

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: REWRITING THE LETTER: WOMEN AND EPISTOLARY FORMS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE AFRICAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

Chinenye I. Okparanta, Doctor of Philosophy, 2013

Directed by: Dr. Zita Nunes, Associate Professor  
Director, Center for Literary and Comparative Studies

This project advances an argument about the significance of epistolarity and other such personal forms of writing in African novels for research in African literary studies and African feminist literary criticism. Although not a widespread form as yet, the epistolary novel is increasingly taken up by writers to represent marginalized figures who are often silenced or unable to tell their stories—most frequently women, the undereducated or underemployed members of society, or those who refuse to live by the mandates of their social world. My project suggests a new frame through which to consider this form in order to contribute to existing work in postcolonial studies on political and social identities, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. I argue that African epistolary novels subvert a range of generic conventions in the process of rendering visible the perspectives of those too-often marginalized by social stigma.

The subject of this project is a selection of postcolonial African epistolary novels in English that use letter-writing protagonists to interrogate national, gender, and sexual identity. The critical impulse of this work is the study of the particular techniques used in the chosen works to represent the coming-to-self of the letter-writing characters. In this

dissertation, I extend discussion about epistolary forms in African literature in English by exploring the messages they make visible about individual processes of self-making and the place of unconventional identities and intimacies in the post-independence nation. By emphasizing narrative moments that show the letter-writing protagonist coming to consciousness about her or his “unconventional” identity, these epistolary novels highlight the value of reading through the multiple layers of mediation that impact identity. These narratives of intimacy and desire are ultimately about knowing and embracing one’s self enough to present that self to another. The African epistolary novel negotiates the tension between what is expected of the individual and what the individual ultimately chooses to do or become; by so doing, it introduces new possibilities for postcolonial identity and simultaneously broadens the critical frame through which African literature in English is read.

This project introduces the possibility of an African literary epistolary genre, heretofore largely unexplored in the field of African literary studies, but one which may provide innovative paradigms for critical work in African fiction and African feminist literary studies. Epistolarity or the study of epistolary forms in African fiction need not be limited to epistles or letters but can include related narrative forms, for example, journals, e-mails, or blog entries that similarly disturb the general narrative stream, testifying to personal revolutions by the characters that correspond to formal revolutions by the authors. To underscore the value of these formal revolutions in African literature, Abiola Irele’s work has examined the unique way the oral tradition and writing are bridged in African literature. He emphasizes the value of orality, for example, through his analysis of the function of proverbs, chants, and other forms of “speaking” in African literature.

The “speaking” passages interrupt the flow of the narrative in the same way letters do, emphasizing moments of self-declaration for the speaking or writing individuals. Attention to these narrative moments, Irele suggests, ensures that African literary criticism embraces a critical perspective informed by the specific nuances of African cultures and history. Evan Mwangi has similarly drawn attention to formal innovations in African literatures, spotlighting the significance of metafiction, whereby East African novels write back to one another as a way of de-emphasizing the West’s role in the production of African literature (i.e., African novels writing for and to themselves, rather than for or to a Western readership). Mwangi further suggests that the recurrence of these “writing back” patterns in African literature, specifically East African in his analysis, is a way to encode subversive messages about the restrictive practices of various African nations. Metafiction, Mwangi argues, challenges the ‘masterfictions’ of traditional African societies that violently control individual expression.

A similar type of literary challenge is made in the novels I consider in upcoming chapters, which contain letters that disrupt the novel’s narrative sequence. I analyze those moments of narrative split that occur through the appearance of letters and consider what they signify for the involved characters. I read those fractures or narrative disruptions as pivotal moments of self-declaration and as signals of the writing characters’ process of self-making. Inspired by these and other works that engage with formal experimentation in African literature, my project invites African feminist literary critics and African literary scholars to evaluate epistolary forms that appear in post-independence novels as a way to map changing postcolonial identities. This epistolary framework illuminates messages advanced about enduring restrictions in the postcolonial states against

marginalized populations—for example, against women who create intimacy with women, men who create intimacy with men, women who reject “traditional” African female identities, and men who do the same. Indeed, such attention to the forms and functions of African literatures, specifically narratives that emphasize identity, may over time have transformative extra-literary social and political impact.

REWRITING THE LETTER:  
WOMEN AND EPISTOLARY FORMS IN POST-INDEPENDENCE  
AFRICAN FICTION IN ENGLISH

By

Chinenye Ifeoma Okparanta

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2013

Advisory Committee:  
Professor Zita Nunes, Chair  
Professor Sangeeta Ray  
Professor Merle Collins  
Professor Randy Ontiveros  
Professor Richard Price

© Copyright by  
Chinenye Ifeoma Okparanta  
2013

## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to family, friends, mentors, and teachers that have supported and encouraged this journey. You are too many to list, but I quietly salute you all. A special thanks to those who read chapter drafts and offered constructive feedback.

Special thanks to Merle Collins, Sangeeta Ray, Randy Ontiveros, and Richard Price for your excitement about the topic and the possibilities of this project.

My most heartfelt thanks to my dissertation director, Zita Nunes, for your gracious and unwavering support. Your guidance has been invaluable. Thank you for seeing me to the finish line.

## Table of Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION: Reading Epistolary Forms in African Fiction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
EPISTOLARITY IN AFRICAN LITERATURE .....	15
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	21
CHAPTERS and CRITICAL FRAMEWORK.....	28
<b>CHAPTER 1_Performing Literacy, (Re)Writing Class: Negotiations of Identity in Cyprian Ekwensi's <i>Jagua Nana</i> .....</b>	<b>39</b>
SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE LETTER .....	45
AFRICAN FEMALE TYPES IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION.....	53
LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CLASS .....	67
PERFORMING CLASS.....	74
<b>CHAPTER 2_Engendering the Letter: Form and Function in Mariama Bâ's <i>So Long a Letter</i> .....</b>	<b>78</b>
ROMANTIC EPISTOLARY TRADITION.....	79
RELIGION, CLASS, AND GENDER.....	83
NEW APPROACHES TO THE FORM.....	85
DESIRE, INTIMACY, AND GENDER IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA .....	105
<b>CHAPTER 3_From Where Do I Write?: Shifting Locations and Traveling Letters in Ama Ata Aidoo's <i>Our Sister Killjoy</i>.....</b>	<b>109</b>
FORM & FUNCTION OF THE POSTCOLONIAL LETTER.....	113
READING POSTCOLONIAL INTIMACIES .....	116
NAMES AND NAMING .....	121
TRAVELING WHILE POSTCOLONIAL .....	123
HEART OF DARKNESS: A REWRITING .....	128
THE JOURNEY HOME .....	132
<b>Chapter 4_TECHNOLOGY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE.....</b>	<b>140</b>
419 LETTERS RECEIVED .....	147



419 LETTERS AND POSTCOLONIAL REMAKING.....	156
GLOBALIZING INTIMACIES .....	159
POST-SCRIPT.....	169
<b>CONCLUSION_Private Selves, Public Others, and the Place of Technology .....</b>	<b>171</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>190</b>
<b>APPENDIX: 419 LETTERS .....</b>	<b>177</b>
EXAMPLE 1 .....	177
EXAMPLE 2 .....	178
EXAMPLE 3 .....	179
EXAMPLE 4 .....	180
EXAMPLE 5 .....	181
EXAMPLE 6 .....	182
EXAMPLE 7 .....	184
EXAMPLE 8 .....	185
EXAMPLE 9 .....	187
EXAMPLE 10 .....	188

## INTRODUCTION: Reading Epistolary Forms in African Fiction

This dissertation addresses a selection of postcolonial African epistolary novels in English that use letter-writing protagonists to examine issues of gender and sexual identity. These explorations of identity challenge representations of the postcolonial nation-state by calling attention to its constitutive rejection of non-normative intimacies. Through their protagonists, the novels undermine the notion that the stability of the postcolonial African nation can be maintained by strict adherence to rules regarding gender and sexual identity. The novels incorporating epistolary forms use journals, diaries, personal notebooks, letters, and other such forms of intimate writing to make statements about the interior, evolving worlds of the writing characters. These narrative patterns, which are often innovative, tell stories about characters who see themselves as untraditional and who defy normative social expectations. I maintain that the epistolary novel in Africa is increasingly becoming an effective means for writers to represent the experiences of marginalized figures and highlight their processes of self-definition as national, transnational, and diasporic subjects. With this project, I analyze the African literary epistolary genre, heretofore largely unexplored in the field of African literary studies, and propose that it merits extended examination by scholars of African fiction and African feminist literary studies. I propose that the most productive context for understanding the epistolary form in African literature and its significance is one that engages with the formal experimentation carried out by narratives in one way or another propelled by letters. Epistolarity in African fiction testifies to personal revolutions by the characters and formal revolutions by the authors in the interest of imagining a more inclusive future for their postcolonial nations.

A few works of African literary criticism have examined formal innovations comparable to the epistolary one in African literature. In *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*, Irele examines the unique way the oral tradition and writing are bridged. He emphasizes the value of orality, for example, through his analysis of the function of proverbs, chants, and other forms of “speaking” in African literature. The “speaking” passages interrupt the flow of the narrative in the same way letters do, emphasizing moments of self-declaration for the speaking or writing individuals. Such attention, he argues, ensures that African literary criticism embraces a perspective informed by the specific nuances of African cultures and history. Evan Mwangi has similarly drawn attention to formal innovations in African literatures, spotlighting the significance of metafiction in East African novels, whereby they write back to one another as a way of de-emphasizing the West’s role in the production of African literature (i.e., African novels writing for and to themselves, rather than for or to a Western readership). Mwangi further suggests that the recurrence of these “writing back” patterns in African literature, specifically East African in his analysis, is a way to encode subversive messages about the restrictive practices of various African nations. Metafiction, he argues, challenges the ‘masterfictions’ of traditional, imperial African societies that violently control individual expression. A similar type of literary challenge is made in the novels I consider in upcoming chapters, which contain letters that disrupt the novel’s narrative sequence. I analyze those moments of narrative split that occur through the appearance of letters and consider what they signify for the involved characters. I read those fractures or narrative disruptions as pivotal moments of self-declaration and as signals of the writing characters’ process of self-making. Ato

Quayson's "Self-Writing and Existential Alienation in African Literature: Achebe's *Arrow of God*" provides useful vocabulary and a valuable conceptual framework for assessing these narrative- and self-splittings. The alienation or psychic split he examines in his essay is ultimately productive in that it allows the postcolonial individual to be acutely attuned to his surroundings and exterior world and therefore also tuned into possibilities for self-making or self-revision. Quayson's work recognizes the merits of "writing" as a process of "activating" the mind and ties that into a discussion of the "dynamic processes by which individuals come to experience themselves as possessing a certain status, or as being the focus of particular concern, or as capable of acting as responsible agents..." (32). Generally speaking, however, the scholarship on African postcolonial identity has tended to revolve around thematic content rather than formal innovations in the novels. My work scrutinizes the interconnectedness of form and theme by considering the work epistolary interruptions do in a selection of African novels in English.

A number of postcolonial African novels in English present epistolary frames or fragments, which I define here as moments in which the protagonists are writing, discovering, or reading journals, diaries, personal notebooks, letters, e-mail, and blogs. These moments in the narratives provide access to the interior, evolving worlds of the writing characters and tell stories about those characters who see themselves as products of their social worlds and agents, in some measure, of necessary social change. The form becomes as significant as the content of these epistolary forms because the literature that has historically excluded or marginalized these characters is necessarily now altered to accommodate them. I therefore examine the formal techniques being used to develop

thematic content in a selection of postcolonial African novels. I introduce these novels as general examples of epistolarity. In subsequent chapters I give attention to four additional novels that specifically employ letters to advance their respective themes about postcolonial identity remakings. The novels incorporate male and female characters of different educational and class levels and present their experiences of or with writing. These novels highlight characters' attempts to come to consciousness about their social and personal worlds through the act of writing or through an intimate exploration of another's writing. In presenting these literary journeys of self-making, the authors offer an extra-literary statement about the multiple perspectives that need to be acknowledged in the building of a more inclusive postcolonial nation, one that is increasingly informed by diasporic migrations and transnational movements.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007) includes in its narrative a subplot centered on Ugwu, a houseboy who ultimately learns to read and write in order to tell the story of Nigeria's Biafran war. Ugwu wrests control over this telling from the white British researcher, Richard, who comes to visit the country but is unsure what to write about or how to begin to tell the country's story. Interestingly, Ugwu's stories are initially penned on scraps of paper that he finds laying about his house. His writing therefore emerges in the novel as fragments, insertions into the primary narrative that fracture or disturb the coherence of that larger story. His voice emerges as bursts, intentional attempts to rupture the national whole and assert or define a place within it. Ugwu's writing in the novel introduces questions of class and social standing that are integral to these epistolary efforts to re-imagine the postcolonial nation. Ugwu is initially compelled to begin writing his country's story after reading Frederick Douglass's

autobiography of a slave becoming a man. Exposure to someone else's writing, in this case Douglass's memoir, creates for Ugwu a model of self-making inspired by the process of writing. The presentation in the novel of Ugwu's interjections on scraps of paper, pieces of an incomplete document, emphasize the significance of reading epistolary form in African novels. Helen Oyeyemi's *The Icarus Girl* (2005) offers another example of writing-inspired self-discovery. The young protagonist, Jessamy, frequently writes haikus and spends hours rewriting sections of her favorite classic novels; she alters, for example, plot lines in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. The haikus in their form are small, short, explosive narrative interjections. A haiku begins without preamble and ends just as suddenly, creating a jagged uncohesive quality when introduced into the narrative. For Jessamy, these haikus and rewritings of novels are manifestations of her sense of cultural and national unease. She is a young biracial girl born to a white English father and a black Nigerian mother; she feels neither at home in England nor in the UK and consequently struggles to determine who she is in both contexts. Hers is an example of a postcolonial fracturing that engages with themes related to migration, immigrant identity, and diaspora. Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Chris Abani's *Graceland* (2004), Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2004), Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1990), J. Nozipo Maraire's *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter* (1997), Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen* (2001), and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not* (2006) are all texts that similarly present the protagonists' writing-propelled self-explorations. Oyono's *Houseboy* and Maraire's *Zenzele* specifically engage the traditional epistolary form of a letter or diary-letter: Toundi's story is told through his diary entries, and *Zenzele*'s is told through

recollections captured in a letter to her daughter. In both novels, the protagonists challenge their place in the postcolonial state. Toundi's writing allows him to imagine himself as something other than a servant, and Zenzele's letter questions her place as a woman in the postcolonial nation of Zimbabwe and simultaneously urges her daughter to return and help transform the social and gender politics of their country. Where Toundi's writing emerges as snapshots, interjections in the narrative that draw attention to the dissonance between his former sense of self and his new, emerging identity, Zenzele's narrative is written in the form of a single, long letter to her daughter that traces the nation's trajectory alongside her personal journey. The form of the former mirrors the moments of clarity that Toundi experiences over the course of his life. Zenzele's letter, by contrast, illuminates her long, ongoing process of self-exploration and self-discovery.

In my reading of these and the subsequent epistolary novels, I respond to Obi Nwakanma's call in "Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel" for increased attention to the ways novelists present characters who attempt to reconfigure the nation. "In very important ways," Nwakanma writes, "the difference between the first-generation Igbo novelists and the contemporary generation, in their shaping of the Nigerian tradition of the novel, is that an earlier generation of Igbo novelists found in the use of the literary tool a means to celebrate and establish the nation, while in the current phase...the novel is used to question the meaning of nation and national belonging" (13). He argues that the earlier generation of Nigerian and African novelists adopted the standard narrative patterns that had been established by a Western literary world. These earlier patterns were not so much about deconstructing the nation as they were about reifying it and reasserting

one's place in and of it. I argue that the contemporary epistolary novel disturbs the national status quo and question its various restrictions and expectations. These novels challenge the symbolic borders that delimit personal identity by challenging standard or conventional narrative forms. That is to say, the letters fracture the "borders" or form of the narratives in a way that parallels their novel's fracturing of limiting constructions of the nation. This summary of the novel's role in challenging the nation and one's place in it is at the heart of my project's analysis of epistolary forms. While Nwakanma's focus is exclusively on Nigeria and on Nigerian novelists, his analysis of how contemporary Nigerian novels are engaged in a project of transforming the postcolonial African space, socially and politically, provides a meaningful thread that I continue in this work.

