As we saw in Jean-Claude Izzo’s crime trilogy, purely fictional texts enjoy the privilege of setting in motion ethnographic thought experiments that more conventional works of anthropology, concerned as they need to be with the preservation of a certain documentary empiricism, must generally avoid. Confiant puts this privilege to good use when he allows two of his major characters, Monsieur Jean and Jacques Chartier (who represent respectively poetry and prose, the sensuous, third-worldist Negritude of Césaire and a more specifically Creole critique of such earlier forms of black consciousness in the Francophone world) to stage a debate about literary representation in the Caribbean against the dystopian backdrop of a Fort-de-France in the grip of extreme forms of social violence. Both of these characters are outliers of a sort, since no one in the proletarian neighborhood of Terres-Sainville where the novel takes place understands precisely why Monsieur Jean has been blackballed from teaching or why the white Frenchman Jacques (often called “Jacqu”) is so interested in black vernacular cultures to the point where he can joke in Creole for hours over glasses of rum in a local bar. In fact, the two men remain strangers from each other until they find themselves alone at a bar one night, forced to drink together and to acknowledge each other’s presence. This forced proximity initiates the debate that will continue throughout the novel and that begins with the Frenchman critiquing Monsieur Jean’s poetic style and, by extension, what he perceives as the defects inherent to all hitherto existing poetry in the Americas: “Mon cher, la poésie en Amérique ne sait parler que des pierres, de la mer, du soleil, des montagnes,
On the one hand, Chartier indicts what he perceives to be poetry’s overly pastoral representation of nature and, on the other hand, he points out that poetry is largely unconcerned with the social drama of everyday life. Poetic language, it would seem, is insufficiently humanist in that it neither seeks to respond nor offer an alternative to everyday struggles in the postcolonial Caribbean. This exchange continues with Monsieur Jean challenging Chartier to consider Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, whose aesthetic merits the white novelist is quick to recognize and whose shortcomings he discerns with equal speed: “Du grand art, du très grand art! Mais le grotesque américain n’y apparaît aucunement. On n’y voit qu’une misère très universelle et le Fort-de-France que décrit Césaire pourrait être n’importe quel township sud-africain, n’importe quels bidonville africain ou casbah nord-africaine. Rien de très spécifique en dépit du génie littéraire de l’auteur.” Negritude’s universalizing conceptualization of black racial particularity dissolves cultural and geographical specificities such that, as Chartier seems to imply here, a universal framework for political solidarity takes the place of a documentary aesthetic imperative that would represent *Créolité* and Martinique as ethnographically unique cultural imaginaries. “Mon cher Jean,” Chartier concludes, “je crois qu’en fait

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seul le roman a le pouvoir d’appréhender ce grotesque, enfin je veux dire la prose…”¹¹

For Chartier, then, the novel is capable of doing what poetry cannot, namely capturing the specificities of Martinican cultural life in fictional form. However, up to this point the Frenchman’s defense of the novel proceeds negatively, through a critique of poetry, and does not offer a clear picture of exactly what this fictional and novelistic capture of Martinique might entail.

We can begin to tease out the crux of Jacques Chartier’s point when we consider what “le grotesque” or “le grotesque américain” (in its geographically specified form) means for the Frenchman who, despite his linguistic pretensions and affinity for Creole culture, is still an outside observer of Martinique’s social life—a quasi-fieldworker figure, we might say. The two characters continue their conversation several pages later, which gives Chartier the chance to expand on his idea of the grotesque: “Qu’on s’entend bien: ‘grotesque’ n’a aucunement un sens péjoratif dans ma bouche. Disons qu’il désigne une certaine démesure du réel insulaire. C’est d’ailleurs la disproportion entre cette démesure permanente et l’exiguïté de l’île qui crée ce grotesque.”¹² Paradoxically, the grotesque seems to gesture at once to the everyday realities of life in Martinique and to the ways in which those realities exceed and travel beyond the geographical confines of the island. Chartier puts this sense of disproportion and “démesure” more humorously when he observes a pack of semi-wild Creole dogs who spend evenings running around the neighborhoods of Fort-de-France and who seem to follow their own secret, hidden

¹¹ Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 113.
¹² Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 115.
logic: “C’est cela qu’il faut tenter d’écrire…cette errance organisée, cette folie qui n’est pas la folie ordinaire que décrivent nos livres européens.”¹³ What these abstract and formalist remarks describe is a sense of ethnographic realism that would grasp Fort-de-France and Creole culture more generally in its specificity, but that would also have to account for events, situations and formal devices that are outside of realism’s traditional representative purview. This type of realism is itself a certain “démesure” of conventional literary realism since it must keep track of an “errance organisée” that both characterizes everyday life in Martinique and that is difficult to render in strictly realist terms.

