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John D. Erickson
Louisiana State University

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Writing Double: Politics and The African Narrative of French Expression

Abstract

This essay studies two African narratives of French expression (*Le Temps de Tamango* of Boubacar Diop and *L'Enfant de sable* of Tahar ben Jelloun) to see how they create a discourse of difference that challenges and deconstructs the conventions of the discursive system of French, its signifying practices, and its ideological underpinnings. The tactics of these narratives, which mark them as post-colonial in a strict sense (as opposed to neo-colonial), are productive of a radical other-meaning, a new meaning that "speaks" to the concerns of and problems confronting the non-Western writer.

Keywords

African narratives, French expression, French, *Le Temps de Tamango*, Boubacar Diop, *L'Enfant de sable*, Tahar ben Jelloun, discourse of difference, discourse, difference, deconstructs, discursive system of French, signifying, ideological, post-colonial, neo-colonial, speaks, non-Western writer

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John D. Erickson
Louisiana State University

“La loi implique une contre-loi . . . logée au coeur de la loi même, une loi d’impureté ou un principe de contamination.”

—Jacques Derrida, “La Loi du genre”¹

Underlying any discussion of literature and politics is the assumption that a fundamental relationship between language and experience organizes all forms of literary discourse. In the last two decades, with the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard, this relationship has commanded considerable attention, particularly in terms of power, ideology, and authority.²

The term “politics” derives plausibly from a modification of the Greek *politika*, influenced by the neuter plural of *politikos*, compounded from *politēs* citizen + the suffix *-ikos*, indicating a systematic formulation relating to the root word *politika*. Hence, “politics,” with reference to the city-state and its citizens, connotes in its accepted usage civil governance and, by extension, control. It is cousin to the word “police.”

In the relationship between literature, governance and control, the latter elements take two forms: one in appearance interior to literature, operating through laws of genre, canon, and literary convention; the other, deriving from an ostensibly exteriorized realm relative to literature, that is, from society and culture. Recent theorists have convincingly demonstrated how these two forms—literary governance/control and social/cultural governance/control—are in reality inextricable, for literary form tends to follow or subserve social/cultural forms. They have posited the now widely-accepted idea that the infrastructure of literary systems such as that of the narrative is

indirectly adjudicated by the dominant social ideology and that literary discourse, far from existing in a pure, apolitical state, in observing normative literary structures, complements (unwittingly or not) the systematic exercise of statist power and authority.

The post-colonial author writing in a Western tongue possesses a special relationship with language.³ Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o expresses what has become a commonplace in recent criticism when he says that "By acquiring the thought-processes and values of his adopted [colonial] tongue, he [the African] becomes alienated from the values of his mother tongue, or from the language of the masses."⁴ Ahead of the post-colonial writer attempting to express his or her identity in a language of foreign provenance lies the uncommonly arduous process of liberation through the restructuring or destructuring of the ideological constructs underlying it. The movement towards literary liberation in non-Western societies still controlled by the ponderous forces of ex-colonialist and neo-colonialist governments is the counterpart of the national liberation movements contesting colonialist and neo-colonialist power from El Salvador to Angola to Morocco.

Two tendencies exist in analyzing the political characteristics of literature. Much criticism still directs its attention to the sociopolitical content of the literary text, treating it as one might a political, social document. The economic determinism that has traditionally characterized most Marxist criticism, as Vincent Descombes has noted, unconvincingly seeks to establish a direct causal relationship between textual content and external reality.⁵ The critic viewing the narrative as a text reproducing directly the ideology of the dominant class or overtly contesting that ideology, however, fails to acknowledge the specific role played by literary/linguistic encoding.

Descombes asserts that only upon deeper analysis will we perhaps perceive a structured and structuring relationship, what he calls "une correspondance structurale" ("a structural correspondence," 150), between the literary/novelistic discourse and "la relation de subordination qui, entre toutes les relations possibles de pouvoir d'un groupe sur un autre, définit le règne de la bourgeoisie" ("the subordinate relation that, among all possible power relations of one group over another, defines the reign of the bourgeoisie," *ibid.*) or Western ideology.⁶ He thus posits an isomorphic relationship between literary/novelistic discourse and the domination of social (bourgeois) ideology. The task of the critic would be to discern what Althusser

terms a “causalité structurale” (“structural causality”—*Pour Marx*), whereby the “métaphore signifiante” of Lacan takes on an ideological underlay, in which we can discern a political dimension operative if not dominant.⁷

If this hypothesis of a relation between literary discourse and (bourgeois) ideological domination holds, the bonafide oppositional literary texts will not be for Descombes those directly representing revolutionary struggle, those with a manifest political content, but “ceux qui, d’une façon ou d’une autre, transgresseront ou mettront en danger le code du roman” (“those which, in one way or another, will transgress or threaten the [conventional] novelist code,” 150). Thus, the truly progressive authors for Descombes would be Joyce or Mallarmé, not Zola or Aragon (150).

By these criteria, in discovering the most progressive political narratives in French-language literature of Africa, one should direct one’s attention to those authors who seek to create a double of the traditional narrative, an alternate discourse that lies somewhere below the surface of the narrative and through the latter’s restructuring works to subvert the reigning discourse, an alternative discourse that calls into question the philosophical (logocentric, eurocentric) precepts upon which the narrative rests and that legislate the laws governing and controlling it.