However, where Nwakanma suggests that the novel—and the new themes being explored in contemporary African fiction—is in itself the tool used to challenge the nation's "once-patriarchal dimension of order and authority," my critical focus is on the specific narrative techniques that are being used in these attempts to deconstruct and ultimately reconstruct a more inclusive nation. Drawing from these and other works that engage with formal experimentation as represented by epistolarity in African literature, my project invites African feminist literary critics and African literary scholars to further evaluate epistolary forms that appear in post-independence novels as a way to map changing postcolonial identities.

This project is propelled by the identification and analysis of specific epistolary techniques used in chosen works to represent the coming-to-self of the letter-writing characters. I attempt to extend discussion about epistolary forms in African literature in English by exploring the messages they make visible about processes of self-making and



the place of unconventional identities and intimacies in the post-independence nation. This focus highlights the authors' investment in reimagining the postcolonial nation, dismantling rigid regulations about personal identity, and extending the limits of social acceptability. The novels I address center on individuals who reject traditional social roles and instead construct their own. In these novels, the reshaping of one's self involves redefining the limits of one's sexuality, an aspect of identity that is at the core of much contention. Debates rage over the question of desire and intimacy: Who is the object of one's desire? With whom does one elect to create sexual or emotional intimacy? And with whom does one establish an emotional bond? The African epistolary work negotiates the tension between what is expected of the individual and who the individual ultimately chooses to be and love. Through its exploration of such literary negotiations of identity, this project argues that epistolarity and other such personal forms of writing in African novels provide a strategy to represent marginalized figures who are often silenced or unable to tell their stories. This focus is relevant to future research in African literary studies and African feminist literary criticism because it initiates a new frame through which to consider letter writing in African literary texts with an eye to what it may add to existing work on postcolonial political and social identities. African novels that engage the epistolary form enact subversive writing that creates a space for the perspectives of segments of society that often are rendered invisible. Epistolary forms, by skirting that line between subversiveness (i.e., something illicit) and openness/exposure (i.e., the public nature of the sent letter), powerfully challenge the relegation of unsanctioned types of identities to hidden, private spaces. The place of women as represented in African literature has historically been one such site of marginalization and

silencing. African women have traditionally been written about by African writers, both male and female, in conformity to very narrow parameters of femaleness. They have been subservient to male figures, traditional in behavior, respectful of custom, and dutiful inhabitants of the domestic sphere. It is perhaps in response to such circumscribed portrayals that a number of recent African writers have embraced the challenge of expanding conceptions of African womanhood through their literary depictions—effectively rewriting postcolonial narratives to expand on the stories written about African women.<sup>1</sup> Ideally, these new representations provide their respective societies with alternative conceptions and ideas about gendered identity. I argue that by embedding letter-writing women in their narratives, these authors acknowledge the importance of this sort of rewriting. This literary revisionism involves not just reimagining the possibilities available to the postcolonial woman in terms of public life, but also recasting the scope of her personal, intimate, and sexual life.

The importance of redressing inaccuracies or limitations of female representation in African literature is championed in a number of recent essays. Jane Bryce, in “‘Half and Half Children’: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel,” writes that the “forms of feminine identity evident in earlier women’s writing...have given way to a challenging reconfiguration of national realities in which the feminine is neither essentialized and mythologized nor marginalized...” (49–50). She posits that contemporary Nigerian women writers are doing a fairer job of representing female identity in their novels than their predecessors or male contemporaries ever did. While I agree with the positive bent of Bryce’s statement, I argue in this work that the project of

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the issues, as presented in literatures of the African diaspora, that affect black women, see *Arms Akimbo*, a thoughtful and informative collection of essays on the topic. Liddell, Janice L., and Yakini Belinda Kemp. Eds. *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999.

demarginalizing those female identities remains unfinished and, in addition, the full dimensions of “female identity” remain largely unexplored in African feminist studies and African literary criticism. Only recently has African literature even begun to introduce narratives of lesbian and same-sex desire, which highlights the stigma associated with those intimacies. Current literary representations of African female intimacies have as their backdrop a history of violation, white fantasies, hypersexualized blackness, racism and conventions established by earlier novels that avoid direct discussion of sex and sexuality from the perspectives of African women. I assert that black sexuality has generally been categorized as somehow aberrant and illegitimate, historically stigmatized, and only intermittently the subject of any recuperative scholarship.<sup>2</sup> Intimacy has only infrequently been presented as something occurring outside the context of traditional and social mores in favor of a focus on communal forms of interaction. African female identity has been regarded, in the colonial and postcolonial periods, through a very contracted, taboo-heavy lens. Indeed, one speaks of the “African” woman or man as an undifferentiated type. In light of such narrow presentations of African sexuality, in what specific ways is the new female distinguished from the old? Is it enough to say that she rejects motherhood or chooses to be gainfully employed outside the home? Is it even enough to say that she is no longer restricted to wifehood? What of her emotional life, her sexual life, her intimate world? These are the questions my project on epistolarity seeks to begin answering. What are the epistolary heroines demanding from their nation? They are not simply asking to be allowed a place in it; they are demanding a much more radical type of national belonging. Through my readings of

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on ideas and (mis)conceptions surrounding black female sexuality, see Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005.

selected novels, I trace the evolution of the postcolonial woman's identity in fiction. I suggest that narratives emphasizing the bonds between female characters highlight transgressive desire and intimacy in the postcolonial African landscape in order to introduce new perspectives on African sexuality and initiate new paradigms for reading female identity in African literature with the goal of advancing new extra-literary possibilities for social, gender, and sexual identities.

I pay particular attention to homosexuality in the works I examine because same-sex desire is a particularly powerful ground on which the tension between age-old tradition and social change is playing out. In "Homoeroticism and the Failure of African Feminism in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*," Glen Retief reads Armah's novel with an attention to its homoerotic whispers and forcefully asserts the importance of scholarly attention to similar narratives of same-sex intimacy: "Same-sex eroticism and intimacy are no longer topics that can be ignored in African studies, and the queer critical project as it applies to the African novel can no longer be delayed" (63). Retief associates the thematic prevalence of excrement in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* with the moral decay of a nation unwilling to allow progress. He reads homoerotic subtext in the presentation of the main character, Man, as a further commentary on how the nation's insistence on normativity—and its preservation of the status quo—produces excrement, filth, degradation, and further corruption. In essence, compulsory heteronormativity creates a society of repression and psychic damage. The African epistolary novels I consider similarly engage with the despondence inspired by a nation unwilling to redefine its social mores. Importantly, Retief stresses the value of unearthing the narrative layers that introduce new sexual identities and intimacies in

Africa. Retief's insistence on the need for discussion about "same-sex eroticism and intimacy" in African Studies recognizes the role these emerging questions of identity will play in helping to reconfigure postcolonial Africa. This critical project is important on two fronts: the thematic content of the literary works and its relevance to national politics. In 2012, for example, global attention was focused on a number of outspoken African leaders, Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Yahya Jammeh (Gambia), Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Liberia), and Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), to name a few, who offered their perspectives on same sex intimacies. Homosexuality was held responsible for singlehandedly destroying traditional African family values—whatever those were to begin with. Same sex desire represented a threat to the patriarchy's regulation of sexuality and a threat to patriarchal control, in general, over social and personal identity. My focus on narratives of same-sex intimacy comes at a historical moment in which laws and policies that either condemn or sanction sexuality and identity are being decided.<sup>3</sup> It is important, then, to examine at this time preexisting literary conversation on the topic that challenges the common-sense assumptions about "African" intimacy, tradition, nationhood, and the future.

One of my objectives in this work is to shed light on narrative strategies of introducing unconventional intimacies in order to explore the formal and political stakes of representing non-normative desire and sexuality in African literature. I pay particular attention to the "silences, omissions, and hints," as Retief terms them, that underscore attempts to represent unsanctioned intimacies and to champion the social and political value of speaking out against oppressive dictates (Retief 64). It is indeed the case in

---

<sup>3</sup> For more on anti-gay laws in African countries: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/24/africa-anti-gay-laws\\_n\\_3491565.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/24/africa-anti-gay-laws_n_3491565.html)

Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and in the novels I examine in my chapters that same-sex attraction is veiled, seldom explicitly explored by the novels or novelists. These stories are often subtexts, occasionally conveyed through what is hinted at in letters but never at the surface of the framing narrative. Examination of these narrative nuances is vital to expanding the contours of female identity and reconfiguring African national spaces in a way that allows for these evolving identities. By reading letters as vehicles for covert and overt desire, I observe the manner in which African novels hinting at the possibilities of same-sex desire and postcolonial female identity use the epistolary form to carry out these interrogations of intimacy. The intimacies that occur in the private world of the writing characters reverberate in their respective societies because they begin to destabilize entrenched ideas about how people can or should live. By intimacy, I do not refer simply to relationships of sexual desire, same-sex or otherwise, but to characters' implicit and explicit rejection of social and political systems that attempt to restrictively identify and classify them. The African epistolary work negotiates that tension between the expectations imposed on the individual and how the individual ultimately chooses to respond—in essence, the dissonance between what society's implicit and explicit rules are, and whether or not the individual chooses to abide by them. As a reflection of that, the epistolary work engages boundaries—the separation between the letter writer and the letter reader, and the intimacy of the letter content and the public nature of its deployment. The letters I examine in this work narrate private experiences that have public impact. I engage epistolarity to explore how identities—female, sexual, postcolonial—are evolving in the face of a changing nation and to propose an approach that is concerned as much with the formal elements of

African fiction as with the thematic content. An attention to innovative ways of storytelling in African fiction by women will shed needed light and add necessary nuance to discussions of the issues that affect postcolonial individuals. By emphasizing narrative moments that allow the letter-writing protagonist to begin questioning her identity, the authors highlight the journey of repositioning one's self in relation to the nation.

The letter is ostensibly meant to establish a closed circle of communication. It bridges distances to unite the writer and the recipient(s), as Janet Gurkin Altman asserts in *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. It is rarely primarily public, but threatens at any moment to rupture that separation between the private and public spheres. There is also another layer to take into account—that the letter appears in the novel (or the letter is a novel) as a means of direct communication with an implied reader *and* an external reader. The external reader is in certain respects as much a part of the epistolary transaction as is the internal or implied reader. Where the external reader of a traditional novel is perceived to exist only outside the text, removed and at a distance from the narrative, the external reader of an epistolary novel is aligned with the internal reader and brought into the immediacy of the letter's content. The epistolary novel does not keep its audience at bay, but rather draws them into the drama, especially when the intended recipient or implied reader is not seen or heard, and the external epistolary reader reads the letter as if being addressed directly. This is a unique way in which the epistolary novel plays with the separation of private and public space. This skirting of the line between the public and the private reflects the separation between the fictional world created in the novel and the public world invoked; the epistolary novel exists as a private document based in fiction, but it is published in a public context, and in many cases, addresses public concerns. In

this respect, the epistolary novel relays its message to a larger society through its communication with the external reader. The female protagonists in these works are using a form that suggests secrecy to dismantle public norms about what is and is not appropriate.

## EPISTOLARITY IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

African literary scholars generally concur that until recently insufficient attention has been paid to the contributions of African women writers and to the literary representations of female identity by African male writers. In “The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction” (1988), Florence Stratton took issue with the invisibility of women in conventional surveys of African literary history: “...[D]espite a marked increase in critical attention, writing by African women has been generally undervalued by critics and sometimes grossly maligned” (144). This lack of attention ignored or underestimated the thematic and formal experiments enacted in works of fiction by African women. Indeed, very little was said by Bâ’s contemporaries about the significance of her chosen epistolary form. It was consigned, as was much of the early writing done by women, to the margins of literary history. Charles R. Larson’s *The Emergence of African Fiction* (1971) made negligible mention of African women writers or about the absence of the female voice in the growing African literary corpus. Eustace Palmer’s 1972 *An Introduction to the African Novel* described itself as “A Critical Study of Twelve Books by Chinua Achebe, James Ngugi, Camara Laye, Elechi Amadi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Mongo Beti, and Gabriel Okara,” the fathers of African literature. The work was notably void of women writers, and no statement was offered to explain this absence. Instead, Palmer’s work compared the African male writers with



their European male counterparts, implicitly reinforcing a male-centered literary value system.

One of the first collections devoted to African woman-authored novels, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (1981), examines how the writers structurally and formally developed their themes. This survey of the most influential female African writers in the years following independence edited by Lloyd W. Brown devotes a chapter each to Buchi Emecheta, Efuia Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, and Bessie Head and examines the contributions of these writers to African literature, not only in their progressive content and provocative themes, but also in the form and design of their novels. He writes that [the women writers] “...managed to develop their themes in such a way that their chosen forms are inseparable from the manner in which they perceive women and society in general” (12–13). Brown discusses the short story form for which Aidoo is known, Sutherland’s contribution to playwriting, and Nwapa’s mastery of the novel form. Even in this foundational work on women’s writing in Africa, however, nothing is said about Aidoo’s fractured narrative style or the role that the epistolary plays in her writing as a strategic device for imagining new forms of identity and intimacy for women. Bâ, in *So Long a Letter*, one of the earliest examples of the epistolary form in African literature, advances an innovative exploration of gender, cultural, and sexual identity through her use of a single open(-ended) letter. Written and published originally in French, the English translation has had an important impact on the teaching of and scholarship on African fiction in English. This contribution to African literature and African literary studies was, however, largely ignored. Over time, critics and literary historians who had initially neglected African women’s writing slowly began to give

more attention to formal evolutions in African women's writing. This project continues that work by analyzing the significance of epistolary moments or sequences in an exemplary group of African post-independence novels in English. The works of fiction I consider offer fractured narrative sequences that mirror the initial psychic condition of the writing characters.

“The first generation of novelists were witnesses, describing to the world the often harsh but coherent and sizable realities of the colonial impact, using the traditional realistic form...” Fredric Michelman writes in “The West African Novel Since 1911,” but later novels were “...the beginning of a new direction for the African novel—the movement inwards....no longer finding guideposts outside themselves, [they] began to explore the interior landscape of their personages” (43). Various forms were found to represent this movement inward by those who felt the traditional novel form was synonymous with a patriarchal culture that had actively silenced and dismissed them. The new forms of personal writing that emerged were testaments to the struggle by those on the margins to articulate their experiences in unique ways. Ama Ata Aidoo's novel, which I discuss in chapter 3, is a testament, in its content and form, to that nontraditional mode of writing. She disavows temporal linearity and narrative sequence; her novels incorporate multiple points of view and different forms and voices of storytelling. The epistolary section includes a letter that is never mailed out and therefore never receives a reply. Markedly, the African works incorporating letters have generally chosen not to include the responses, and so, the narratives present only the primary letter. This pattern is significant because it foregoes the exchange of correspondence that would usually create a private transaction between two or more letter-writing individuals and suggests

the open-ended and unresolved nature of the explorations. The postcolonial African novelists creating this pattern are rewriting the epistolary tradition by suggesting that the letter is an open/ongoing process of reflection and self-creation for the letter-writing individual. The pattern emphasizes the individual's quest for self-determination and the importance of overcoming the psychic trauma of colonialism by remaking the self. The epistolary novel in Africa involves the establishing of one's identity and then a "writing" or reaching out to another individual in a gesture of self-assertion. There is agency in this act of writing, and there is an acknowledgement of the possibilities for self-redefinition—an especially crucial factor for the women protagonists engaged in this writerly self-making process. The epistolary form in African literature was revolutionary in its inception and continues to be a powerfully charged form in the contemporary texts making use of it. It appears in novels in which protagonists are at odds with the precepts of their societies and are struggling to change that world by first changing their identities within it.