Several hundred pages later, the two characters continue their discussion and Chartier begins to lay out precepts that both characterize his vision of Creole (ethnographic) fiction and that seem uncannily to resemble the formal features of Confiant’s own prose in the novel we are reading. He begins from the perspective of an outside literary observer of Martinique: “L’Européen qui observe votre pays…est tenté de croire qu’il n’y pas de héros possible dans un tel chaos…c’est vrai qu’il est quasiment impossible de décrire un Rastignac créole, par exemple, et de s’attacher cent, deux cents pages durant à ses faits et gestes. Ou alors si on y parvient, c’est au prix d’une…d’une distorsion de la réalité.”¹⁴ Simply to transfer the concept of a Balzacian hero, for instance, to the Caribbean risks distorting a sense of realism that is itself, as we have seen for Chartier, already distended and spilling over its own representative boundaries. Jean provocatively replies that “le nègre” must be nothing but a literary “velléitaire,” then,

¹³ Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 110.
¹⁴ Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 305.
since he cannot constitute a hero strong-willed enough to hold a novel together. Chartier corrects him by replying that “tout un chacun ici est un héros possible de roman. Personne n’est insignifiant car la vie de chacun est comme redoublée par l’effet de grotesque. Il y a comme…comme un excès de vie en chaque être et il suffit de gratter légèrement le vernis du quotidien pour se rendre compte que chacun est le fruit d’une somme incroyable de déraisons, de légendes entremêlées, d’hérédités biologiques et sociales proprement inouïes.” It is here that we come across the most ethnographic of Chartier’s formulations, since any Creole literary “hero” is also in certain respects a cultural construct, the repository of any number of legends, traditions and bloodlines that must necessarily reach beyond Martinique’s insularity because of the histories of colonization, slavery, indentured labor and migration that comprise the cultural present of the island. To write an ordinary Creole character with a view toward representing everyday life is thus to tap into a history and ontology of the cultural present that weighs far too heavily to be treated as mere contextualization and that demands to be dealt with via a literary form capable of approaching and moving beyond “le vernis du quotidien.”

This is precisely what Chartier demands when he announces that “Il faut inventer…une forme neuve, une architecture disparate qui soit en mesure, comment dire…qui puisse épouser chaque méandre de la réalité sans pour autant prétendre l’épuiser. Il faudrait bâtir le roman créole à l’aide de pans inachevés. Donner à lire un

15 Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 305.
Chartier’s ethnographic realism seems only capable of succeeding to the extent that it makes itself known thoroughly to be constructed, a realist *bricolage* composed of disparate patches of the social existence of ordinary human beings whose lives are sewn together in such a way that the seams are always intentionally left showing. This is a realism that is at once up to the task of engaging with everyday life on the island and highly conscious that it cannot claim to totalize Martinique or Creole culture in any simplistically holistic manner.

Incredibly enough, entrenched as he is in his faith in poetry, Monsieur Jean comes around to his literary foil’s mode of thinking, not by deciding to become a literary fieldworker but by realizing that his reticence to share his poetry with those around him stems from his awareness that his poetic rhetoric does not measure up to the “excès de vie” of his compatriots. “[I]l avait toujours su…que célébrer le minéral, le végétal, le ciel et ses couleurs…était une fuite, une démission devant la réalité créole et son cortège de grotesqueries.”

This excess is also what makes for Martinique’s cultural specificity which, as Chartier indicates, can best be captured in an ethnographic sort of prose: “Il venait de comprendre que les héros de la littérature occidentale tels que Lancelot, Werther ou Thérèse Raquin, ne pouvaient pas prendre forme, se corporiser, dans cet univers-là. Ils étaient à la fois trop simples et trop purs, ou plutôt ils étaient supérieurs à leur histoire personnelle tandis que le héros créole, c’est tout le monde et n’importe