The very nature of language itself, which is differential, favors such a procedure. To remain effective and not be completely marginalized, however, contestatory discourse that seeks to subvert the rules and norms of the dominant discourse must pull up short of rupture and unintelligibility. “So in relation to the norm, its violation strives for the greatest possible distance, but *without* disconnection.”⁸ Even in the case of an effective adversarial discourse, however, the threat of reintegration, reinscription of the terms of the dominant discourse back into the adversarial discourse seeking to violate it, continually exists (Terdiman 69–70).

Such reinscription lends the appearance of inevitability and leads us to conclude that counter-discourses can rarely hold realistic hope for the overthrow of dominant discourse, but must settle instead for a holding action, the preservation of an alternate, minor mode, the continual stirring into consciousness of those under sway of the dominant mode of totalitarian ideology and the arbitrariness of its mechanisms. In the case of the post-colonial writer, a more defined alternative exists in the potential displacement of what Lyotard calls

the truth functional operation upon which the dominant Western discourse rests, which legislates the conditions of “truth” and defines the criteria for judging what is true and what is false, what is acceptable and what unacceptable. The values dictated by such an operation would be replaced by values of non-Western origin.

Accordingly, certain French-speaking African authors have managed to develop counter-tactics that, while operating within the frame of the discourse of power, the magisterial discourse, manipulate or dismantle the ideological structures of that discourse so as to create a discourse of the Other, inflected by a foreign culture with its own dispositions and modes. They have succeeded in creating, as the Moroccan critic-philosopher Abdelkebir Khatibi describes it, a new space for their writing by radically inscribing themselves in the “interval” between identity and difference, i.e., in the space between, on the one hand, the sameness of language that works towards assimilation of all its speakers (Western and non-Western) and, on the other, their radical alterity to the Western culture that has formed the ideological bases of the language:

Cet intervalle est la scène du texte [Khatibi tells us], son enjeu. Dans la littérature maghrébine, un tel intervalle—quand il devient texte et poème—s'impose par son étrangeté radicale, c'est-à-dire une écriture qui cherche ses racines dans une autre langue, dans un dehors absolu.⁹

That “other language,” that discourse of “radical strangeness,” that “absolute outsidersness” mark the work of a few post-colonial writers who, refusing to write in someone else’s terms, have filled the otherwise silent void of non-communication between the West and the non-West with voices from the outside proclaiming their presence as *other*.

In their engagement with the signifying system of the French language, these writers have created a discourse that transcends the limitations that that system imposes on them, particularly in terms of its ideological underpinnings. By the very fact that, as Descombes remarks, “une langue n’a pas l’univocité d’un code, dans lequel la valeur sémantique de chacun des symboles est fixée par la règle” (“a language does not have the univocity of a code, in which the semantic value of each of the symbols is fixed by rules,” 123), such writers can

take and have taken advantage of the space between, the ambiguities possible in language, its inconsistencies, to create a discourse of difference, challenging the conventions of the discursive system of European tongues and their signifying practices. This other discourse, in its radical non-meaning or other-meaning is productive of a new meaning that “speaks” to the concerns of and problems confronting the non-Western person.

With regard to alterity, outsidership, in the particular context of the Greek word *politika* that relates to a Hellenic notion of civil authority, the words of Lyotard, who speaks of the famous adversarial discourses of those rhetoricians who opposed the master logicians in Hellenic times, have special importance:

Or les excentricités de ces fous de Cyniques, de ces Mégariques incultes, de ces clowns les sophistes, ne feront pas école . . . : ils sont tenus enfermés au-dehors comme les esclaves, comme les femmes, comme les barbares, comme les enfants le sont au-dehors de la citoyenneté, de l'hellénité, de l'homosexualité virile. Mais pour eux ce dehors n'est pas un dehors, parce que le dernier lieu, le dernier mot, le référentiel ultime, l'absolu—justement n'ont nulle valeur positionnelle. Pour eux pas de dehors, parce que pas de dedans, pas d'*en-soi*: l'en-soi comme prétendue intériorité tombe immédiatement dans l'extériorité. Il n'y a que de l'extériorité. Ou mieux: il y a de l'extériorité. (“Sur la force des faibles” 6)¹⁰

The stratagem of the writers I shall discuss is precisely to refuse to the statist discourse of the metropole, to dominant Western discourse, all positional value; to reveal it for what it is—not an interior/insider discourse privileged by absolute, universal truths, but a discourse based on arbitrary precepts, that like any other discourse is exterior to the other. What writers like the Sophists, like those I call post-colonial, like many the world over who seek to create a woman's discourse—what these writers hold in common is an effort to bring about a *leveling*, to put all discourses on the same level—the logocentric and the eccentric, the eurocentric and the afrocentric, the patriarchal and the feminine.

To give concreteness to these ideas, I shall look in detail at two African narratives of French expression: *Le Temps de Tamango* (*The*

Time of Tamango, 1981) of the Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop and *L'Enfant de sable* (*The Sandchild*, 1985) of the Moroccan writer Tahar ben Jelloun.¹¹

The general contours of Diop's narrative evolve like this: it is divided into three Parts of varying length (24, 45, 24 pages, respectively), themselves sub-divided into brief chapters. Each Part is followed by a brief pseudo-paratextual section in italics entitled Notes (11, 9, 13 pages, respectively). The three Parts relate events occurring during a period extending from the 1960s through the death of the principal character N'Dongo, a revolutionary and a writer, in 1986—five years after the historical event of the publication of Diop's book in 1981. The Notes consist ostensibly of the notes of the (first-level) Narrator of the main narrative, assembled in July 2063. They are described, and fragments of them are cited in a commentary by an anonymous commentator—second-level narrator, whom I shall hereafter refer to as the Commentator—who some years later is editing them for publication. The notes thus described and parsimoniously cited contain observations by the first-level Narrator on the story he relates in the main narrative. Through his own speculation and recourse to historical and eyewitness accounts (e.g., 42ff), he attempts to reconstruct two series of events: (1) the political struggles from the 1960s through 1986, between the neo-colonialist government of Senegal and a combined syndicalist-anarchist opposition group; (2) the story of Tamango, an eighteenth-century chief of the Wolof tribe, whose name is used as a *nom de guerre* by N'Dongo, and whose historical existence the Narrator strives to authenticate. (Tamango was invented by Prosper Mérimée in the 1829 short story by that name.)