My attention in this project to the experiences of women within the postcolonial nation is an attempt to understand their exclusion, and, further, to understand the demands that women, both the ones creating narratives that highlight the uneven nature of those gendered experiences and the characters themselves who articulate the social inequities they are faced with, are making of the new nation. I focus in this dissertation on epistolary novels that feature letter-writing heroines by both female and male authors, not to discount the valuable re-imaginings of male identity in the postcolonial space offered by both male and female African writers, but to effect a redemptive reading of female identity in African literature and further make visible the importance of this

gendered aspect of postcolonial remaking. Generally, women have been excluded from conceptions of the postcolonial nation, relegated to second-class citizenship, or worshipped as sexual or semi-mythical symbolic figures. The reality of being a postcolonial woman is too often subsumed by the question of postcolonial masculinity. Recognizing the need for a reworking of postcolonial gender, African writers are increasingly redefining not only malehood, but also womanhood in their novels. Indeed, some epistolary male protagonists are also helping to shape the emergent African epistolary tradition. It is worthwhile to consider the voice male authors lend to this tradition in order to identify possible avenues for ongoing interrogation of gender, specifically male, in the African postcolony. I briefly discuss two of these texts in order to highlight the dissonances and points of convergence between the way men and women are treated in relation to the form. In Helon Habila's *Measuring Time* (2007) set in the 1970s in a small Nigerian village, letters mark turning points in the main character's life. The novel tells the story of twin brothers, Mamo and LaMamo. Mamo is afflicted with sickle cell disease and therefore weaker than his twin brother. The first series of letters in the novel is sent from LaMamo, who has joined the rebels fighting against a corrupt government and is making his way from country to country on the continent, to his brother Mamo, who because of his health has remained at home in Keti. These letters are written and sent from one African country to another, and not from Africa to a Western country or a Western country to Africa, as is the case in the other novels I examine that feature female letter-writers. It would seem that whereas a female letter-writer must engage with other national spaces to understand what it means to have her own space within the nation, the male letter-writer is always already positioned within the national

context. LaMamo's letters to Mamo show a gradual concretizing of his place in Africa and as an African. Another instance in *Measuring Time* in which letters effect a shift in the protagonist's life is when Mamo receives two letters, one from a London magazine that rejects his submission, and another from a Ugandan journal that wants to publish his work. The acceptance of Mamo's essay by the second journal is an affirmation of his contribution to a national narrative because the submission is in fact a revisionist essay in which he writes about Keti, or, rather, addresses "misrepresentations by foreign historians" (175). That the submission is rejected by the London magazine but accepted by the Ugandan journal cements Mamo's voice as part of and representative of the nation in a way we do not see in the representations of the female letter writers. In the novels I explore in the following chapters, the women characters are writing from private spaces, writing against and about their exclusion; the male writers are writing from public spaces, writing for and about their nation. This gendered inequality inspires the women letter writers to articulate their discontent and begin defining the contours of a new female-inclusive nation.

Isidore Okpewho's *Call Me By My Rightful Name* (2004) is another male-authored novel that features a male letter writer. In the novel, Otis Hampton is a 21-year old African-American student who lives in Boston, a city rife with racial unrest in the 1960s. Otis is uninterested in black politics or in exploring his racial identity in America until he starts experiencing spasms whenever he hears the sound of African drums and a language, likely Yoruba, spoken by Africans. Otis goes to Africa to discover what his connection is to the continent. The third part of the novel is narrated entirely through letters that Otis writes to his parents back home and to his girlfriend, Norma.

Exemplifying the pattern of partial correspondence that I argue is characteristic of African epistolarity, the novel never provides the letters that Otis's parents or girlfriend write back to him. In the epistolary section of the novel, the reader is able to witness Otis's blossoming sense of himself and his coming to an understanding of his African ancestry. Significantly, Otis's sense of his African identity is solidified by his presence in Nigeria. He is within the nation and afforded an unquestioned place in it. His letters home are confirmations of that increasing sense of belonging. Whereas the female epistle-writers I consider wrestle with an enduring sense of unbelonging, the male characters—heterosexual, traditional, unreluctant producers and products of a patriarchal system—are portrayed as fluidly embedded within their nations.

#### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the years following independence in formerly colonized African countries, a period roughly beginning in the 1950s to 1960s, authors writing in English about the effect of colonization have found numerous ways of representing the trauma of the colonial experience. The depiction of writing characters has been one of those ways. In a number of African novels in English or English translation that have been taken up by international scholars, authors have delved into the question of and quest for identity—the negotiation and re-definition of it in the aftermath of colonialism—as explored through portrayals of literate and non-literate/writing and non-writing characters. Contemporary African novels in English or English translation use writing to reflect the social transformations that have taken and continue to take place in post-independence years. Letters are unique in their ability to call attention to the acts of reading and writing that often lead the reading and writing individuals to resurrect and revisit the past. As

such, letters are a particularly eloquent representation of the postcolonial moment as it wrestles with historical legacy and future potential.<sup>4</sup> The displays of and interactions with letter writing discussed in this project underscore the complex psychological, social, and political terrain of postcolonial personhood. The history of journals, diaries, and similar forms of self-narrativizing in the African context encourages an analysis of these questions of writing-defined identity. In the colonial and newly post-independence context, writing was initially a practice imposed on the colonized as a form of control and regulation. Karin Barber's, *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* provides historical context for literacy and explores how colonial systems of education purposefully used access to literacy to create division and promote separation among the colonized. The social transformations occurring in those historical moments created in individuals “. . . a desire to find forms in which to express the ideas and emotions . . . emerging in new social circumstances” (Barber 3). Awareness of one's changing social identity created a need for ways to express that evolution. Initially, diary and journal writing was a feature of regulatory school and church systems, but later writing was in many ways a refuge from the world that the individuals inhabited. The ability to write provided an opportunity to reconceptualize the self.

Writing, by its very nature, is a self-reflexive gesture; this is particularly true for diary, journal, letter, and other forms of writing that demand a consciousness of and help create one's self. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), writing becomes a way for Ugwu to order his mental and social world, make sense of his experiences of war, and establish

---

<sup>4</sup> Anne McClintock examines the challenges of delineating historical time to specifically capture the post of the colonial period. For that discussion, see McClintock, Anne. “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-colonialism.’” *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 628-636.

control over his own existence. It becomes a process of real introspection and eventual self-making. A lowly peasant-turned-houseboy wrests control of the telling of his country's narrative from the better educated individuals around him, initiating a significant revision of postcolonial identity. If Bâ and Aidoo, members of the educated upper class adopted epistolarity as a tool for advancing women's rights in the African postcolony, then writing by a character like Ugwu is an important reminder of the attention to class that must also attend all efforts to remake the postcolony. Political histories of postcolonial countries have traditionally been narrated by the educated male members of the society. As Stratton observes, "...the national subject is designated as male" (Stratton, 51). But such totalizing constructions of African male identity have not allowed for an investigation of the disparate groups based on class, for example, that would render null the notion of an African male type. The educated elites have been granted control of the nation and assumed to be representative of the "African." This idea of homogenous, undifferentiated male postcolonial figures is meaningfully fractured by Ugwu and other writing characters such as Chris Abani's Elvis, Helon Habila's Lomba, and Ferdinand Oyono's Toundi, all of whom represent different social and class levels.

To further explore the significance of letters and similar forms of personal writing in the postcolonial African context, I here discuss the Christian civilizing missions that introduced those forms of writing in colonial Africa. Barber writes of the birth of personal writing in Africa: "...reading and writing were emphasized to encourage individual self-reflection (59). In some mission areas in colonial Yorubaland, all agents working for the Church Missionary Society (CMS) were "expected to write journals, of which extracts were sent to the London headquarters" (59). These excerpts were used to



monitor the thoughts and interior worlds of the colonial mission subjects. The irony of the project lay in the fact that while the missionaries purportedly encouraged self-awareness and introspection, the surveillance of the agents' writings was a means of tracking those inner thoughts to ensure that they did not exceed an appropriate level of "self-awareness." Literacy was ostensibly a means of creating a private sphere in which individuals could come to a clearer sense of themselves and their place in the nation, but the breaching of that private domain through the colonial administrators' inspection of the letters, journals and diaries undermined that project. The private transaction of writing as communication between self to self was violated by the fact that, at least initially, these personal writings were monitored by missionaries. Writing in European languages was initially imposed and used as a tool to train a group that would abide by colonial policies and be responsible for carrying out and sustaining those policies in the absence of colonial administrators. As Barber states of writing, it was used ". . . sparingly and strategically under a regime where literacy was experienced as an instrument of oppression more than a means of liberation" (5). The writings were therefore about performance before they were about a more authentic presentation of the self, a fact which informs the way I read the letters in the selected novels.

In the colonial period, access to literacy was, then, a process of losing, rather than gaining, a clearer sense of one's identity. Tied as literacy and writing were to emulating the colonizers, it inherently required a psychic schism within the colonially trained individual. The early research on postcolonial psychology spearheaded by Albert Memmi and Frantz Fanon provides the vocabulary for understanding the postcolonial individual. Early in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Memmi observes the nature of the colonizer-

colonized relationship: "...[The colonized] endeavor to resemble the colonizer in the frank hope that he may cease to consider them different from him" (15). Rather than adding on elements of identity to become more like the colonizer, the colonized attempts to shed the self that has been deemed inferior. He is in fact accustomed to being characterized in terms of what he is not, rather than what he is. Memmi writes, "The mechanism of this remolding of the colonized is revealing in itself. It consists, in the first place, of a series of negations" (83). The colonized "is not" and is denied at the outset any opportunity to determine or define what he "is." Homi Bhabha in "Of Mimicry and Man" further dissects that relationship of the colonized to his colonizer noting that ". . . the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference." This process is characterized by the desire of the colonized to be like the colonizer but, in attempting to claim this identity, always constitutes a self that is "almost the same, but not quite" (126). Every attempt to be *like* the colonizer reinforces the hierarchy of that relationship, establishing the superiority of the colonizer and the lack or "partial presence" of the colonial subject. Bhabha describes the colonized or formerly colonized as constantly engaged in a process of trying to be un-othered.

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, a seminal postcolonial novel, captures this ambivalence of the colonial and postcolonial subject. With the two main characters, Tambudzai and Nyasha, the difficulty of negotiating this position as *not* the colonial, but *of* the colonial—that is, not considered equal to the colonizers, but educated and brought up with colonial influences and therefore positioned at the intersection of lack and semi-privilege—is laid bare. Nyasha's inability to manage this ambivalence results in her

eating disorder—her rejection of the colonial influences she has imbibed. Tambu’s negotiation of her unique position results in a figurative splitting between the two different “identities” to which she has claim. In the narratives I examine, the characters similarly grapple with identities informed as much by the colonial experience as by the country’s newfound independence. Determining one’s place in a country still beleaguered by historical trauma creates anxiety for the characters—anxiety about their place in society, and what this place means in terms of financial status, gender, and sexual identity. We see writing shift from performance of exteriority to one of interiority, from an act of externalizing an invented, “appropriate” self to a reality of inhabiting a re-invented internal one. The act of letter writing initiates a psychic break or a self-splitting in the writing character who begins to understand herself as the subject in charge of representing, as well as the object to be represented; in essence, letter writing facilitates an encounter with self that inspires the writing character to envision new possibilities for her future. We witness these characters as they engage in an exploration of how best to represent the self and, also, which self to present through the letter—i.e., how will I be read? Who is the “me” that will be identified? The letter writing form is significant for allowing the sort of self-analysis that even a novel with first-person narration would not. Where a first-person novel invites the reader into the mind and thoughts of the narrator/speaker, a letter invites not only the reader but the writing-character herself into the narration. The act of writing implies a continuous process of creating; in this sense, the letter writer is involved in her own self-(re)presentation. The process of letter-writing in the novels is one of self-consciousness and, to a certain extent, anxiety about the possibilities of self-re-creation. Symbolically and actually, the introduction of writing in

the texts signals moments in which the characters begin to move beyond socially designated roles. Although the letters written are still products created within the regulative discourses dictating the characters' worlds, the content, and in certain cases the context in which the letter is written, speaks to a conscious (emergent) process of self-determination.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon explores the colonized's unconscious desire to be like the oppressor and thereby define some sort of identity. Since the colonized individual's claim to an authentic identity has been damaged by the colonial experience, an identity is imposed upon him. Of the process of being externally categorized, and of having no access to a self before the colonized self that has been assigned, Fanon poignantly writes:

I arrive slowly in the world; sudden emergences are no longer my habit. I crawl along. The white gaze, the only valid one, is already dissecting me. I am *fixed*. Once their microtomes are sharpened, the Whites objectively cut sections of my reality. I have been betrayed. I sense, in this white gaze that it's the arrival not of a new man, but of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro, in fact! (95).

The process of being "fixed" by the white gaze is a much-explored theme in feminist scholarship and in race studies<sup>5</sup>. This gaze that fixes the scrutinized in a category, rather

---

<sup>5</sup> For more on the origins of "male gaze" theory, see Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.

Anthony C. Alessandrini thoughtfully revisits Fanon's discussion of the white colonial gaze in "Fanon Now: Singularity and Solidarity." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 7, November 2011.

than allowing for any real process of identification, is the burden under which the postcolonial labors; it emphasizes the need for self-defining experiences. There is no “new man,” but rather a new “type of man,” a category lacking specificity or individuality, a collective identity that continues to shadow postcolonial individuals. Because men are the presumed victims of this postcolonial plight, the condition of women is frequently overlooked. Consequently, the epistles written by our female protagonists are doing double duty, allowing the women to (re)discover and (re)define themselves in a new cultural context—a nation discovering itself in the aftermath of shared historical trauma—and also speak out against a patriarchal culture that continues to oppress or neglect them. The process of letter writing allows for self-scrutiny that precedes a heightened consciousness about one’s self and the presentation of that self in written form. The postcolonial novels incorporating this letter-writing theme stage the obstacles faced by women engaged in this struggle of rediscovery, and the letter makes visible the intention to see and present the self. It shows how writing affords the individual a glimpse of a past that must be overcome, and it shows how the process of introspection through writing initiates transformation.

## CHAPTERS and CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

This project focuses on a selection of post-independence novels that explore characters’ processes of self-making through the act of letter writing. The novels provocatively crystallize different approaches to imagining the post-independence

---

Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall’s *Visual Culture: The Reader* provides illuminating analyses of black identification in relation to the white gaze. (London: Sage Publications, 1999). See also Ella Shohat’s “Imaging Terra Incognita: The Disciplinary Gaze of Empire.” *Public culture Spring*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 41–70. Corinn Columpar’s “The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory” offers a cross-disciplinary and textured critique of the white, male gaze (*Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2002), 25-44).

African nation. Those literary divergences make Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961), Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981 \*English translation), Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1978), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You By Chance* (2009), and Sefi Atta's short story, "Yahoo Yahoo" (2010) especially rewarding to consider as epistolary texts that make use of letters in different ways, but advance related themes. I read the novels in relation to other African novels that feature female protagonists to scrutinize the challenge epistolary novels pose to traditional representations of African women in literature.