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Although by the end of the novel Monsieur Jean ends up refusing to adopt Chartier’s approach, Confiant himself coyly indicates that the very text we are reading constitutes an attempt to represent this new type of literature. He does this by having Monsieur Jean realize that the people with whom he interacts on a daily basis are already Creole literary characters, “tout le monde et n’importe qui”: “C’est Rigobert, le major du Morne Pichevin. Ou Ancincelle Bertrand, sa fiancée adorée. Ou Fils-du-Diable-en-Personne, voire même cet insignifiant d’Eugène Lamour. Chez eux, les péripéties de l’existence, em-blis-facettes d’inventions ou de croyances insensées, pèsent plus lourd que leur misérable petite personne.” Jean’s list of Creole heroes is comprised of none other than characters in the novel, and Confiant’s narrative continually (and even confusedly, at times) jumps between them; the reader cannot help but recognize at this point, along with Monsieur Jean, that the novel itself calls upon all these ordinary heroes as so many subjective perspectives on the events of December, 1959 and that the cohesiveness of Confiant’s story comes from the fact that he refuses to choose from among all these “heroic” points of view. It is at this significant moment in the text, as well, that we become aware of the ways in which the novel has allegorized its own conditions of production via the ongoing debate between Chartier and Monsieur Jean: in addition to the multitude of subjective perspectives comprising the narrative and a valorization of the Creole language (which Chartier refers to as an “élixir verbal”), the text is interspersed

18 Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 315.
19 Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 315.
20 Confiant, L’Allée des Soupirs, 239.
with poems, some of which are Monsieur Jean’s own veneration of nature and others of which appear at the beginning of each of the five sections into which the novel is divided and which explicitly take everyday life in the city as their subject. Thus even though Monsieur Jean assures Chartier near the end of the novel that he will never stray from the poetic word, we as readers come away from the text with the impression that *L’Allée des Soupirs* is precisely the novel he could have written had he taken up Chartier’s theory of Creole fiction and blended it with his own predilection for poetry.

Since we can read *L’Allée des Soupirs* as offering an ethnographic allegory of its own productive process as a novel, the text forces us to consider how Confiant challenges and reworks certain tenets of the genre of ethnographic fiction. For one thing, we are dealing with a work of ethnographic fiction in which the representation of a fieldworker as an organizational perspective has intentionally been effaced. Or, rather, we might say that the idea of fieldwork has been radically dispersed and becomes immanent to the multiplication of subjective perspectives that characterize Confiant’s narrative and from which a representation of Creole culture in Martinique can be derived. Thus fieldwork seems to “occur” in the abrupt shifts in the text from the perspective of, say, Monsieur Jean to that of Ancinelle Bertrand, his much younger love interest, to that of Ziguinote, the (East) Indian gravedigger to that of Henri Salin du Bercy, the de facto head of the *béké* (white Creole) community on the island. Each of these characters has their own life.

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21 We could consider, for instance, the short poem that opens the fifth section of the text: “Ruée de songes au seuil de nos cases / La vie vécue décachète les tôles sur les- / quelles une pluie-fifine tamise / depuis un siècle de temps / l’irritant de nos rires”. This poem is utterly distinct from the rather bland but well constructed examples of Jean’s poetry that are scattered throughout the novel and that deal with mountains, trees and island landscapes more generally. See Confiant, *L’Allée des Soupirs*, 453.
story and their own interaction with the complex racial calculus that makes up Creole modernity, and each can be said to be a “hero” of the text in their own right, following Jacqou Chartier’s narrative logic. Among the other texts under consideration in this project, only Jean Rouch’s *Jaguar* possesses multiple fieldworker-characters, but even this film cannot be said to actually shift between subjective positions in the same meaningful way that Confiant does in his novel; it is only in Confiant’s text that we get a sense of how the multiplication of “heroes” provides us with an idea of the constructedness of everyday social life in Martinique.