The narrators in Diop's narrative proliferate. The first two chapters of Part 2 (and perhaps chapter 3) introduce what appears to be a third narrator, who recounts events in which he played a role and who is a friend of N'Dongo. In the last chapter (122), we learn that he is called Kader. In Part 2, chapter 5, a conservative economist named Galaye narrates. And in Part 3, Chapter 3, yet another, a fifth narrator, appears, perhaps N'Dongo himself, who picks up the thread of the main narrative (the time of the narration is unclear, though it is contained in the main narrative and appears to be recounted more than 70 years after N'Dongo's death).¹²

In addition to the problematization of the narrator, Diop regularly violates the chronological presentation of events as well as

the coherence of event/story: e.g., the anachronistic appearance of blue jeans, cameras, tape recorders, and the metro in the eighteenth century (137–38), or the appearance of N'Dongo as narrator of a story recounted after his death. Another example of the tendency to render event/story equivocal lies in the pseudo-paratext presented in the Notes, in which political opponents in the twenty-first century seek to rewrite history: the communists reporting Navarro's death as a political assassination (44), the reactionaries as a suicide (45). The Commentator concludes: "il y a bien d'autres sons de cloche" ("there are many other versions," 45). History (consequently versions of "truth") is constantly under revision.

By projecting the story into the twenty-first century, moreover, Diop introduces us, as Mongo Beti says in his preface to *Le Temps de Tamango*, to "une époque où nous avons enfin conquis cette liberté si désirée" ("a time when we have finally conquered that so strongly desired freedom," 8). But strong irony lies in the fact that that "so strongly desired freedom" is, after all, fictional, a fact that underscores the authoritarian rule of a neo-colonialist, Senegalese society contemporaneous with the reader of Diop's novel. Diop's science-fictional narrative does not, however, rely merely on the juxtaposition found in conventional science fiction to make its point but goes further in unmaking the conventional narrative. His techniques include the breaking down of levels of narration: characters like N'Dongo and the multiple narrators move confusedly (but without impingement) from a diegetic level where they participate in the story being told to an intradiegetic level where they both participate as character and function as narrator, to an extradiegetic level where they stand apart from the story as observers. The most curious examples are instances when N'Dongo addresses the Narrator who "lives" a century and a narrative level apart from him: one time N'Dongo makes a remark (set in quotations) regarding the Narrator "qui prétend rendre compte de tous mes faits et gestes" ("who claims to account for all my actions and gestures," 67); another time he comments caustically on the narrator/"author," identified as Kader, who created him, then addresses him directly:

. . . *Le Temps de Tamango*—un titre qui ne veut rien dire—prétend raconter ma vie du dedans. Il est un peu ridicule, mon ami Kader, mais il ne s'en aperçoit pas. . . . Alors comme ça tu t'installes à ta table de travail et tu me fourres dans des situations

impossibles, d'ailleurs, je ne m'appelle pas N'Dongo Thiam, tu le sais parfaitement. N'es-tu pas fatigué de jouer au Narrateur, ce paumé qui, dans certains romans, se tapit derrière les autres pour leur faire raconter n'importe quoi? Quand donc t'apercevas-tu de la vanité de ton entreprise? (123)¹³

(N'Dongo then proceeds to speak of the impossibility of describing reality in its completeness—particularly since he, Kader, does not have the skills of the great Gabriel García Márquez and reality is filled with things that escape meaning. “Au fond c'est trop riche et complexe une vie humaine”[“fundamentally a human life is too rich and complex,” 124]).

We also observe the erosion of character and narrator identity—the most pronounced examples being Léna who appears as both a possible character in the story and a mythic personage from the eighteenth century (120) (“mais peut-être n'existe-t-elle même pas, Léna. . . .”—“but perhaps she does not even exist, this Léna. . . .” 60) and N'Dongo himself, whose “real” existence is called into question.

Diop's narrative, comprising the main story and the Notes, spans a period of some 100 years. Its allusion to Tamango extends further, into a mythical past, thence leads to a fictional (past-) present (the main story) intermixed with “real” historical events, to a fictional future (-present) presenting a fictional commentary on a fictional commentary. By juxtaposing the supposed real with the mythic and the purely imaginary, Diop manages to problematize the very concept of the historically “real” laid down as truth by the magisterial discourse of those in power. The Narrator wonders whether “reality” even exists: “A force de ne jamais être elle-même, elle finit par susciter le doute chez les esprits les mieux intentionnés” (“Because it is never identical with itself, it instills doubt in the best intentioned minds,” 97). By putting the veracity of all events into doubt, by lending equal credence or incredence to conflicting viewpoints and ideologies, the narrative gives the appearance of refusing to take sides, of aiming only for an objective account of what really happened. (The Narrator: “je me suis efforcé de m'en tenir à une relation objective des faits, je n'ai jamais cédé à la tentation de choisir entre le Mal et le Bien”—“I have assiduously adhered to an objective account of things, I have never given in to the temptation of choosing between Good and Evil,” 134.) Precisely through this supposed objectifica-

tion of discourse that parodies the logical discourse of the master and throws into doubt the bases of representation, a situation emerges in which antinomies co-exist. This parodic operation, which masks the narrative's "true" contestatory nature, denies positional value to all metanarratives (narratives of legitimization), and consequently subverts the metanarrative of the magistral discourse itself—the French language of colonial origin.