Ekwensi's novel incorporates a seemingly insignificant epistolary moment that I argue changes the course of the protagonist's life and also introduces issues concerning postcolonial class and gender. The very seeming insignificance makes it possible for me to make more powerfully my argument for the value of reading this novel with an eye to what the letter signifies for the female protagonist's sexual identity. *Jagua Nana*, a minor work by a so-far minor author, some would argue, is temporally closest to the colonial moment and very poignantly documents the anxious transformations that were occurring in that period. Unlike the other authors included in this work, Ekwensi is considered a "popular" as opposed to "literary" writer and has to some extent been dismissed by African literary critics based on the assumptions inherent in that categorization. I hope to address such arbitrary assessments of value by showing the worthwhile perspective that Ekwensi's work lends to the field of African literature. Since one objective of this project is to discuss the trajectory of an underappreciated genre of African literature, it is worthwhile to consider the contributions of popular as well as literary writers. A discussion of the intersection of class and writing in African literature and the African

postcolony should also, to a certain extent, engage with the “class” of the works produced. Bâ and Aidoo were educated members of their society and so their works were readily (eventually) classified as valuable literary works. Ekwensi’s work emerged during a period characterized by despair, a time in which the works produced were responses to the bleak national condition.<sup>6</sup> The themes that come up in Ekwensi’s novel are eloquent reminders of that particular period and perfectly set the stage for the changing (or still existing) concerns addressed in subsequent African novels. Additionally, as a male writer, Ekwensi’s treatment of women in his fiction offers a textured lead-in to this project’s interrogation of female identity in works of African literature. My first chapter offers a close reading of *Jagua Nana* to develop an argument around letter writing as a performance of social aspiration. Concerns about national identity and what it meant to be a citizen of a newly liberated country inform the content of the novel. Performance of national identity at the state level inflects performance of social identity at the individual level, and it is that consequent anxiety about fashioning the self that permeates Ekwensi’s work. Jagua, Ekwensi’s titular character, is anxious about her place in society. She is anxious about finding a “proper” mate and achieving social legitimacy. Jagua’s anxiety about legitimacy is in part fueled by her rejection of “traditional” African womanhood, the intimacy between her and a fellow prostitute named Rosa, and the place of her unconventional sexuality in a society that strictly monitors female desire. That Jagua is a prostitute, unmarried, and without child makes her an especially complex character, coming as she does at a historical moment in which these factors made definitive statements about a woman. Jagua is anxious about how society views her, and the novel

---

<sup>6</sup> See Florence Stratton’s discussion of the development of African literature and the exclusion of women from surveys of African literature in “The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction.” *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Special Issue on Women’s Writing (Summer 1988), 143-169.

documents her attempt to create a public persona, one that initially involves disavowing emotional authenticity, to earn respect. Ultimately, Jagua creates a life for herself that rejects socially sanctioned scripts in favor of her own conception of female identity.

My second chapter examines a canonical work of African literature, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1989). I discuss Bâ's novel in English translation and its message about letter writing as a self-reflexive gesture that allows the writing character to redefine her identity. Bâ's novel is widely taught and analyzed in translation, a fact which warrants an approach that 1) reads it in relation to other works in the African literature in English canon, and 2) considers its importance and influence on writers in English. Bâ's protagonist, Ramatoulaye, is wedged in by patriarchal tradition, Islamic culture, French colonial legacy, and her own personal sense of obligation to honor those myriad inheritances. She is unwilling or unprepared to fully reject the social script she has been assigned. The narrative depicts Ramatoulaye's emotional, intimate connection with her best friend, Aissatou, hinting at the significance of that strong bond. The message it conveys about Aissatou as a stand-in for Ramatoulaye's estranged husband, about the strength of the enduring bond between the women, and about the romantic possibilities of such an intimacy is only covertly explored. As is perhaps fitting for a private letter, the full import of Ramatoulaye's emotional life is never fully revealed in her epistle. But the novel closes on a hopeful note: it signals to the possibilities for Ramatoulaye's self-remaking represented by her evolving views on male-female relationships and her progressive lessons to her daughters. And at the end, Ramatoulaye is ready to welcome Aissatou, the woman to whom she writes her letter.



In my third chapter, I discuss the use of a missive in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1978) to examine a woman's evolving sense of the limits of social acceptability. Aidoo's female protagonist, Sissie, refuses to entertain expectations about how she should behave as an African woman. She travels internationally, and her experiences in the locations to which she journeys allow her to explore her identity as an African woman. During Sissie's trip to Germany, she confronts questions about her sexuality initiated by interactions with a German woman named Marija, particularly through a key scene in which Marija kisses Sissie. The scene invites an examination of traditional female roles and sexual identity, which I consider in depth in the chapter. Further, Sissie's trip to London provides her with an opportunity to come to a deeper understanding of race (i.e., the experience of being black) in Europe, as well as the trauma of colonialism that lingers in a number of the colonized who have immigrated to England for work or education. These varied experiences outside her home country of Ghana provide the critical distance that allows Sissie to assess her identity as a post-independence Ghanaian citizen. It further provides the impetus for her return home to begin correcting the issues of gender-based inequality that she perceives as partly responsible for the lack of progress in her country. Aidoo's novel has received significant critical attention over the years. However, my reading of the work with an attention to epistolarity offers a new frame through which to examine it. By reading the novel within that framework, the messages about evolving female identities become more apparent, as do the challenges to postcolonial African progress presented by adherence to "traditional" or outmoded rules dictating social and political identities.

My fourth chapter reads the blogs in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* as a recent, digital media-based iteration of the epistolary form in African literature in English. The blogs in the narrative interject the thoughts of the writing protagonist and allow her to scrutinize questions tied to her race in America as well as her identity as a Nigerian citizen living in the United States. The insertion of the blogs into the main narrative creates the same sort of narrative disruption that I identify as characteristic of African epistolary novels in English. The blog form in this novel offers an introduction to my discussion of diasporic and global identities, which have become a related part of conversations about postcolonial identity. The chapter goes on to scrutinize the contemporary phenomenon of 419 letters as a thought-provoking and complex byproduct of globalization and related negotiations of identity. The novelistic letters I address in the first three chapters involve attempts to discover authentic identities. Although these attempts may include occasional acts of dissembling or moments of inauthenticity, they are ultimately geared towards discovering a true self. By contrast, the letters in this fourth chapter are, at least superficially, tools used to conceal truth and undermine legitimacy. However, an examination of example 419 letters collected over the course of several months, combined with insight gained from research on the 419 phenomenon and a close reading of a novel and a short story—Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You By Chance* and Sefi Atta's "Yahoo Yahoo"—dedicated to the topic, allowed me to broaden my perspective on the practice. Thus informed, I propose that 419 letters may in fact be attempts to rewrite or redefine social standing. I further argue that the phenomenon is not solely about the desire for wealth, but about the transformation of class position that would attend such wealth. I suggest in this chapter that the

convergence of writing and technology, coupled with discourses of wealth and privilege, testify to an emergent postcolonial African class-consciousness. Accordingly, these e-mail scams are tied to negotiations of social worth. In addition to the thematic importance of the letters, I propose that the epistolary focus in African literature is particularly salient in this historical moment in which, despite societies being more digital than ever before, are also intensely text focused. Technology allows for the manipulation of literacy in ways previously unseen. As I discuss in the chapter, increased access to computers and the Internet in some African countries has made the cyber dissemination of 419 scam letters more prevalent. But what it means in terms of authentic bonds and connections between people, or authentic presentations of self, remains to be seen. This chapter, in its powerful engagement of themes related to social standing, performance, and identity, allows us to begin answering those questions.

Reading canonical works through the lens of epistolarity, this research on existing examples of African epistolarity is at once a recognition of its critical merit and an invitation of sorts to critics of African literature to give more attention to questions of form. Much literary criticism of African woman-authored works has emphasized the thematic content or has limited itself to a consideration of how few African women writers exist and how few are included in the African literary corpus. African women writers and their literary works must be distanced from discussions about deficiencies or lack and linked to discourses centered on innovative narrative techniques. The number of African women writers has greatly increased over the years, and the ways in which they tell their stories continue to evolve. These subtle shifts in the structures and contents of

the narratives should be the focus of energized criticism, as should the transformations in the female identities represented.

My dissertation draws on William Decker's discussion of the systems of representation inherent in epistolarity practices in order to examine letter writing as a means of reinforcing self and subjective identity. In *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications*, Decker poses the following questions, "What did letter-writers feel that they could say in letters but nowhere else? What manner of narrative arose in the exchange of letters? What do letters tell us about what formerly it meant for people to be present and absent to one another? What possibilities for the creation of human relationship were (and for some people still are) promoted by a practice that negotiates distance between persons through the comparatively slow material exchange of written texts?" (4). Although Decker's work largely focuses on correspondence in nineteenth-century America, the questions the text raises about what letters stand in for, how to read epistolary patterns, and the evolution of epistolary practices are suggestive for my project. Additionally, Decker's work takes on the task of surveying technological advancements that have altered mediums of correspondence. The letter in African fiction is particularly salient now, in light of technological advances that are transforming the way communication occurs. As emerging forms of technology will undoubtedly continue to inform the way we understand the "where from, where to, and how" of communication, I use my final chapter on 419 e-mail scams to discuss e-mail as a modernized form of correspondence and to begin fleshing out its implications for our understanding of identity. If technology is meant to facilitate access and communication between widely dispersed populations, then the identifiable trope of letter writing in

contemporary fiction provides an interesting counterpoint to that. Letter writing speaks to the need for more personal engagements and human interactions; it suggests an investment in retaining the authentic bounds between people that foster growth and self-discovery. Although I identify letters without responses as a hallmark of the African epistolary genre, this pattern does not discount the value of the intended letter recipient or the connection between letter writer and addressee. The letters are written as personal gestures of self-assertion, but they are addressed to a particular reader as an important gesture of self-projection. The epistles are, in spite of not receiving responses, testaments to processes of self-making and attempts at creating new paradigms of intimacy. The challenges technology presents to establishing those connections and maintaining intimate bonds will be further explored as its role in Africa grows and produces more discernible effects.

Janet Gurkin's *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* is a seminal study of epistolarity in fiction. Drawing on French epistolary novels, Gurkin builds a case for "the letter's potential as artistic form and narrative vehicle." What Gurkin's research states explicitly and I work to further establish in my project is that the *act* of letter writing propels the psychological action in the novels. Whereas Gurkin's work focuses on epistolarity as a form out of which literary interpretations can be made, I hone in on the actual events that precipitate letter writing, how the process of writing—before and after—alters the self-perception and self-presentation of the writing character. Indeed, a country's political situation informs the content of the missive. I therefore devote attention to the particularities of each country's sociopolitical drama, specifically as it effects the psychic state and psychological condition of the writing character. To explore

the contours of the letter writing woman's psychological condition, I draw on Carole B. Davies' *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the subject*, which provides a theoretical framework for gender as inflected by race and issues of postcolonial migration. "If following Judith Butler, the category of woman is one of performance of gender, then the category Black woman, or woman of color, exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on the particular, cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist," then gender can also be seen as a site of mimicry, particularly in light of concerted colonial efforts to train and create "proper men and women." Social identity has been strictly regulated in colonial and postcolonial Africa; propriety is fundamental to the colonial and postcolonial individual's public presentation of self—what is acceptable and what is not are defined within very strict parameters. Davies' discussion of the performative nature of the Black woman's identity is applicable to my analysis of the women letter writers in my novels who are products of different class situations and social milieus. Although Davies's work does not touch on the specific act of letter writing, the attention to writing as a symbolic and meaningful process tied to identity creation provides a useful touchstone for my project.

African literary criticism and African feminist literary criticism are steadily growing fields. With this study I hope to extend discussion of the myriad ways in which novelists attempt to define or redefine narrative form, and how their characters are similarly involved in defining and redefining themselves. I suggest that attention to writing characters opens up room for future/further analysis of identity formation, a critical aspect of postcolonial and gender studies. The novels I examine highlight the act

of letter writing as inextricably linked to one's development and awareness of social identity. Letter writers in these works are attempting to make sense of the fracture that is the psychological inheritance of the postcolonial individual, and letter writing underscores that process of reconstituting the whole. These narratives initiate, also, a deconstruction of taboos about female intimacy and emotional attachments. I therefore read the novels with an eye not only to the psychological underpinnings, but as a commentary on the changing politics of the literary postcolonial arena—and what this change signifies for the actual postcolonial contexts represented. I suggest African feminist literary critics and African literary scholars may evaluate the various forms of epistolary writing that appear in post-independence novels as a way to further develop their studies of evolving postcolonial identities. The possibilities inherent in this new critical paradigm are symbolically captured in the letter—ripe with the potential to cover distances, to form a figurative bridge between places and people, to temporally resituate, to invoke past memory while simultaneously gesturing to future possibilities, to deconstruct and reconstruct identity, and to present and (re)present the self.

## CHAPTER 1\_Performing Literacy, (Re)Writing Class: Negotiations of Identity in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*

In the tense historical period of post-Independence 1960s Nigeria, Cyprian Ekwensi pens a novel that reflects the confusion of individuals navigating their social identities in the newly postcolonial country. *Jagua Nana*, published in 1961, tells the story of Jagua, a 45-year old Nigerian woman living in the metropolis of Lagos and forming part of the money-mongering, nightlife-loving underbelly of the city. The chaos of the post-independent historical moment is captured in Ekwensi's representation of the city and of the characters seduced by its frenzy. Ekwensi's protagonist, Jagua, for whom the city symbolizes possibility—provided one effectively uses the tools at one's disposable—uses men for money, offering sex in return. Ekwensi introduces this character with a purely physical description of her, setting the stage for how she capitalizes on those attributes:

...she sat on a low stool with a mirror propped between her bare knees, gazing at her wet hair. Only one cloth—a flowered cotton print—concealed her nakedness, and she had wound it over her breasts and under her armpits. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and she sat with the cloth hunched between her thighs....She raised her arm and ran the comb through the wiry kinks, and her breasts swelled into a sensuous arc. (5)

The mirror, an object that facilitates self-scrutiny, is a fitting symbol for the journey of self-discovery and transformation that Jagua undergoes. In this opening scene, it is positioned between her knees, a placement that draws the eye to the space between



Jagua's legs. The reader's introduction to this protagonist is therefore one in which her sexuality is the object of focus. As Jagua continues to prepare herself, in this scene, for the evening out, her young lover, Freddie Namme, walks by and pauses at the sight of her getting ready. Jagua notes the observation; she frequently positions herself to catch his attention, intentionally arranging her figure to emphasize the curves. Freddie calls out to Jagua, insisting that she speed up her preparations so they can make the evening's event on time: "She could sense the irritation in his voice. As always when she did not like where they were going she delayed her toilet..." (5). This initial presentation of Jagua not only has her purposefully using her physical beauty, but also shows her strategically and subtly determining how and when the evening's events will unfold. Jagua's sexuality, a powerful tool she uses to navigate her social world, poses a clear challenge to conventional male-female romantic relationships.

In this chapter, I devote attention to the role of letter writing in Jagua's complex attempt to establish agency over her existence, sexual and otherwise, and dictate the terms of her social life. The letter emerges in the narrative as a tool for covertly exploring female desire and Jagua's unconventional sexuality—a sexuality defined by rejection of a heterosexual union for intimacy with another woman and a consequent reconfiguration of the home space—to show how female identity was being, or needed to be, recast in evolving post-independence African societies. I suggest that Ekwensi and other postcolonial African novelists have the imaginative space to explore a set of possibilities for female identity that cannot be, or have not yet been, addressed through the sociopolitical process. In the group of novels examined in this project, written by both male and female authors, the position of women serves as a metaphor for the new nation

and its ability to overcome both ‘tradition’ and ‘colonialism’ in favor of a future that is not solely determined by one version or other of the past. The form of the realist colonial novel in English before independence can be seen as a conservative one that rarely gave voice and agency to (or gives voice and agency only to punish) the disenfranchised, illiterate, and marginalized. As novelists in the turmoil of the transition from colonialism looked for ways to represent their new nations, they experimented as much with forms as with themes. In this dissertation, I focus on a small but important genre—the epistolary novel—in order to explore how writers variously used letters to imagine, successfully or not, how the representation of intimacy among women (suggestive because most consistently marginalized) could undermine accepted ideas of the relationship between tradition and modernity in the post-colony. These authors use letters not only to introduce previously discounted and discredited perspectives, primarily but not only female, on class, sexuality, marriage, motherhood, and other forms of the reproduction of the nation, but in their very form, to fracture the very idea of an overriding teleological national narrative.