Further, in *L’Allée des Soupirs* Confiant’s relationship to his readers is not mediated by a desire to convey a sense of ethnographic contextualization in the same way that Amadou Hampâté Bâ carefully contextualizes scenes and vignettes for his (implicitly Western) audience. Instead, we are simply thrown into the consciousness of his characters and are forced to catch up with social and political events whose import we do not grasp until later in the novel—this makes the first several chapters of the text unexpectedly difficult to read, and Confiant’s decision here reminds us of Michel Leiris’s sudden urge to plunge us into the “real time” of his fieldwork in order to force his readers to be just as at sea, ethnographically, as he was at the time of writing. Thus, for example, in the opening pages of the book we learn that Ancinelle is unable to meet Monsieur Jean at the Allée des Soupirs because she is stuck at a makeshift roadblock constructed by rioters but, like her, we do not necessarily understand why: “La jeune femme ne comprenait pas ce qui se déroulait là sous ses yeux. Elle demeurait plantée, droite comme un bœuf qui vient de boire de l’eau frette, tout-à-faitement incapable de former deux mots.
et quatre paroles sur ses lèvres.”\textsuperscript{22} Confiant makes sure that we as readers are in the same position as his character and even when we do learn that riots have engulfed the city and that they were precipitated by a relatively harmless traffic encounter, we are not provided with any sort of broader cultural contextualization until far later in the novel. We finally learn that the mysterious character named Camarade Angel, who claims to be half-Spanish and half-Martinican and to have fought in the Cuban revolution (but who is really a “mulâtre” Communist and son of a well-to-do Creole father) has been working for the Communist Party and has been writing letters to the Comintern about Martinican social conditions. One late section of the text shifts from Angel’s official letters and his personal diary, and it is in the former documents that we at last get some sense of context: in one letter, dated from May, 1959, he writes that “La plupart des habitations cannières ferment les unes après les autres et sont laissées en friche ou transformées en plantations de bananiers qui emploient cinq fois moins de personnel. L’exode rural est impressionnant. De nouveaux quartiers champignonnent à la périphérie sud de Fort-de-France sur des terrains municipaux envahis par une population interlope.”\textsuperscript{23} This is one of the only instances of straightforward cultural and political economic contextualization that we come across in the novel, although it seems to go a long way toward explaining just how Fort-de-France had become a social powder keg, with an increase in a precarious urban proletariat, ready to explode at the slightest pretext. Confiant wants to prioritize a direct and unmediated reading of the consciousness of his heroes so that we

\textsuperscript{22} Confiant, \textit{L’Allée des Soupirs}, 19.  
\textsuperscript{23} Confiant, \textit{L’Allée des Soupirs}, 410.
experience their own subjective constructions of everyday life before we are given a more conventional and so-called “objective” perspective of the changing social landscape in Fort-de-France that seems to have facilitated the spread of social and political violence in the city. This narrative strategy provides us with a more immediate understanding of the constructedness of social and cultural processes than in any other text I have considered until now, and it would seem that we are far from the friendly and avuncular ethnographic didacticism of Hampâté Bâ, for example.

*L’Allée des Soupirs* is such a significant text both because it stages a debate on Creole literary production that is shot through with the imperatives and thematic concerns of ethnographic fiction and because it actually enacts the terms of this debate in the very form and narrative organization of the text. Additionally, the novel is in explicit conversation with a broader set of questions concerning Caribbean writing that Confiant himself helped to draft in the famous *Éloge de la Créolité* and that offer a provocative theoretical framework for thinking about ethnographic representations of Creole hybridity and métissage in the Francophone Caribbean imaginary. However, *L’Allée des Soupirs* represents an especially striking novel with which to conclude this dissertation because it gestures toward some of the basic tenets of the genre while endeavoring to take them beyond themselves. As a work of ethnographic fiction, Confiant’s novel is particularly concerned with representing fieldwork and the constructedness of everyday cultural processes, for instance, but it does so at the same time that it defamiliarizes them by demonstrating how the cultural specificity of Martinique obliges us to rethink the conceptual and generic tools that we bring to bear on its literature. It also forces us to
recognize that the geographic boundaries of ethnographic fiction, as well as the boundaries of France’s twentieth-century conversation between literature and anthropology, extend to the Atlantic world in provocative ways that prompt us to observe how this conversation is as much transcultural as it is interdisciplinary.
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214


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Biography

Justin Izzo was born in Newton, Massachusetts in 1981. He received his B.A. in French Literature (summa cum laude with honors) from New York University in 2004, his M.A. in Cultural Anthropology from Duke University in 2006 and his Ph.D. in Literature from Duke University in 2011. He was trained as a cultural anthropologist before joining the Program in Literature at Duke and has completed ethnographic fieldwork in Paris and Réunion Island. His French-English translations have appeared in the journals *Radical Philosophy* and *Polygraph* and his article, “Narrative, Contingency, Modernity: Jean Rouch’s *Moi, un Noir,*” is scheduled to appear in 2011 in volume 14, issues 1-2 of the *International Journal of Francophone Studies*. His research has been supported by the Center for European Studies at Duke University, the Graduate School of Duke University, and he was a finalist for a dissertation fieldwork grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research before he joined the Literature Program in 2006.