Through this act of writing double, Diop turns his narrative into an adversarial discourse that puts all discourses—the discourse of the master as well as that of the slave—on the same level. The time of Tamango—the slave who, in Prosper Mérimée's short story, rises against the master of the slave galley and kills him only to find himself unable to steer the ship—stands as an intertextual metaphor for the neo-colonialist failure that substitutes one system for another while using the same instruments of control. Diop replaces this time—the time of the slave—by the time of an alternative discourse, an African discourse, paralleled by the first-level Narrator's rewriting of the story of Tamango into a new narrative heralding Tamango's successful return to Africa and revolt against the slave traffickers. Ultimately the story is about a return to Africa—by means of a new fiction/myth substituted for the old one. As in the post-colonial narrative of Yambo Ouologuem, *Le Devoir de violence*, the story of Africa is rewritten, while the form of that rewriting (the narrative) itself is re-constituted.

The Narrator in fact, in his notes, refers to his search to prove beyond doubt the historical authenticity of Tamango, for on this fact rests the veracity of his entire account (the "real" existence of all the personages of whom he speaks), which would be questioned by his detractors. *But*, the time of Tamango *is* the time of fiction, of the "new" (post-colonial) African fiction, which allows transgression of all temporal as well as spatial bounds, which forswears the prescriptions of conventional narrative that imposes verisimilitude, that revindicates the logic of characters and events in accord with a logocentric tradition foreign to African culture. It is a time created by the act of writing double.

Diop introduces a clever metaphor for the act of writing double. One of N'Dongo's comrades, Mahécor, displays in his room a type of bulletin board covered with a sheet of yellow paper. Mahécor calls it a *défouloir*—"On pouvait y écrire n'importe quoi, tout ce qu'on pensait, même ce qu'on ne pensait pas . . ." ("One was able to write on it

anything at all, everything one might be thinking, even what one might not be thinking . . . ,” 60). The noun *défouloir*—a double neologism coined after the psychological neologism *défouler*—signifies a writing object/medium by means of which one can give free reign to repressed impulses.

The range of this metaphor is subtly and brilliantly extended by the context out of which it arises. Upon seeing the *défouloir*, N'Dongo recalls a large electronic machine he had seen in Helsinki. When people pressed its buttons and it was “plein de cris de révolte ou de haine, on efface et on recommence” (“filled with cries of revolt and hate, they erase it and begin again,” 61). Diop transforms this totalitarian machine, designed to dissipate harmlessly all expressions of opposition, into a metaphor for oppositional narrative. In other words, the reversal or doubling that comes about in the operation of the *défouloir*, an object from which results a writing over, not only presents a metaphor for oppositional discourse but functions with the precise operational tactics that Diop’s own discourse utilizes to unleash repressed impulses of African being.

The *défouloir* calls to mind the “Mystic Writing-Pad” of Freud, a pad on which one writes over, erases, and begins again. The Mystic Pad, Freud notes, “provides not only a receptive surface that can be used over and over again, but also permanent traces of what has been written, like an ordinary paper pad: it solves the problem of combining the two functions by *dividing them between two separate but interrelated component parts or systems*.¹⁴ As Freud points out, it is precisely in this manner that the perceptual apparatus of the mind is structured and functions. So too the oppositional discourse, which can be oppositional only with relation to that which it opposes (as parody can operate only with relation to that which it simulates), comprises a separate and equal discursive system that is interrelated to the linguistic/literary system of the metropole (the Western narrative in French).

In sum, this metaphor and the manner of its elaboration reflect the goal of the post-colonial African writer as oppositionalist to rewrite the language of the oppressor, by effacing all metanarratives and beginning again, so as to replace the ersatz non-African narratives of the African leaders with an African narrative. Write large, it metaphorizes the political desire/act to rid the country of the neo-colonialists who have presided over a pseudo-independence and to begin anew to build an Africa by and for Africans.

Boubacar Boris Diop puts into the mouth of Khaly, the wise elder, the question: “Peut-on se battre contre un appareil politique organisé sans faire de la politique?” (“Can one fight against an organized political system without recourse to politics?” 83). Reformulated, this question poses the dilemma of all oppositional action: can one fight power without becoming corrupted by it? Or can one combat totalitarianism without becoming totalitarian? The answer is conceivably yes, not only because the desire of African post-colonial writers is not simply to seize power but to create an ontologically different discourse, but because of the effective course of action they have chosen: that of the tactician who seeks not a major confrontation against overwhelming forces but small engagements, guerrilla attacks that erode the massed power of a formidable opponent—what Lyotard terms “small instruments of cunning” that produce “discontinuous local effects” (209, 213), what Ross Chambers has compared to the successful military action directed by General Giap against the U.S. forces in Vietnam.¹⁵

King contends that Diop’s novel “transcends a purely political perspective” (87) and she may be right (but not, I believe, for the reasons she gives). We would be justified in viewing Diop’s discourse as a renunciation of politics, or at least of the customary function of political discourse. Lyotard defines that function as “merely a pedagogical function: its very essence consists in bringing about the awareness which will allow us to differentiate true and false statements among the countless utterances we are bombarded with every day. The efficacy of language, in this perspective, is always linked to truthfulness. . . .” A number of injunctions exist that “make truthfulness both the object and the means of discourses” (“On the Strength of the Weak” 206). Such is the basis of the magisterial discourse: it defines what is truth and rejects all that departs from it as untruth, thus invalid, whereas the post-colonial discourse underscores the equality of variant discourses, the arbitrariness of absolute and universal “truths” (the “universal common sense” mentioned by the President [17]), legislated by discourses seeking domination.