In the postcolonial novels I consider, letter writing functions not only to present the writing characters to themselves, but to destabilize existing rules governing female place, female potential, and female sexuality. In “Re-visions, Re-flections, Re-creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women,” Elizabeth Campbell asserts that the letter can be used “...as a subversive and freeing agent,” in other words, as a means by which to reflect upon and reform the self (332). In the novels considered in this and following chapters, the letter inspires a psychic shift, a psychological transformation, and in many cases, a narrative breach that underscores a before and after for the writing

character. The letter captures the conflict between a past self and a future possibility, often igniting for the female writer, a sense of unease and a strong desire to shift locations or change *something*. Ekwensi's novel, as an early example of a novel incorporating epistolary form and engaging with its attendant subtext of identity transformation, only hints at the breadth of these re-imaginings. In later novels by Bâ and Aidoo, in which letters also document post-independence moments, the epistles function as veritable calls to attention. The letters serve a dual function, on one hand reminding the letter writers of the roles they have thus far occupied, and on the other hand inspiring in them recognition of the much-needed project of redefining those roles. Where, for example, Ekwensi's novel only begins to hint at the possibility of alternative sexualities and nontraditional narratives of desire, the other works more directly confront and examine those normative roles of femaleness, female sexuality, and female desire.

For Jagua, the letter writing effects a disruption; it causes a breach in her performance of normalcy. It is only after the breach occurs—a sensation of unease and discontent builds in Jagua after her letter is written and sent off—that she embarks on her personal liberatory journey. As Campbell notes, earlier epistolary novels—products of the eighteenth century—were generally about romance and love, but the epistolary novels that have emerged in contemporary times have put social and sexual politics at the center of their considerations. The letter effectively subverts the language and power of the dominant culture, and serves as an attempt to dismantle structures that reinforce patriarchal power while excluding women from those structures/systems of authority. Jagua's engagement with letter writing is a gesture of rebellion against that restrictive enterprise. Although her letter initially follows a pattern suitable for an exchange between

male and female romantic partners, Jagua eventually rejects this form; the rejection of conventional form foreshadows Jagua's rejection of normative structures governing intimacy and desire. Campbell notes that formal evolutions have accompanied the shift in the thematic concerns of epistolary novels: not only have the novels become more than sentimental fare, they have also incorporated changes in epistolary conventions, one of which is the avoidance of closure and a repetition instead of action and plot. This change is meant to emphasize the actual act of writing, the attempt to be heard, rather than the arrival at a definitive end point. In these postcolonial narratives, writing—letter writing, to be exact—allows the women protagonists to write about and reflect on their personal experiences of being marginalized. It is therefore noteworthy that these epistolary works appear with notable frequency at historical moments in which women begin to demand more social and political recognition.<sup>7</sup>

While progress continues to be made in the representation of non-heterosexual intimacies in African fiction, the novels that take on that polarizing work are often also tasked with addressing the stigma attached to these non-normative presentations of desire. Indeed, such projects illuminate the challenges (and possibilities) of recreating the postcolonial African nation in a way that encourages and promotes inclusion. Often, sexual identities that do not conform to “acceptable” patterns are rendered in code in literary works, treated as subtexts or presented symbolically or indirectly through narratives of suppressed desire. This project interrogates the relegation of these nontraditional identities to the margins by arguing for their thematic and formal value as central to the narratives. In his work on this lack of representation in African literary

---

<sup>7</sup> According to Campbell, “Previous flowerings of epistolary literature—in first century B.C. Rome and in seventeenth- and eighteenth- century England and France—are also connected with a positive change in the status of women, and with a sense of the validity of the writer’s own culture in relation to the rest of the world” (334).

texts, Gaurav Desai suggests a redemptive project of “opening up a space for considerations of African sexual practices in all their fluid forms” (737). By examining these often covert themes of same-sex desire, non-heteronormative intimacies, and unconventional identities, this critical work begins to de-invisibilize unconventional identities and inspire real-world discussions that have extra-literary social and political impact. The difficulty of opening up space for discussion about these issues, Desai explains, is that researchers are cautious about raising issues or questions in non-Western cultures that may procure a charge of “cultural insensitivity.” Desai further describes this challenge: “. . . Suspicious of the historically ethnocentric renderings of non-Western sexualities as ‘primitive,’ the ‘insider’ prefers to draw attention away from any non-normative sexual practices; at the risk of not being offensive, at the risk of not being unethical, the ‘outsider exits,’ and so critical information remains buried (737). This pattern can certainly be observed in the works of fiction I consider in this project in which female sexual desire—perhaps even more controversial a subject than male desire, which in Western and non-Western societies remains slightly less regulated and less an object of sensationalist discourses—is never expressly articulated. This is the case with Jagua and Rosa, the two prostitutes in Ekwensi’s novel. They meet, as I later discuss in greater depth, moments before the illusion of Jagua’s heteronormative romance with Freddie is destroyed—he discovers that the rumors are true and Jagua is in fact a prostitute. But even more significant in that scene is the exchange between Jagua and Rosa in which Jagua disavows having a boyfriend. She says to Rosa, “Boy frien’? . . . What boy friend’ got to do wit’ dis one?” (50). The tone of the passage suggests an emotional detachment from the romance with Freddie. By contrast, the brief passage is

peppered with observations Jagua makes about Rosa: “She was small and sweet and rather new to Jagua . . . . She looked at the face of the girl; heart-shaped it was very beautiful” (50). Although there are no scenes of sexual intimacy between the two women, the relationship that eventually blossoms between them hints at a fuller range of nontraditional female romantic attachment, emotional intimacy, and sexual identity in the African literary landscape. The impulse of this work is making that range, as presented through formal innovations in African novels, more visible and the object of invigorated critical interest.

#### SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE LETTER

Ekwensi purposefully uses *Jagua* to introduce concerns about social mobility, gender identity, literacy, and economic viability that attend independence. Letter writing is the symbolic construct embodying all these concerns. A product that speaks, testifies, documents, and dissembles, there is no more suitable vehicle for encompassing these key historical preoccupations than a letter which in itself bespeaks mobility (the opportunity for growth), movement (social agency), dislocation (the ability to shift within one’s social space), relocation (the ability to redefine one’s social space), and the unique bridging of social/public performance and personal/private realities. In post-independence Africa, the role of the postcolonial woman is being negotiated: Does the African woman resign herself to a predefined notion of wifhood and motherhood, or pursue a path not dictated by social mores about proper female identity? In the postcolonial environment of social vicissitudes, female sexuality—and the inherent discourse about the choice to regulate one’s own sexuality—remains largely stigmatized and relegated to the periphery of literary discourse. Ekwensi’s novel endeavors to extend the contours of discussion

concerning female identity. By introducing female sexuality and nontraditional female desire, he begins to create a space for the exploration, however clandestinely, of alternative romance. A challenge to making representations of female non-normative sexuality a visible part of African fiction often comes from African scholars who suggest that the homosexual narrative, for one, is a uniquely Western one, not indigenous to African societies. The prolific African female writer Buchi Emecheta has suggested that it is not as important to African societies as it is to Western societies—a perspective shared by many African literary scholars and writers. In their work on the topic, Chris Dunton and Mai Palmberg note: “In the great majority of novels and stories by black Africans that mention the subject, homosexual relations are targeted as being unnatural, abusive and exploitative” (*Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa* 24). Dunton and Palmberg discuss the prevailing and popular view in African countries that homosexuality is a Western import, and homosexuality and tradition are incompatible in Africa (24). Of late, African leaders have been vociferous in their public denunciation of homosexuality or same-sex romance. Zimbabwe’s Robert Mugabe sparked outrage when he proclaimed during his 88<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration that his country would never support gay rights. Zimbabwe is but one of a number of African countries where homosexuality is illegal and a public display of affection between partners an offense punishable by jailing. Into the discussion surrounding alternative sexualities in Africa is thrown the voices of Western scholars, who, reluctant to be accused of persistently sexualizing black bodies, resist interpretations that highlight these non-normative themes of desire and sexuality.

The overt narrative traces Jagua's negotiation of her social standing through heterosexual intimacy and sexual manipulation of the men around her. However, the real intimacy that provides the subtext to the narrative occurs between Jagua and Rosa. The initial meeting between the two women occurs when Jagua is on the streets waiting for a man to offer money for her sexual services. Rosa emerges out of the shadows and Jagua observes that she was "small and sweet and rather new" (50). The newness Jagua notes appeals to her because of its suggestion of a fresh beginning, of the possibilities of starting again. She is quickly enthralled by the prospects Rosa offers. The letter, which Jagua mails to her lover, may therefore be said to dissemble the real substance of her emotional life; the letter is in essence a vehicle for her performance of social legitimacy. For Jagua, Freddie serves as a strategic alliance; by becoming his wife and the mother of his children, Jagua believes that she will inherit his respectability. By mailing off the letter, Jagua establishes a tie with a man who is literate, educated, and poised to become a part of Lagos politics. He is an ideal candidate, in Jagua's estimation, for her performance of romantic attachment. As Jagua herself states, "Freddie had more than youth. He had gentility, royal blood, ambition. She noticed how tastefully he was dressed... This was the dream she had always wanted" (134). She will *perform* social legitimacy.

The language with which Jagua assesses her relationship to Freddie underscores the performative nature of it. Firstly, she describes it as a "dream," something she had always wanted; this description evokes for the reader a sense of Jagua's preoccupation with an idea rather than a reality. She regards him as one objectively assessing a partner to determine what advantages he will bring, and she recognizes the security that a



position as his wife will provide. The intensity of an emotional bond is never truly evinced in Jagua's ruminations. That sort of selfless bond does not become apparent until Jagua makes the acquaintance of Rosa. It is after this meeting that the first breach occurs in the façade of romance thus far established between Jagua and her lover, Freddie. Immediately following the introduction to Rosa, Freddie arrives on the scene in the back of a friend's car where, on the advice of that friend, he has come to discover Jagua's true profession:

The door opened wider and [Jagua] went inside. The car moved forward.

She looked at the young man, but he only smiled and said: 'Get up, Freddie. You owe me ten shillings! I won the bet! I think I told you I saw her?'

Jagua nestled closer to him. 'What you say?'

'Freddie, get up now! You owe me ten shillings!'

The truth dawned on Jagua. She stared about her. From the backseat came Freddie's voice. 'Wait. You'll get your money.'

...Her head was splitting. Why had Freddie humiliated her so? Freddie, the one man who must never see her in so shameful a light. (52)

Up until this point, Jagua has attempted to keep her lover from knowing who she truly is because her illicit occupation does not align with the image she wants to create of herself for him. Most, if not all, of her sexual-business escapades occur under cover of night, and Freddie's penetration of this underground context destabilizes Jagua's usual performance of acceptability. Rosa is present at the moment of this performative rupture in a way that portends her future role in Jagua's emotional life. The letter Jagua writes to Freddie

testifies to a performance of social legitimacy, while simultaneously embodying the hidden, illicit content of Jagua's sexual life; it presents a façade of romantic earnestness (a desire for the traditional family structure that can be achieved with Freddie as her husband), while in fact encoding the private nature of Jagua's as yet unarticulated female desire (the nontraditional, stigmatized non-heteronormative bond she ultimately establishes with another woman). The latter relationship, when compared with the others of varying short duration in Jagua's life, suggests a positive focus on the nature of female intimacies. The relationship effectively disturbs traditional notions of love. Jagua and Rosa may not be categorically depicted as paramours, but they are portrayed as women decisively existing outside of the boundaries of heteronormative bonding. They are creating new patterns for female identity as regards marriage/non-marriage and hetero/non-hetero- intimacy, and by so doing, they challenge the postcolonial African nation's exclusion of non-normative identities and reject its attempt to regulate female identity vis-à-vis sexuality.

In the letter writing scene that marks a turning point in Jagua's life, she invokes the language of religion: her reference to the priestly transaction conveys the purging and purification process of the confessional and the opportunity to start over. Jagua feels the need to shed an old identity and construct a new one. She leaves Lagos for a brief visit to the village to introduce herself to Freddie's family. This is a further attempt to establish social legitimacy by following the traditional marriage script, but even in this attempt Jagua fails because instead of being presented by her family members as a future bride, she presents herself to the Nammes. Jagua is always one step removed from convention. In that letter-writing scene that inspires Jagua to begin reflecting on her identity, she

looks for a scribe to write a letter to Freddie. She finds one beside the bank, near the public lavatories. Jagua pays him the agreed-upon rate, and then sits down, with feet crossed, prepared for the process. She gives him helpful information about her relationship with Freddie, then waits for him to produce the letter. Jagua notes: “[The letter-writer] handled her words like a priest at the confessional, each one with a sense of the power to save or perish the soul, to shower with happiness or flood with sorrow.... At the end of the session, Jagua realized that she had told him nearly everything there was to know about Freddie” (62). The reader realizes, when Jagua goes to the letter-writer to have the epistle written for Freddie, that Jagua is illiterate. After he finishes, the letter-writer reads the letter aloud to Jagua. “She could not fully understand the whole of what he read,” we are told of Jagua’s reaction, “but she knew when a letter sounded right, and this one did” (64). The letter seems modeled on an idea of exaggerated sentimentality that both the letter-writer and Jagua believe appropriate for its England-based recipient. To Jagua the letter works because it “sounded right” by seeming to adhere to the conventions of the British letter-writing tradition. Just as she identifies Freddie’s journey to England as the height of education and sophistication, so too does she equate the ill-written letter with the English romantic letter tradition. She misunderstands the nature of social acceptability in the same way she fails to understand the limitations of the letter by the letter writer. “I last night dreamt of your beautiful and your smiling face which seems to me like a vision,” the first paragraph concludes. “...[W]ishing you happiness till once more I look into your heavenly eyes and hearing your sonorous voice . . .,” ends the letter (64-65). There is obviously a disconnect between Jagua and those words meant to capture her feelings and thoughts; she does not in fact understand the letter’s true meaning, but,

as it is essential at this juncture to perform her literacy and the requirements of traditional male-female intimacy, she embraces the façade of verisimilitude. After Jagua approves the letter that “sounds” right, she wanders off to post it:

She posted the letter herself and drifted into a trance about the streets for the writing had taken something out of her. A part of herself had gone into that envelope and was now on its way to Freddie 4000 miles away. She felt exhausted and exposed to some remorse, some discontent she did not understand. (65)

Jagua experiences a sense of discontent immediately after “producing” the letter. Jagua experiences in this instance the beginnings of an emotional and psychic shift. The letter is the marker of a performance meant to elevate her social standing. The disconnect between the sentiment of the letter and Jagua’s real reasons for pursuing the romance (the insistence on her part to be socially respectable), begins to hint at the extent to which Jagua truly and purposefully performs her gender, class, and sexual identities. Jagua attempts to use the letter to lay claim to social status and to begin striving for upward mobility. The act of letter writing, and in fact the content of the letter, is an attempt at reframing Jagua in her social world that she ultimately rejects.

The initial encounter between Rosa and Jagua ushers in a new phase of emotional intimacy and authenticity previously unexplored by Jagua. Jagua vividly recalls the night during which she sees Rosa for the first time:

It was the memorable night on which she saw more closely the young woman called Rosa. Rosa had a ready smile and a charming way of speaking. She said she had come to Lagos, from the East. She had

nowhere to stay in Lagos. Could Jagua help her? Jagua took pity on her and promised, rashly, to do something. 'If you come to my place, sometime I kin fin' something; for you.' She quickly dismissed Rosa from her mind, but later that evening it flashed through her consciousness that Rosa could well live with her. Rosa could be her companion, in Freddie's absence. Lagos then, might have a new meaning. (109-110)

For Jagua, who up to this point is only concerned with who she can manipulate and use for her various needs, this genuine concern for Rosa marks a remarkable shift. More than a simple connection is established here; Rosa signals for Jagua the beginning of authentic emotional intimacy. Her failed attempt to dismiss Rosa from her mind further emphasizes the significance of the blossoming relationship between the two women. Most significantly, in envisioning a role for Rosa to occupy, Jagua's plotting mind does not assign the young woman a lesser role as her maidservant or house girl, a logical position given Rosa's desperate circumstances. Rather, Jagua imagines Rosa as her companion "in Freddie's absence." Rosa is simultaneously established as her equal, and more importantly, conceived of as a substitute for Freddie, Jagua's male lover. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of this new arrangement is the fact that whereas Jagua's relationship with Freddie was predicated on her ability to benefit from his social worth and potential, this relationship with Rosa is premised on companionship and genuine concern for the other woman's welfare. Jagua invites Rosa to share her home, meaningfully altering the home space, and simultaneously redefining established definitions of appropriate inhabitants of that home. In place of the traditionally accepted male figure, Jagua inserts a destitute, street-working woman, much like herself, and with whom she hopes to establish, not a

mistress-servant hierarchy, but a relationship of equals. At a later point, Rosa brings her meager possessions to Jagua's room: "The day Rosa came, Jagua was sitting in the kitchen turning over a huge lobster in the frying-pan" (114). Rosa's entry to Jagua's home is colored by this scene of domesticity.<sup>8</sup> The novel does not explicitly suggest sexual intimacy between Jagua and Rosa. Considering, however, the nature of the sexual escapades that Jagua engages in—without emotional depth, for financial gain, to present a façade of hetero-romance—the absence of anything physical between the two women is poignant. If heterosexual intimacies are cheapened and tied to profit-making, then it would seem the novel champions in this particular instance the value of intimacy that exists outside of sex. The novel is in essence positing a deeper bond, a deeper emotional relationship between the women. If sex means nothing to Jagua, as the novel attests to, then an emotional bond with another woman is an even more transgressive type of intimacy for her. Her relationship with Rosa is not tawdry, as her previous sexual and/or physical relationships have fundamentally been. Her intimacy with Rosa is depicted as a deeper-than-friendship connection to a lifelong partner.

#### AFRICAN FEMALE TYPES IN POSTCOLONIAL FICTION

Jagua belongs to a type (the whore/prostitute) explored by other African male writers at similar periods of historic transformation. In "The African Prostitute: An Everyday Debrouillard in Reality and African Fiction," Nazaneen Homaifar notes that Cyprian Ekwensi and Okot p'Bitek are but two in a sizable group of African male writers who created plots centered on female prostitute-protagonists as characters struggling

---

<sup>8</sup> Karen Hansen offers an informative look at colonial Africa's adoption of Western models of female domesticity. Hansen, Karen Tranberg. "Introduction: Domesticity in Africa." *African Encounters with Domesticity*. Ed. Karen T. Hansen. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 1-33.

amidst the general instability that attends the end of colonialism to create new social mores and articulate themselves within evolving national contexts. Homaifar suggests that the protagonists in Ekwensi and p'Bitek's works "...are exceptional in the consciousness of their precarious position...Jagua Nana and Malaya were crafted at a time when the respective countries, Nigeria and Uganda, were in the midst of political and economic transition; a time when traditional ideals were challenged by the corruption and modernism crawling through the city" (174). The setting of these works, and the placement of the female characters in the midst of national turmoil, seems to suggest an authorial preoccupation with the fate of African women in post-independent nations. Sembene Ousmane, another prolific male African writer, also used the prostitute trope in his novel, *God's Bits of Wood* (1960) to reflect the evolution of Senegal's political and social landscape. Ousmane's novel, set 1947–48, narrates the events surrounding the Dakar-Niger railway worker strike. The novel tells the story of the men who waged war against a colonial system of racism and unfair labor treatment, and the women who fought beside them. From Thiès to Dakar to Bamako, the men who worked the railroad united and refused to return to work until their demands had been met by their French European bosses. Many lost their lives during the six-month strike period. But personal transformation accompanied the tragedy: "...when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence. They began to understand that the machine was making of them a whole new breed of men. It did not belong to them; it was they who belonged to it. When it stopped, it taught them that lesson" (33). This marks a powerful moment of comprehension through which the colonized see themselves not as self-directed

individuals, but as cogs in the colonial machine. It is this realization that fuels the revolution even when it seems that failure will be the outcome. What makes the novel even more striking, in addition to its poignant tale of unity and revolution, is the variety and multi-dimensionality to the representation of the female characters: “And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women” (34). Ousmane’s novel is particularly interesting for its presentation of unconventional and nontraditional women, showing how patterns of female intimacy were invoked, examined, and reconfigured.

Among the women who stand out in this novel is Ramatoulaye, a matriarch and respected member of the community. During the strike, when hunger threatens to destroy her family and neighbors, Ramatoulaye marches to the food store owned by her brother. She asks him to spare them some grains on credit, but he refuses because he has aligned himself with the colonial administrators. Ramatoulaye curses her brother, but not satisfied with doing just that, she eventually goes on to slaughter his ram that wanders onto her property, an act that ensures everyone will be fed for a little while longer. A momentous battle occurs between the ram and Ramatoulaye; he charges her and her clothes are torn off. Ramatoulaye fights back: “...she plunged the knife three times into the ram’s neck. The blood spurted out again, spraying over the trembling figure of Bineta. Ramatoulaye wiped the blade clean on the animal’s heavy fleece and stood up at last. There was neither pride nor arrogance in her attitude...” (68). She emerges victorious against the ram; Ramatoulaye’s triumph over the male animal serves as a symbolic rejection of any and all attempts to subdue her. She is a woman who defies the traditional conception of female-ness. She forms the vanguard of the striker’s revolution, not simply



serving as a woman in support of the men, but as a woman alongside the men.

Ramatoulaye is joined in the ranks of powerful women in the novel by the whore/prostitute figure, Penda, who leads the women on the march from Thiès to Dakar: “She kept the women in line, and she forced even the men to respect her. She came to the union office frequently to help with the work, and one day, when one of the workmen had stupidly patted her on the behind, she gave him a resounding smack. A woman slapping a man in public was something no one had ever seen before” (143). Penda sets herself apart, not just as a woman doing “man’s” union work, but as a strong individual undeterred by her society’s perception of appropriate behavior. When, on the long march, the women’s energy and enthusiasm begins to falter, it is Penda who encourages them: “Penda, still wearing her soldier’s cartridge belt, marched at the head of the procession with Mariame Sonko, the wife of Balla, and Maimouna, the blind woman, who had joined them in the darkness without being noticed by anyone” (192). In spite of her illicit background, Penda takes on a leadership position in the revolution. In situating her, a prostitute, at this critical historical juncture, the narrative suggests a transformation in female identities in the colonial and post-independence periods. The occupation of prostitution, in Sembene’s text, appears to be one only taken on by a woman without any other financial means, and without any family or social obligations. However, success in the profession speaks to an independence and strength of character that actually ends up being validated in the narrative. Upon their arrival in Dakar, the women are met with opposition from officers guarding the columns of the city. Warnings are shouted out by the guards: “Go back to Thiès, women! We cannot let you pass!” The tension heightens: “And already the pressure of this human wall was forcing the soldiers to draw back....A

few rifle butts came up menacingly and were beaten down by clubs and stones. The unnerved soldiers hesitated, not knowing what to do, and then some shots rang out, and in the column two people fell..." (204). Penda is one of the casualties. She is fatally wounded at this crucial point. What does it mean that Penda's demise comes as she heralds in a new social order? Is there some discernible meaning to the death of the prostitute at the critical stage in which gender roles are being redefined? Ousmane, for all the affirmation of the prostitute figure evident in his text, ultimately indicates that there is as yet no place for her in an evolving system of things. Penda is not subordinate to the men, but is regarded by them as an equal. She represents, much like Jagua, a new type of woman who must carve out a space in the postcolonial nation. Jagua begins to do this by forging intimacy with Rosa and creating a new portrait of the home space—peopled by two women instead of a man and a woman. Penda, however, dies before she is able to fully realize the possibilities available to her.

Ousmane's work is frequently championed for the bevy of well-developed female characters that are not peripheral or tangential to the principal narrative, or only presented in terms of their relationship to a male figure. His texts portray dynamic, complex female protagonists not content to sit on the bylines of history. By contrast, Ekwensi has been accused of offering a limited female representation in the character of Jagua, who, I argue, is in many respects similar to Ousmane's Penda. Critics have generally been divided about Ekwensi's female character. Charles Fonchingong, for example, argues in "Unbending Gender Narratives in African Fiction" that for all of Ekwensi's attention to female identity in contemporary life, his women are still rendered through a contracted lens and ultimately fit only one of two competing types: prostitute or wife and mother.

Fonchingong further asserts that in exiling Jagua at the close of the narrative to the village where she grieves her baby's death, Ekwensi reduces Jagua's story to a typically traditional one in which a woman is defined by those social obligations she may or may not be able to fulfill (136). Nazaneen Homaifar, on the other hand, suggests in "The African Prostitute: An Everyday Debrouillard in Reality and African Fiction" that "The role of the prostitute in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*... is one of an individual using tactical opposition to counteract victimization. The prostitute in these two works cannot be viewed as solely a victim" (174). While some critics champion Jagua's deliberate manipulation of her social world through sexual barter, others lambast Ekwensi's presentation of a character that satisfies a limited range of African female literary types.<sup>9</sup> To these critics, Jagua is without agency in her social world and her options are determined by the overriding will of those individuals to whom choice is granted, presumably men. Such readings may, however, overlook the complexity of a female character depicted as not easily overtaken by her social conditions. In the representation of Jagua, Penda, and others, there is a statement being proffered about the range of possibilities available, if not necessarily realized by the women, in terms of identity and social progress. These narratives are gestures at the future potential of women who dare to be transgressive, who may still be struggling against lingering expectations about their social identity—poised as they are at key historical junctures, but who signal change, the need for and the imminence of it.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o is another African male writer whose female representations have been, like Ousmane's, generally well regarded for defying conventional

---

<sup>9</sup> Bonnie Roos provocatively discusses the African female type depicted in male-authored novels. Roos, Bonnie. "Re-Historicizing the Conflicted Figure of Woman in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*." *Research in African Literatures*. Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer 2002): 154–170.

representations of women in African literature. Ngugi received accolades for his portrayal of Wanja, a prostitute-cum-revolutionary in the novel *Petals of Blood*, who is alternately loved or used as a sexual plaything by the men in the novel. Wanda runs away from home as a young girl, after being taken advantage of by an older male family friend who impregnates her. With limited options at her disposal, Wanja kills the baby. She eventually leaves the city and moves to Ilmorog, a small village, and it is here that the reader is presented with the complexities of this female character. In an initial presentation in Ilmorog, the following is said of her: "...but she remained a mystery: how could a city woman so dirty her hands? How could she strap a tin of water to a head beautifully crowned with a mass of shiny black hair? And what had really brought her to the gates of Ilmorog village when the trend was for the youth to run away?" (37).

Wanja's beauty is at once highlighted as is the difficulty of reconciling that beauty—tied to female value and social worth—to the village space. This functions as an attempt to classify the female body, to mark her as object. But, as some critics have argued, Ngugi forestalls such a limited representation by creating a textured narrative to Wanja's life. As Bonnie Roos argues in "Re-Historicizing the Conflicted Figure of Woman in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*," "Wanja is not always defined by her body, as her work in the fields, her entrepreneurial skills, her own expressions of artistry, and her depth of character go to show" (156). Roos further asserts that it is in fact through the comprehensiveness of Wanja's character that Ngugi is able to examine women's issues of post-independence. She writes: "It is precisely with his use of Wanja as earthly mother, prostitute, and sexual being that he is able to portray a nation that addresses the issues of women as well as those of men" (156). Wanja is shown engaged in a struggle to redefine herself, both in the

city and in the village, to find a means to support herself financially, to re-imagine a romantic relationship not predicated on male dominance, and to also determine how to navigate the changing politics of her country. Ultimately, Wanja emerges as “a character infinitely more complex than one who is traditionally ‘feminized,’ weak and downtrodden, lost and without recourse in the neocolonialist system. She is always depicted as acting or reacting from the numerous strengths she possesses, rather than giving in to weakness or desperation. Once again she reflects a real history of strong women who did the best they could, given the circumstances around them” (165). With limited resources at their disposal, the women in these narratives tap into strategies for survival that may perhaps be superficially contemptible, but end up being far more nuanced than one would initially assume. And, perhaps, more significantly, there is a pronounced refusal on the women’s parts to rely on men or male figures for assistance. It is by relying on their own skills, strengths, and strategies that the women are able to achieve personal transformation and growth.

The theme of dislocation and relocation is tied to concerns that citizens faced after independence regarding progress and growth, industry and economic viability—concerns which in many cases encouraged migration to urban areas that ostensibly offered financial promise. There is undoubtedly some similarity to the manner in which Wanja, like Ekwensi’s *Jagua*, eventually makes her way back to the village. Although the outcomes are dissimilar, the authors appear to be advancing a message about the village as representative of healing and nurturing. Ironically, in many of these narratives that feature women working as prostitutes in the city, the village serves as a redemptive space, allowing for the possibility of earning income without resorting to self-sale. *Jagua* returns

to her village, Ogabu, on the occasion of her father's death. Her mother tells her that on his dying bed, the only name Jagua's father called was his daughter's. This revelation motivates Jagua's decision to remain in Ogabu with her family. Jagua assumes, initially resignedly, the responsibility of looking after the family property. Her initial love for fabrics, for sewing and selling resurfaces, and Jagua begins to reconnect with her former self that was independent and successful prior to entering a romantic relationship with Freddie. She begins again to make a living through sewing: "She started by sewing odds and ends for the convent girls, and then some of the more daring women brought her material for blouses. The occupation gave her a direct contact with the world she knew and loved" (179). As Jagua settles into this life, she receives word from Rosa, who joins her in Ogabu. Their recreation of the same domestic scene they created earlier in Lagos is poignant. Jagua is overjoyed to have Rosa in the home. It is, in effect, a partnership of equals unlike the one with Freddie. Interestingly, Ekwensi's novel and the others previously discussed share an inability to envision a male-female romantic relationship based on equality. Ultimately, that possibility remains unrealized for all of our female protagonists. Indeed, it is as a result of Jagua's attempted romantic relationship with Freddie that she loses her initial fabric importing and selling business. She instead devotes her time to keeping Freddie happy and fostering what she hopes will someday result in marriage and children. For Penda, the possibility of romance with the enigmatic Bakayoko, the educated, enigmatic leader of the strike, is only hinted at. He considers her a worthy woman and partner, and is profoundly saddened by her death. But the narrative does not in fact show what a male-female romantic partnership between the two individuals would look like, or if it could actually be sustained given the nature of gender

roles in the country. Wanja's attempts at romance are misguided (when she is young and taken advantage of by the older man), and unsuccessful with Karega, the young, revolutionary teacher (he leaves Ilmorog after being fired from his post by the jealous Munira who wants to possess Wanja). For Wanja, "motherhood" or pregnancy is the result of an illicit relationship. There is no traditional family structure within which the role of wife and mother is enacted. When Wanja chooses the path of prostitution and runs a profitable brothel, the young women who work for her become a surrogate sort of family. It is essentially a community of women, of unofficial daughters, into which men are occasionally invited for profit-making. Only at the end of the novel does the possibility of motherhood for Wanja resurface, and at this point, there is still no traditional family circle. Wanja believes the father of her unborn child is Abdulla, and perhaps, there will be a potential union between the two of them, but the narrative does not address this. It would appear that even male writers documenting the evolving roles of women in the post-independence moment are seeing beyond the limitations of age-old mores about a proper woman's place and a woman's proper place. In *God's Bits of Wood* Penda is readily thrust into the role of leader, and as such, there is no real examination of what wifedom and motherhood could be for her. The narrative seems to suggest that the role of strong female and traditional role of African wife and mother cannot coexist in the new country, or rather, that the traditional roles need to evolve to take into account the changing place of women in society. It is perhaps for this reason that Penda does not make it out alive. No space has yet been created for the new type of woman that she represents, and consequently, she must be written out of the narrative. Jagua has a similarly fraught relationship to the identity of wife and mother. She leaves her first and

only husband, to whom she is married at a young age, to go to the city and pursue her own interests. Among the many reasons Jagua is initially drawn to the city is the vision she has of Lagos as a place of freedom and equality. She is not drawn to the “loose” life per se, but to the liberatory potential for female identity. Jagua remarks that in the city women could work in an office “like the men.” Jagua clearly sees herself stagnating in marriage and seeks an escape that will enable her to refashion herself. The writers creating these new complex and compelling female figures do not know how to resolve the dilemma they represent. What is the new society that will accommodate these women?