The post-colonial discourse turns on a tactic that rejects the binary, that affirms that which is and is not, that is not either/or but both and neither. As such, it represents the historical return of the seventeenth-century concept of *alieniloquium*—other speech, Ironia—, or the rhetorical category of *adoxos* in Hermagoras (the fifth category that stands outside the *doxos*), or even earlier the Sophist

strategy of antilogic (which “consists in causing the same thing to be seen by the same people now as possessing one predicate and now as possessing the opposite or contradictory predicate. . .”). A recent reintroduction of sophistic rhetorical tactics into contemporary theory is found in Lyotard’s concept of paralogism (which shares resemblances with the “bilangue” of Khatibi, a language that refuses to conform either to a Western idiom or an indigenous idiom).¹⁶

Tahar ben Jelloun also refuses positional value to the dominant discourse through a similar use of a double or counter narrative in *L’Enfant de sable*—a use that creates just such an interval as the one theorized by Khatibi. Just as an important non-Western, Latin American intertext informs Diop’s narrative (García Márquez’s *Cien años de soledad*), so ben Jelloun’s narrative takes as one of its informing intertexts a Latin American work: the writings of Jorge Luis Borges. Borges’ fictional counterpart who appears in *L’Enfant de sable* in the guise of the Blind Troubadour, a blindman who “sees,” exemplifies the silent voices of the non-Western other that “speak.” The manner in which ben Jelloun integrates this intertext will serve as a touchstone for my discussion of how he counters the system of traditional narrative by rejecting the reductive ideology that underlies it.

The Blind Troubadour, who joins the storytellers Amar and Salem (Chapter 17) while they meditate on the tale just told by Fatouma, relates in his turn how he has set forth in search of a mysterious Arab woman who visited him in his library in Buenos Aires. His narration, starting out in a fairly straightforward manner, undergoes permutations, shifts in a way that often makes it difficult to comprehend who is speaking, and at times becomes so entangled that it is impossible to straighten it out. Chapter 17 concludes, for example, with the Blind Troubadour describing gifts given him by the mysterious woman, including a dream narrative. The first words of the opening paragraph of Chapter 18 tell us that, “Le rêve était précis et très dense. Je partais à la recherche d’une longue et noire chevelure” (The dream was precise and very dense. I was setting forth in search of long and black tresses,” 190). With these words we embark on a confusing, discontinuous narrative that appears to be a dream narrative (allusions to that effect occur and it has the undeniable stamp of dreamwork), whose central character is a male (masculine agreements in French). But we confront a proliferation of possibilities in trying to identify the progenitor of the dream: the possibility that (1) the Blind Troubadour relates the dream of the

mysterious woman in which he is dreamt by the character, that (2) the dream related is a direct retelling by the Blind Troubadour of his own dream, that (3) he and the mysterious woman are fused, that (4) more than one dream is being alluded to (perhaps both his and hers), that (5) the dream related is her dream of herself, that (6) everything is encompassed within a dream in which the Blind Troubadour dreams of her and her recitation of a dream (on p. 188 he calls her a “*métaphore élaborée dans un rêve*” [“metaphor elaborated in a dream”]), that (7) the dream is a dream by yet a third person: an unknown stranger (on p. 194 the dream narrative breaks off and a new narrative—that comes to be attributable to the Blind Troubadour—begins: “*Amis! Vous avez écouté l'étranger avec la patience de votre hospitalité*” [“Friends! You have heard the stranger with a show of patient hospitality”]), etc.

The dream described in the narrative following the words “I was setting forth” *appears* to be the unknown woman’s dream, the recitation of which she had left him (190), in which the allusions to the subject’s library and a coin she has given to him seem to mark the Blind Troubadour as subject. Who, then, is the “stranger”? Does the Blind Troubadour address himself in the third person? To complicate matters, in the dream account the dreamer-subject has his sight and a “blind man” appears, who is one of the three characters “[qui] faisaient partie de mon histoire en cours” (“[who] participated in my story underway,” 192).

The reader can choose the likely hypothesis by remembering that the Blind Troubadour was formerly called a “stranger,” etc. That hypothesis is, however, but one of several, and the narrative here as elsewhere conjoins, intricates, imbricates the threads of all these possibilities. Its structure resembles that of the medina described in the dream itself: “*La médina se présentait à mes yeux comme un enchevêtrement de lieux—des rues et des places—où tous les miracles étaient possibles*” (“The medina presented itself to my eyes like an entanglement of places—streets and squares—where all miracles were possible,” 192). Like the air space Salman Rushdie describes as a “defining location” at the beginning of *The Satanic Verses*, where anything is possible, the medina serves ben Jelloun as a metaphor for unconfined narrative space—more particularly space for post-colonialist double writing.