The sole recourse for the female protagonists is often clever maneuvering and strategy. But are these women truly powerful in the political and social sense that suggests influence, or is the emphasis on their successful—often sexual—strategies another way to ostensibly elevate while in reality denigrating the position of woman? Defending Ngugi’s work, Roos is vocal in her assertion that Wanja, in spite of Ngugi’s (sometimes) overtly sexualized depiction of her, is overall a truly progressive representation of female identity. Roos’s perspective stands in direct contrast to readings of the novel by scholars like Florence Stratton who decry representations of women in Ngugi’s and other African male-authored texts. Roos takes issue with this criticism, however, suggesting that those scholars neglect “...to account for what free sexuality means for woman in a post(neo)colonial Kenya, whose very national independence is premised in part upon the reinstatement of traditional customs, most notably, among the Gikuyu, female circumcision.” Wanja’s uncircumcised status is a testament to her rejection of tradition—or at least the elements of tradition intended to control and dictate



a woman's identity. Wanja maintains ownership of her body; she does not allow it to be contained or constrained by the keepers of a patriarchal system. As Roos writes, "Wanja's uncircumcised body suggests that she is a modern woman who refuses to allow men to dominate her" (160). Clearly, even the redemptive thrust of these representations of womanhood cannot be straightforward or uncomplicated given the convoluted nature of their social environments. The pleasure-in-sexuality experienced by a woman like Wanja represents a small victory given the restrictions placed on female sexuality in that particular sociopolitical context. It would seem, with these considerations in mind, that the choice of prostitute as protagonist is truly meaningful, as is the fact that the women are afforded control of their own bodies and sexualities. Roos states, "In terms of literary history...the figure of the prostitute often functions as a powerful figure, capable of acting from both within and outside of norms. While it is true that she often indexes the particular plight of women's poverty and can be used to represent the 'degradation' of the nation, the prostitute is also an appealing figure because she represents the ability to challenge traditional thinking, to cross the customary divide between the lower and upper classes" (163). Jagua, much like Wanja, is permitted interesting insights into her society as a result of her nontraditional position as "liberated woman," *and* her social position as an unmarried woman. Jagua is generally underestimated by her male lovers. Because she takes no real interest in Freddie's intellectual world and is only excited about going to the Tropicana nightclub, Jagua gives Freddie the impression of being inept in cerebral matters. She gives the lie to that impression when eventually in the narrative she brokers peace between Freddie's feuding family members and their respective villages: "The news went around that a great thing had happened, that a woman from another land had

brought with her the good luck they had prayed for all the time. Jagua beamed with joy. She knew that her victory in bringing the two feuding villages together was far greater than Nancy's master of the Bagana dance" (97). Jagua is lauded and praised by the villagers and the rulers of Freddie's hometown, and she takes great pride in this recognition as it cements her place as a "respectable" woman. After returning to the city, she also takes part in a political campaign and compellingly speaks to the market women about matters that interest and affect them. After her speech to the market women, "They pressed in on Jagua from all sides, wanting to shake her hand, to detain her, to chair her. She felt truly proud" (147). Jagua, who we are told was once running a successful fabric import and sale business, is evidently more than just a "loose" woman. What Jagua epitomizes is an inchoate class position, of notable emphasis in light of the time period the narrative maps. Jagua is not a product of colonial educational systems like her lover Freddie Namme. She is not a product of any formal religious training, at least not to the reader's knowledge. She represents an undefined, underemployed class, a group of individuals whose place in the new nation has yet to be determined, but who are struggling—sometimes successfully—to carve out new niches.

The recurrence of the prostitute or "loose woman" figure in the body of African literature suggests that the trope is not being used haphazardly. Rather, it is being used to speak to unofficial types of social power that necessarily become relevant given the exploitative nature of official systems of power. Although Jagua ostensibly represents the underbelly of her society, the narrative undermines this loose interpretation by complicating the portrayal of the more educated and socially-mobile members of Jagua's society. Freddie, for example, who yearns to further his European education and is

enamored of all things English, only becomes involved in politics because of the money: "...I wan' money quick-quick; an' politics is de only hope" (137). He wants quick money, he states, and politics is the only avenue through which to secure it. A critique is undoubtedly being made of the politics of post-independence Nigeria. If money is the only incentive for becoming involved in politics, then those officially-sanctioned systems of control and power are no less corrupt than the unofficial systems acknowledged and effectively utilized by Jagua. Additionally, Uncle Taiwo, who runs as the candidate for the opposition party, bribes potential voters with money, threatens his opponents, and is responsible for Freddie's death at the hands of his thugs. Uncle Taiwo makes empty promises to his constituents, uses Jagua to sweet-talk the women voters, and has no real plans to effect change in his country. "Tell dem our party is de bes' one. We will give dem free market stall, plenty trade, and commission so dem kin educate de children. Tell dem all de lie," Uncle Taiwo instructs Jagua. There is no genuineness or sincerity to his campaign, and his sole goal is to further line his pockets with political money. In the earlier scenes in the village when Jagua goes to visit Freddie's family, she is informed of the feud between his two uncles and their respective villages of Bagana and Krimaneh. The chiefs refuse to speak to each other or take the necessary steps to facilitate peace and progress. It is Jagua who becomes the voice of logic and manages to mediate peace between the two warring camps. Evidently, the official structures of power are not only ineffective, but require the assistance of a "common" woman to function. These men repeatedly tell Jagua that they are surprised by her intelligence. Chief Ofubara says, "I've never met so intelligent a lady" (91). After Jagua's speech to the market women on behalf of Uncle Taiwo, he asks her, "Jagua—who teach you politics?" As a woman taking

part—and successfully so—in the political world of men, Jagua is remarkable. Unlike the market women and the merchant princesses, who although respectable and even wealthy members of their society, are still relegated to their own separate space, Jagua is able to bridge her different worlds. Homaifar asserts: “She uses and is used by her society. Close examination of the role of the prostitute . . . will reveal an individual with a unique position in society—an individual who epitomizes the art of *debrouillardise*, and marks it with a connection to the city” (173). Homaifar defines “*debrouillardise*” as the talent of getting by cultivated by the “weak and marginalized individuals of society.” By virtue of her position as prostitute, Jagua gains unrestricted access into different social realms. She is underestimated and thereby granted entry. It is as a result of the assumptions concerning her knowledge and intelligence that Jagua’s accomplishments are always met with surprise.

#### LANGUAGE, LITERACY, AND CLASS

Jagua’s performances in the novel are tied to aspiration and the potential for social ascension; they are attempts to transcend her class(less) position. Readers are introduced to Jagua in the scene below elucidating the role of linguistic play in her life. It is a performance similar to that which she enacts in the course of writing (or having a letter written) to Freddie. In the passage, Jagua explains her origins and Freddie’s, and then goes on to point out how they are able to find common ground in the city. The explanation is one more means of asserting her suitability for Freddie with whom she hopes to perform social legitimacy through a conventional marriage:

Like Freddie, she was an Ibo from Eastern Nigeria, but when she spoke to him she always used Pidgin English, because living in Lagos City they did

not want too many embarrassing reminders of clan or custom. They and many others were practically strangers in a town where all came to make fast money by faster means, and greedily to seek positions that yielded even more money (5).

Although the relevance of language and speech in this novel has not been the subject of much critical examination, it offers provocative insight into the role of the city and the value of Jagua's initial epistolary performance. Here, in a symbolic way, the city—at least as far as language is concerned—serves as a unifying agent, as a force that erases ethnic distinctions and tribal affiliations. For Jagua, it hints at possibilities for reinvention. Considering the post-independence occasion in which the action of the novel plays out, this information about the urban setting is vital. The political and social turmoil of Nigeria was due in large part to decades of bitter conflict and rivalry between the different ethnic groups. The Biafran War was a direct result of the hostility that existed between Nigeria's major ethnic groups, a divisive and contentious relationship that was fostered by the British colonial administrators who knew that encouraging tension between the people would ensure continued success at controlling and manipulating them. In light of these facts, Ekwensi's rendition of the city as a location in which relationships are based on commonalities rather than differences is important. The novel recasts the city as a redemptive space, a site that can allow individuals to begin again, much like Jagua does when she first moves there from the village. The linguistic play that gets highlighted in the city also calls attention to the performative nature of Jagua's urban identity. In Lagos, Jagua speaks Pidgin English in order to disavow any tribal affiliation. When in the villages, Jagua reverts to Ibo. When visiting with Freddie's intellectual

circles Jagua remarks on the proper English spoken by his associates: “They began speaking in what Jagua regarded as ‘grammatical English’ and she felt immediately excluded. These men: she never could understand them” (140). Evidently, this feeling of alienation and exclusion echoes her desire to perform her way out of her current class situation and into a better one. Language fluency is of course a marker of social place, and being adept at Standard English is indicative of a better-than-average position on the social ladder. For Jagua, being around Freddie’s cohorts is a discomfiting reminder of a perceived lack. Nevertheless, as only Jagua is able to, she significantly alters her social standing while still using the language and fluency available to her. When during Uncle Taiwo’s political campaign Jagua is asked to speak to the market women, an influential voting bloc, she realizes the power and position that she has been subconsciously seeking: “She found herself nervously caressing the microphone, but as the first few words shattered the hubbub and the chattering, Jagua experienced a new sense of power. Her voice was new, attractive” (143–144). Jagua begins to redefine her place in a public space. Interestingly, the novel never specifies the language spoken by Jagua during this election speech. A contextual analysis would suggest that Jagua speaks Yoruba, which adds another dimension to Jagua’s language fluency. She is not speaking English: “She did not need to be subtle for the language she used was not English” (145). The narrative intimates that the language of her speech is not Jagua’s native Ibo, but Yoruba, a fact reinforced by a telling passage in which Jagua speaks about Sierra Leone: “It is one thousand miles from Lagos. The people do not speak Yoruba there, neither do they speak Ibo or Hausa” (146). The fact that the first language she refers to is Yoruba seems to attest to that as her immediate language of communication to address the market women.

Importantly, this scene further highlights the city as a site of unification, a location in which tribal affiliations are not divisive or a source of disharmony. Jagua's multi-lingual feat also draws attention to the importance of non-Standard English language skills in addressing the members of the working and trading class. As similarly evinced by her letter-writing experience, Jagua is able to recreate power and social standing in spite of not being the traditional figure associated with these things. In the moment in which she gives the speech, Jagua challenges the misconceptions concerning her female identity and her social class, and this powerful political speech testifies to the transformative process initiated by her very first encounter with letter writing.

Writing in the missionary and colonial context was not only about constructions of self, but about genuine self-reflection. Writing initiated the process of interior examination, tied as personal forms of writing—like letter and journal writing—were to exploring identity. What further adds to the value of the letter writing process is the bridge it creates between the individual's interior and exterior world. For Jagua, sending off the letter becomes about more than constructing romance with Freddie; it becomes a projection of a public persona, an attempt to consciously rewrite herself in an appropriate way, and it is this anxiety about fashioning a self that lends to Jagua's unease. The privacy of the letter, the intimacy of the act, is disrupted by the necessity of performing for the recipient, and by the chasm that exists between Jagua's exterior acts and her interior desires. The disconnect between Jagua's supposedly authentic "private thoughts" and the reality of her discontent provokes a psychic shift. The letter's intimate contract is doubly disturbed in this instance by the presence of the letter writer, who serves as a tertiary audience to Jagua's performance. Jagua, increasingly aware of the public nature

of her reception, begins to—perhaps for the first time—feel dissatisfied with this need to perform. Linked to that public performance of her identity is the attendant desire for social ascension. Following the confrontation with her illiteracy, Jagua takes a trip to the village to visit Freddie’s family and affirm—or perhaps convince herself of—the prudence of becoming his wife and member of his family, and once and for all embrace a sanctioned social script. By rejecting her own desires, Jagua will adopt a role for herself that will not render her an illicit outcast.

Initially, Jagua is perturbed by a growing sense of lack, of not being fit for the position she hopes to attain. It would appear that if literacy was a way to alter one’s social standing and position, then Jagua’s illiteracy similarly becomes of critical weight, essentially a crucial factor in the attempt to change her social role. Jagua is the product of a postcolonial moment in which she is called to determine how tradition and progress will define her. She is an under-educated (illiterate), class-less (without a defined class position), unmarried, unemployed, and childless woman in a society that equates femaleness with wife- and motherhood. It is meaningful that Ekwensi chooses to present this protagonist in a postcolonial country wrestling with its postcolonial identity. In calling attention to Jagua’s illiteracy, the narrative demands an examination of the illiteracy plaguing an ostensibly independent nation. The focus on the underhanded measures that so many of the characters make recourse to underscores the financial situation of post-independence Nigeria. In creating a distinction between the avenues for education and self-improvement open to Freddie compared with the far more limited options available to Jagua, the gendered dilemma of the postcolonial question is exposed to scrutiny. In colonial societies, literacy was a barometer by which intelligence was measured. In



postcolonial societies, literacy continues to be a marker of putative sagacity. Jagua is therefore a product of a historical context in which the ability to write signifies something concrete about an individual's social standing, and the inability to write signifies just as eloquently. For an individual like Jagua, who already wrestles with a persistent sense of being improper, wrong, or illegitimate, literacy—even the performance of it (a pseudo-literacy in effect)—is as an attempt to assert legitimacy and propriety. Indeed, literacy for the colonized was tied to dehumanizing systems of regulation and control.

Literacy was a means through which the literate were subjected to various education-based processes of social coercion and manipulation. As Barber attests, “Literacy embodied aspiration, and aspiration was founded upon lack—a sense of personal inadequacy associated with an education perceived as incomplete” (5). In spite of this fraught relationship to literacy, in spite of its link to colonial administration, literacy was still a marker of advancement and progress. To further examine the value of literacy in the colonial and postcolonial context, I consider Louisa Mvemve, a South African woman whose letters date from 1914 to the 1930s. In her epistles, Mvemve implores government officials to be allowed to practice natural medicine for those who come to her to be cured by her herbal, root poultices. In her research on Mvemve, Barber points out that although Mvemve was never formally educated and was in fact illiterate, she was able to transition out of her initial position as a house servant and become someone who hired her own messengers and domestic servants. “Louisa Mvemve aspired to the world of respectability and wrote letters about herself which projected an image of Victorian womanhood,” Barber writes (81). Evidently, “...Louisa Mvemve was a complex person in her day, and the ambiguities of her self-representation, her audience,

and her reception, provide a central thread throughout the remains of her documented narrative” (81). The desire on Mvemve’s part to breach her class situation (and interconnected racial place) created some ambivalence about her own identity. She did not speak highly of black Africans, specifically the working-class and rural-based, believing herself to be superior to them. This intense desire to dissociate herself from an identity she suspected of holding her back, coupled with modeling herself on ideals of Victorian femininity, created, in Barber’s words, her “ambivalent position as an aspirant person.” Where Mvemve sought to disavow her link to her brethren, Jagua conversely chooses to redefine her identity in terms of and in relation to her fellow countrymen and women.