The Blind Troubadour’s tale reflects a process integral to the doubling narrative of ben Jelloun and which we have previously seen

in Diop's narrative: the interpenetration of characters/narrators/authors.¹⁷ Several examples of this process may be cited. In the manuscript of Ahmed/Zahra read by Amar, for instance, the former speaks of his/her desire to escape—

Choisir une heure discrète, une route secrète, une lumière douce, un paysage où des êtres aimants, sans passé, sans histoire, seraient assis comme dans ces miniatures persanes où tout paraît merveilleux, en dehors du temps. (157)¹⁸

—his/her desire to make her way through the hedge to join the *vieux conteur* ("old storyteller") on a precious carpet (157–58). Such an interpenetration of separate narrative realms marks one of the important structuring elements that engender ben Jelloun's doubling narrative.

Another instance occurs with the declaration of Fatouma that she lost the "great notebook," tried in vain to reconstitute it, and set out in search of the narrative of her former life, which she found being told by the *conteur* in the great square. The revelation of Fatouma's identity as Ahmed/Zahra introduces the anomaly of a second-level (intradiegetic) narrator simultaneously fulfilling the role of a third-level (metadiegetic) character.

The Blind Troubadour, whose intrusion in the tale takes up some 20 pages, provides the most curious examples of interpenetration of narrative levels in ben Jelloun's text. From the outset the text signals our initiation into a quixotic game by the words of the stranger who joins the storytellers (second-level narrators) Ahmed and Salem: "Le Secret est sacré, mais il n'en est pas moins un peu ridicule" ("The Secret is Sacred but is always somewhat ridiculous," 171), for the stranger draws this sentence word for word from Jorge Luis Borges' short story, "The Sect of the Phoenix," properly enclosing it in quotation marks.¹⁹ Several allusions in the succeeding pages link the Blind Troubadour to the historical Borges: the fact of his blindness and vocation as a writer, his life in Buenos Aires, knowledge of Spanish, livelihood as a librarian, his mention of Borges' character Stephen Albert in "The Garden of Forking Paths" as being one of his characters (he also cites an aphorism taken from the same story, 181), his allusion to an unnamed story from which he cites a passage (Borges' "The Circular Ruins"), the references to the *zahir*, a coin that gives its name to one of Borges' stories, and his preponderant interest in

esoterica (“Je sais . . . que le Zahir est le fond d’un puits à Tetouan, comme il serait, selon Zotenberg, une veine dans le marbre de l’un des mille deux cents piliers à la mosquée de Cordoue”—“I know . . . that the Zahir is the bottom of a well in Tetouan, as well as, according to Zotenberg, a vein running through the marble of one of the 1200 pillars in the mosque at Cordova,” 176). Yet, in ben Jelloun’s anomalistic manner, nothing is ever certain, for we concurrently encounter numerous allusions that problematize the Blind Troubadour’s identity.

In addressing Amar and Salem, he speaks of being in their “story,” in their “conte,” of coming from afar, “d’un autre siècle, versé dans un conte par un autre conte” (“from another century, poured into one story by another story,” 172), of having been “expulsed” from other stories (172). He declares that he is passing between dreams. Places, like dreams, become interchangeable, exist simultaneously and within each other just as the tales within tales. He speaks of their frequenting a café in Marrakech while at the same time finding themselves in the heart of Buenos Aires! During the visit of the unknown woman to his library in the latter city, he tells of having had the sensation of being a character in a book, even of being a book (177–78). The woman (“probably Arab”) who visits him presents a letter of introduction from one of his (Borges’) own characters, Stephen Albert. Her voice recalls to him a voice he had previously heard in a book he had read—the voice of Tawaddud in *A Thousand and One Nights*.

The Blind Troubadour operates on several levels: as a fictional replication of the historical Borges, he functions as one of the second-level (intradiegetic) narrators and is in that function a character in the tale of the first-level (extradiegetic) narrator; he functions also on various metadiegetic levels in his direct interaction with the character of the mysterious (Arab) woman visitor and participation as character in other stories (including his own and *A Thousand and One Nights*). When the Blind Troubadour enters the tale, it commences to fold back on itself. The pivotal figure of the unknown woman visitor, while on the same level as the Blind Troubadour, bears a strong resemblance to the principal character, Zahra, raised in male disguise under the name of Ahmed, for she speaks of like episodes in her life, and the Blind Troubadour has a vision of her tormented father. Moreover, he describes her as “un personnage ou plutôt une énigme, deux visages d’un même être” (“a character or rather an enigma, two

faces of a selfsame being," 178). He later refers to her as being from Morocco (184). We learn at the end of the narrative (taken up again and ended by the *conteur*), however, that Ahmed/Zahra is a fictional representation invented by the *conteur* and adapted to a Moroccan setting to tell the story of an Alexandrian woman's uncle, Bey Ahmed, who had undergone similar experiences (207–08).

Thus, the Blind Troubadour, who brings outside inside, is the device whereby levels of discourse are displaced and characters are put on the same level as their creators. His remark to the effect that he was "[un] prisonnier d'un personnage que j'aurais pu modeler si j'avais séjourné un peu plus longtemps au Maroc ou en Egypte" ("prisoner of a character whom I would have been able to create if I had stayed a little longer in Morocco or in Egypt," 179) is an allusion to the two levels: fiction (first level)—the unknown woman/Bey Ahmed; and fiction of a fiction—Ahmed/Zahra (second level).

The most extreme instance of movement from one narrative level to another occurs when he speaks of himself as coming from and having lived a story whose concluding words he cites—it is a Borges story called "The Circular Ruins." Those words, which he says may help to unravel the enigma that unites him with the other narrators, describe a character, a magician awaiting death, who, desiring to dream into being a man, comes to understand that "lui aussi était une apparence, qu'un autre était en train de le rêver" ("he too was a mere appearance, dreamt by another" [*L'Enfant de sable* 173; Borges, *Labyrinth* 50]). The dream related in chapter 18 leaves us to speculate that the Blind Troubadour may also be dreamt by another, by Zahra, the character of another storyteller, and that he might consequently exist on a still more remote level—a metametametadiegetic level!²⁰

What purpose does this interpenetration of narrative levels serve? The difficult demands exacted upon the reader push illogic and contradiction to the limit. We are refused the possibility of getting a fix on the narrators and characters, of making the story itself intelligible. The Blind Troubadour, referred to repeatedly as the "stranger," of foreign origin, whose tale turns on encounter, loss and unending quest for a mysterious woman of Arabic origin, is homologous with the North African, at once subject of his narratives proper and object-Other (shadow without substance) of the narratives of Western society, recounting his "tale" in the language of another, menaced with the loss of his own culture and autonomous existence.

The description of Ahmed/Zahra by the *conteur* in the opening paragraph of *L'Enfant de sable*—"le voile de chair qui maintenait entre lui et les autres la distance nécessaire" ("the veil of flesh that maintained between him and others the necessary distance")—adumbrates the movement of the narrative, motivates it in a Shklovskian sense, and articulates the development of narrators and characters, just as it valorizes the positive potential of alterity in regard to the North African writer himself, in his resistance to assimilation. The veil of flesh providing distance can also function as a protective covering that allows the North African writer to lead his own existence equidistant from sameness (assimilation) and otherness (alienation), to exist in the face of the power play of Western culture as well as traditional Islamic culture.

Rather than action in *L'Enfant de sable* becoming in Jamesian terms an illustration of character, ben Jelloun's narrators/characters may be viewed as subserving the action, such that we encounter what Tzvetan Todorov has called an a-psychological narrative.²¹ Considered grammatologically, by valorizing the predicate rather than the subject of the verb, by emphasizing intransitive action—even to the extent of threatening a loss of the psychological coherence of character—a-psychological narrative throws into relief the *event* itself. Historical process is replaced by evenemential process. Character becomes thereby "une histoire virtuelle qui est l'histoire de sa vie. Tout nouveau personnage signifie une nouvelle intrigue. Nous sommes dans le royaume des hommes-récits" ("a virtual [potential] story that is the story of his/her life. Every new character signifies a new story. We are in the realm of narrative-men," 82). In *L'Enfant de sable*, which is the story of a woman masquerading as a man, we confront narrative-(wo)man whose loss of psychological coherence is vital to the reversal of roles or rather the leveling of sexual differences. The story of Ahmed/Zahra told by ben Jelloun's succession of characters/narrators exhibits a variable relationship with preceding stories, which are always under revision, just as on the discursive level a process of revision goes unendingly on.

What results from this process of a-psychological narrative, as in *A Thousand and One Nights*, is the enclosure of one story within another, or the phenomenon of embedding and embedded narrative, a consequence of which is, as Todorov reminds us, that characters can migrate from one story to another (84). It is, again, by the reversible inside/outside manoeuvres deriving from this breaking down of narra-

tive levels that ben Jelloun literally and literarily turns inside out the traditional Western narrative and, by extension, the relationship between the West and the non-West. For by the device of reversibility, hierarchies of value, value systems legitimated by totalizing metanarratives, reveal their character in all its naked arbitrariness.

In this regard the search of ben Jelloun, like that of Boubacar Boris Diop, for instability in a post-colonial literary frame resembles Jean-François Lyotard's practice of *paralogism*, in which, as Fredric Jameson terms it, "the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework" of previous science and knowledge. "The rhetoric in which this is conveyed is to be sure one of struggle, conflict, the agonic in a quasi-heroic sense . . . ; the guerrilla war of the marginals, the foreigners, the non-Greeks, against the massive and repressive Order of Aristotle and his successors."²²

In considering the French-speaking African text in light of its adversarial, contestatory nature, my choice of authors like Diop and ben Jelloun is by no means arbitrary, for to be an African writing in French is different from being an African writing African in French. Between the assimilated African writing another's discourse and the African writer consciously contriving to make French a cover and a means for creating his/her African discourse, a qualitative difference exists. It is for such writers that I have reserved the term post-colonial and whose discursive tactics I have described as "writing double." Other such writers who have also been engaged in writing double include, in my mind, Tchicaya U Tam'si, Mongo Beti, Adelkebir Khatibi, Abdelwahab Meddeb, Yambo Ouologuem, and Sony Labou Tansi. These writers, to mention only a few of the more prominent ones, are in the forefront in creating, through an anti-political counterdiscourse, a new interval, a new space which can be called African.

Notes

1. Derrida, "La Loi du genre," 178
2. See in particular Foucault, *L'Ordre du discours* and *Surveiller et punir*. For Lyotard, see "Sur la force" 4-12; "On the Strength 204-14; and *Le Différend*.
3. The terminology used to refer to former African colonies ruled by Western powers has proved uncommonly problematic. The term "third world" is unsatisfactory because it implies a hierarchy in which non-Western nations occupy the bottom rung.

The term connotes inferiority as exemplified in the English usage “third-rate.” On the other hand, the adjective, “francophone,” by identifying French-speaking countries in terms of the French language puts a premium on language and culture of which the source country is metropolitan France. While it underscores the very area that creates a problem for African literary identity, it also glosses over the cultural/linguistic differences between non-Western French speakers and metropolitan France as well as between themselves.

As for the recent tendency to speak of non-Western literatures as emergent literatures, one has only to affirm that such literatures have origins in the distant past (in orature). In what sense can they be said to be “emerging”? Another fairly recent coinage is the term “post-colonial.” Unfortunately, critics have often tended to employ this term indifferently to denote African cultures that have gained nominal independence, though most of them are still dominated by the same forces of political/economic control operative under the colonials, now wielded by neo-colonialist regimes and cultures. Few African nations have wrested a true measure of independence from the West and its surrogates. (See the scorching account of Ziegler, *Main basse sur l’Afrique*)

Hence, I shall use the term “post-colonial” only for those latter cultures or for narratives in which we observe a counter-discourse expressive of a struggle consciously undertaken against the controlling norms of the dominant discourse, whether indigenous or Western. It is not an anomaly, therefore, to find post-colonial narratives by writers such as ben Jelloun from countries ruled by a neo-colonial regime. (Or even different narratives by the self-same author that may be viewed as post-colonial [ben Jelloun’s *L’Enfant de sable*] and neo-colonial, that is, observant of the literary norms of an oppressive culture [his recent *Jour de silence à Tanger*]. This is not the place, however, to pursue this anomaly.)

4. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Homecoming* 16.

5. Descombes, *Le Même et l’autre* 150. See also fn 27, 150. More recent Marxist critics such as Althusser, Jameson, and Eagleton, while preserving the transcendental signifier of Marxism, have observed the indirect (unconscious) infiltration of the political into the literary.

6. Descombes speaks of the literary/novelistic discourse in this regard “in its totality (but not such and such a novel)” (150).

7. Cf. Lacan, *Écrits* 508, also 515, 806.

8. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse* 69.

9. Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* 141. “That interval is the scene of the text, what it puts into play. In Maghrebian literature, such an interval—when it becomes text and poem—imposes itself through its radical strangeness, i.e., through writing that seeks its roots in another language, in an absolute outsideness.”

10. “Now the eccentricities of these mad Cynics, of these wild Megarites, of these Sophist clowns, will constitute no school . . . : they are exteriorized like slaves, like

women, like barbarians, like children who are excluded from the citizenry, from Hellenity, from virile homosexuality. But for them this outside is not an outside, because the last place, the last word, the ultimate referent, the absolute—have, to be sure, no positional value. For them, there is no outside, because there is no inside, no *en-soi*: the *en-soi* as pretended interiority immediately falls into exteriority. There is only exteriority. Or better, there is exteriority.”

11. Diop, *Le Temps de Tamango* and ben Jelloun, *L'Enfant de sable*.

12. See Adèle King's helpful discussion of narrative perspectives in “*Le Temps de Tamango*,” 79–80. King is only one of two critics who, to my knowledge, have studied Diop's work. The other critic is Prof. George Lang of the University of Alberta, who, in a paper presented at a Modern Language Association convention, compared the work of Diop and Hubert Aquin.

13. “. . . *Le Temps de Tamango*—a title that means nothing—claims to recount my life from within. He's a little ridiculous, my friend Kader, but he doesn't realize it. Just like that you seat yourself at your working desk and thrust me into impossible situations. What's more, my name isn't N'Dongo Thiam, you know perfectly well. Aren't you tired of playing Narrator, that bum who, in certain novels, cowers behind other people to make them say no matter what? When will you see the vanity of your efforts?”

14. Freud, “A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’” 230.

15. Chambers, *Room to Manoeuver*.

16. Françoise Douay-Soublin has kindly called to my attention the rhetorical categories of Hermagoras, contained in fragments preserved in Saint Augustine's *Rhetorica*. We have observed the recent reentry into contemporary speech of the term *doxa* to denote common opinion, for which Roland Barthes must be credited. (He uses the term in several of his works.) I cite in my text Kerford's description of “antilogic,” in “Dialectic, antilogic and eristic,” *The Sophist Movement*. Lyotard's ideas of paralogism are found throughout his work. Finally, Khatibi's notion of the “bilangue” is perhaps best exemplified in “Bilinguisme et littérature” in *Maghreb pluriel* and in his novel *L'Amour bilingue*.

17. A second process in *L'Enfant de sable* integral to the author's tactic/technique of doubling conventional narrative is the folding into itself of the narrative, whereby the external becomes internal, the outside/inside reversed. See my forthcoming article, “Veiled Woman and Veiled Narrative in Tahar ben Jelloun's *Sandchild*.”

18. “To choose a discreet hour, a secret road, a soft light, a countryside where lovers, without past, without history, would be seated as in those Persian miniatures where everything appears marvelous, outside time.”

19. Borges, “The Sect of the Phoenix,” 103. This volume also contains the other stories to which ben Jelloun alludes: “The Garden of Forking Paths,” “The Circular Ruins,” and “The Zahir.” English translations in my text of phrases rummaged by ben Jelloun from Borges' stories are drawn from the *New Directions* volume.

20. For the terminology describing the operation of this interpenetration or movement from one level of narrative to another, see Genette's description of *métalepses*, particularly the *métalepse de l'auteur* (authorial metalepsis) where we see "[une] intrusion du narrateur ou du narrataire extradiégétique dans l'univers diégétique (ou de personnages diégétiques dans un univers métadiégétique, etc.), ou inversement, comme chez Cortázar"—"[an] intrusion of the narrator or of the extradiegetic narrataire into a diegetic universe (or of diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or, inversely, as in the case of Cortázar." Genette, *Figures III*, 244.

21. Todorov, "Les Hommes récits," in *Poétique*, 78–79.

22. Jameson, Foreword to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* xix. Lyotard would probably dispute (or refine) Jameson's use of the term "marginal."

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