Mvemve, like the fictional Jagua, makes use of scribes who pen the letters as she dictates the general content. This method of managing limitations testifies to the value of strategy as a stand-in for socially recognized power. The managing of limitations truly operates on multiple levels: the women manage their limitations through strategy; they also manage the scribes who pen their letters; and they simultaneously manage the scribes’ management of the stories being produced. Clearly, the recourse for these women who are restricted by social mores and sanctions is clever manipulation of their social worlds. Strategy thus becomes notably important for overcoming impediments such as illiteracy, which these women do not allow to deter them from striving for social mobility. For Jagua and the real-life Mvemve, performing is not about accepting one’s current class position, but about strategically shifting out of it. The performance of literacy for these women allows them to position themselves at the forefront of class movement. Not being able to write is not a final determinant for the women, and neither

is it a reflection of their abilities. Rather, it provides the impetus, the opening that allows the women to reevaluate their social places and begin to imagine ways of renegotiating or transitioning out of the position their interdicted identities force them to occupy. This ambivalent position for Jagua is marked on one hand by the intense desire to be a traditional, socially respectable woman, wife, and mother, and a desire, on the other hand, to live outside of the rigid identificatory confines established by her society, a society that does not sanction the non-normative female identity she represents or the possibilities for same-sex intimacy and romance she introduces. As Jagua confronts the limitations governing her identity as a woman in post-independence Nigeria, she also struggles with the impediments posed by her class(less) position and consequent privation. In postcolonial African society, the unemployed or underemployed are situated at an important crossroads, reminders of the collision of “traditional” past and “modern” future.

#### PERFORMING CLASS<sup>10</sup>

Jagua’s roles in the multiple social worlds she enters require a marked degree of performance, and her letter writing serves as a window into her performance of aspiration. As with everything she does, Jagua is aware of the effect she wants to achieve and the strategy she must employ to obtain the desired outcome. From a performance as seemingly simple as seducing her male acquaintances in order to have them pay for her accommodations or clothing, to being calculated about what language she employs in different settings: “...when she spoke to [Freddie] she always used pidgin English...” (5-6), Jagua establishes control by performing. Performing in different social contexts for

---

<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of women and class in Africa in the colonial and postcolonial period, see Robertson, Claire, and Iris Berger. Eds. *Women and Class in Africa*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986.

Jagua is not just about financial benefits, but, manifestly, about struggling for the social mobility and validation that is denied her. She is as ambitious as even the powerful men vying for their political posts; but, rather than making obvious her intentions, Jagua is calculated and this makes her a more effective strategist than Freddie and Uncle Taiwo, who it should be noted, both end up dead in the narrative. She is not an object devoid of agency, but a subject intentionally directing herself. For Jagua, a performance of hyper-femininity or male-female intimacy is ultimately a strategy through which to alter her social standing, a way to take ownership of her own identity. Ekwensi's novel meaningfully highlights Jagua's inability to fit into the traditional roles of wife or mother. She is unable to become pregnant with her young lover, Freddie. By the end of the novel, Jagua has returned to her family home in the village. She has a fling with a stranger from the city who stops by occasionally to visit her market stall, and she ends up pregnant: "Jagua's mother named the baby *Nnochi* which means *Replacement*. One old and dead, the other new and young and full of promise. And when at dusk the drums beat under the banana leaves, Jagua turned and listened to the rhythms that to hear meant happiness" (190). The baby lives for three days before passing away as Jagua feeds him:

On the third day, Jagua put Nnochi to the breast. It was early evening and her mother and Rosa had not come in from the farm. Jagua felt a sudden slackening of the lips on her nipple. She looked at the face of her newborn infant. It was turning an ashen colour. She gazed, not understanding. The life was draining out of Nnochi. Dumbfounded Jagua watched Nnochi stiffen, and then all movement ceased. (191)

Tellingly, the baby dies in the act of feeding on his mother's milk. A process generally associated with giving life is here linked to death. The underlying suggestion is that Jagua's milk, the essence of her motherhood, is unable to sustain life. She is not a woman meant to occupy the traditional, heteronormative role of wife and mother, and the narrative makes that clear.

In attempting to redefine the woman's place in post-independence African societies, authors begin to deconstruct or re-imagine existing modes of conceiving of family units.<sup>11</sup> Jagua's loss of her son re-establishes her as part of a community of women; Jagua is attended to by her mother (whose husband, Jagua's father, has since passed), and Rosa, who has left Lagos. Like Wanda, who establishes a clan of women at the end of her own narrative, Jagua is here shown being cared for by Rosa, the only individual with whom she forms a true and enduring bond. Although Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* does not directly depict female-female desire—there are no scenes of sexual intimacy between the two women—the introduction of the emotionally intimate bond between Jagua and Rosa acknowledges the wider range of nontraditional female identities, relationships, and sexualities gently hinted at in the novel. Indeed, it is quite suggestive that the only true emotional connection Jagua experiences occurs with another woman, that her relationship with men leaves her barren and unfulfilled, and that her narrative ends with her in a safe haven peopled by her mother and Rosa. Jagua's early negotiation of her world through 'body-barter' makes it evident that her sexual relationship to men is borne of necessity and gain. This dialectic of manipulation and stratagem is overturned by an emotional connection with another woman that teaches

---

<sup>11</sup> For more on traditional conceptions of women, gender, and family in Africa, see Cornwall, Andrea. Ed. *Readings in Gender in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

Jagua not only how to care for another individual, but also how to accept care in return. The bond forged between the two women subverts the usual male-female model and destabilizes it as the only acceptable paradigm in which intimacy may be staged. The novel therefore leaves the reader, not with a vision of a postcolony that speciously replaces the patriarchal colonial nation with a female collective, but one that recognizes a greater range of possibilities for intimacy and romantic attachment—essentially, one in which same-sex romance is not a covert, marginalized alternative but another equally viable avenue to home and family. In the post-independence period being presented in Ekwensi's novel, all such negotiations—or negations—of “appropriate” female identity are necessary. Clearly, it is not enough to rewrite the man's place as a product of a changed political and social context; Jagua's narrative stresses the need to similarly re-imagine the woman's place within these evolving historical moments. Jagua embarks on her revisionary journey by writing a letter that alters her conception of self and place in a newly liberated nation. Letter writing, as Jagua proves, begins to make possible new identities, new intimacies, and new postcolonial patterns.

## CHAPTER 2\_Engendering the Letter: Form and Function in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

The representation of an exchange between a letter writer and recipient is a fixture of the epistolary novel. This convention is being meaningfully transformed, however, in the postcolonial African literary context, where writers are significantly altering the standard epistolary form to document the political and social upheaval of their countries shortly before and after independence. In contrast to large scale historical novels capturing the disquiet of these times, the epistolary novel focuses on the intimate sphere and the letter provides a vehicle to explore individual struggles for self-definition in a new nation. I argue that this emphasis on the postcolonial individual's interior journey has fueled the prevalence of what I call "partial correspondence" epistolary novels. In a partial correspondence epistolary novel, only the writer's engagement with the letter-writing process is highlighted, calling attention to the writing individual's attempts to fashion a new self or fully embrace a transformed one through a process of self-evaluation and assessment. The writer of the letter, in essence, becomes its first reader. Forced to confront the self being projected in the letter, the writer becomes conscious of how she will be received and "read" by another. This split enables the letter writer to undergo a process of revision in an attempt to reconcile or at least explore the gap between public and private understanding of gender, sexuality, and class in a historical moment of social and political transformation. Mariama Bâ's 1981 novel, *So Long a Letter*, is a key example of a partial correspondence epistolary novel. In her portrayal of Ramatoulaye, a widow who experiences a series of enlightenments while writing a letter,

Bâ highlights how the act of letter-writing propels her protagonist's growth. The novel narrates the experiences of Ramatoulaye, a woman in post-independence Senegal who is observing the requisite mourning period following the death of her husband. According to Islamic precepts, she must remain isolated in a room for a 40-day period. Ramatoulaye spends this mourning period writing a letter to her best friend, Aissatou. In the letter, she recalls the country's independence and the hope she initially felt about her place within a new generation of African woman. The letter also delves into Ramatoulaye's husband's decision to take a second wife, a decision that effectively left her with twelve children to care for and an uncertain sense of her identity in a traditional, strongly Islamic, patriarchal society.

#### ROMANTIC EPISTOLARY TRADITION

In the romantic European epistolary tradition from which Bâ borrows, the heroines are usually illustrated penning letters to male lovers or objects of unrequited affection.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Aissatou here functions as a replacement for Ramatoulaye's husband. She is the confidant whose loyalty Ramatoulaye never questions. In place of the heteronormative relationship that has resulted in Ramatoulaye's imprisonment, the letter introduces a homosocial model that has Ramatoulaye poised to exit her period of confinement upon Aissatou's arrival: "These caressing words, which relax me, are indeed from you. And you tell me of the 'end'. I calculate. Tomorrow is indeed the end of my seclusion. And you will be there within reach of my hand, my voice, my eyes" (71-72). In poignantly romantic language, Ramatoulaye suggests that Aissatou will effectively liberate her. "Till tomorrow my friend," Ramatoulaye begins the final section of her

---

<sup>12</sup> For further exploration of epistolarity in European novels, see Beebee, Thomas O. *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999.



novel, “We will then have time to ourselves, especially as I have obtained an extension of my widow’s leave” (88). Ramatoulaye anticipates the time she and Aissatou will spend together. There is an allusion to privacy, of an imminent, uninterrupted period of intimacy between the women. Indeed, the relationship between the two women serves to undermine the traditional male-female dynamic that has relegated Ramatoulaye to a room of the house. It is after all the death of her husband that has forced her to remain sequestered for 40 days. And it is the arrival of her female friend that will mark the end of her confinement.

From this room in which she observes the requisite period of mourning following her husband’s death, Ramatoulaye writes the letter that is the text of Bâ’s novel. As Ramatoulaye writes her epistle, she recalls the trajectory that has brought her to this particular juncture in life. She remembers the eagerness with which she and her fellow female compatriots looked to their country’s independence, believing in all that it promised for the advancement of African women:

...being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women, there were very few of us. Men would call us scatter-brained. Others labelled us devils. But many wanted to possess us. How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed. (14-15)

The language of this passage is at once defiant and bittersweet. She writes from a woman-centered perspective that wishes a different outcome for her country. There is an acknowledgement of the uniqueness of the female identity she and the other women like

her represent; they were “devils,” content to be regarded as such rather than perceived as angels if it would ensure a more accepting post-independence nation. In describing the men’s desire to possess them, she introduces the tension facing women who ultimately had few options but to become wives, mothers, and possessions of men. In giving in to those limited roles, they also give up their dreams of change and are ultimately left with nothing. This emphasis on a women-centered consciousness and community of women comes up repeatedly in the narratives of postcolonial African women. The turn to other women speaks to recognition of shared experiences and challenges, but it also symbolically represents a rejection of those traditional patterns of intimacy that require women and men to turn to one another. Following the loss of her husband, Ramatoulaye turns to her female confidant, her friend, and the only individual with whom she creates emotional intimacy. Aissatou is, in essence, Modou’s replacement.

In addition to providing needed support during her period of mourning, Ramatoulaye’s writing offers the opportunity for her to undertake an introspective journey. Ramatoulaye’s epistolary mission is a manifest attempt to re-imagine herself. She invokes Aissatou with the hope of creating a self that will be deserving of her independent and strong-willed friend’s respect. And by extension, a self that Ramatoulaye herself will be proud of. In “Correspondance et création littéraire: Mariama Ba’s Une si longue lettre,” Renée Larrier asserts: “One can say that for Ramatoulaye writing to Aissatou is like writing to herself” (748). Indeed, the bond between the women is powerful. *So Long a Letter* starts off with the statement: “I have received your letter.” The letter to which Ramatoulaye refers in the first line is the impetus for her epistolary engagement with Aissatou. Aissatou effectively sparks Ramatoulaye’s writing of the

letter and helps initiate the eventual transformation in Ramatoulaye's life. Significantly, the absence of Aissatou's initial letter positions Ramatoulaye as the focus of epistolary scrutiny. This nuance in the epistolary narrative design underscores female identity that is not contingent upon interaction and exchange with a male figure or correspondent. In a patriarchal society in which women are defined by and through their relationships to men, the absence of a male figure in the epistolary exchange is important. It speaks to a community of women determining themselves without the often restrictive intervention of male figures. The women in Bâ's work write for and to each other. Essentially, Ramatoulaye and other similarly situated women are finally discovering their voices, or pens. When Aissatou leaves her husband because of his decision to take a second wife, Ramatoulaye is impressed by her friend's determination and resilience. She is in awe of Aissatou for ending up successful as an independent woman, emigrating to Europe and then America, and taking care of her children without any assistance. Although Ramatoulaye never brings herself to physically leave her husband, she harbors no illusions about her marriage, and through his death, it could be argued that Modou ultimately does the leaving. Aissatou creates for Ramatoulaye a new model in which a woman is liberated from the demands of traditional wifedom. Early in the novel, Ramatoulaye's decisions had been based primarily on her adherence to religious principles and familial obligations. She admits: "I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizons for four months and ten days do not bother me" (8). She is figuratively and literally caged in by her fidelity to the precepts of her social world. However, Bâ's novel, along with the other novels I consider

in these chapters, shows how letter writing effectively reworks the women's understanding of their social worlds. The act of writing the letter unsettles something in the writing woman, causing her to examine her society anew and simultaneously explore how, if at all, she fits in to it. In these novels, letter writing, an act occurring in the private sphere but dependent on communicating oneself and then anticipating how that self will be publicly received, becomes integral to the development of a gendered postcolonial or post-independence conception of nationhood. Through their seemingly simple letters, these female protagonists engage in transformative journeys that signify on the personal as well as political level.

#### RELIGION, CLASS, AND GENDER

*So Long a Letter*, published in French in 1980 and translated into English in 1981, offers a compelling narrative of the interplay of religion, class, and gender in postcolonial Senegal. Senegal, a country that attained independence in 1960 after 300 years of French colonization, experienced—like many other postcolonial African countries—an enduring period of political, social, and economic instability following independence. At the time during which Bâ's novel was published, the country was still struggling to find its footing amidst the French colonial legacy and its own cultural and religion-informed ideas of nationhood. Bâ's epistolary novel, one of the first of its kind in Africa, serves as a testament to the fraught political situation of the country. In postcolonial Senegal the position of women in society was and still remains in a state of flux, informed as it has been since colonialism by the rules inculcated by the Islamic religion and colonial

education, as well as persistent beliefs concerning gender roles.<sup>13</sup> In the wake of national independence, the country was and is still engaged in a process of redefining womanhood. The epistolary novel with its pseudo-stream-of-consciousness narration is at once a fitting testimony and a metaphor for the evolving voices of women. Bâ's protagonist, Ramatoulaye, a member of the educated, privileged class, finds herself caught in the interstices of tradition and rebellion, custom and change. This short novel, which has been the subject of much debate and critical analysis, appears to have popularized the epistolary form in African literature, a form which is only now becoming a more visible part of the African literary corpus. In "Epistolary Friendship: La prise de parole in Mariama Bâ's Une si longue lettre", Ann McElaney-Johnson states that "Bâ distinguishes herself from her contemporaries in her choice of genre. Although the first-person narrative is common in the African corpus, it is usually represented in the form of autobiography or journal writing. Letter novels are a rarity" (111). A narrative form made up of letters exchanged between two or more individuals, the epistolary novel had primarily been associated with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French and British women's writing. Bâ, who like her protagonist, was a product of French colonial systems of education, had likely been exposed to French literature and based her own writing on the texts and patterns to which she was accustomed.<sup>14</sup> Adopting the form as a vehicle for political engagement in her own country shows a meaningful adoption of the tools of oppression.

---

<sup>13</sup> For more discussion of the role of Islam in shaping gender identity in postcolonial Senegal, see Creevey, Lucy E., "The Impact of Islam on Women in Senegal." *The Journal of Developing Areas*. 25.3 (April 1991), 347–368.

<sup>14</sup> Shaun Irlam discusses the influence of Bâ's colonial education on her writing. Irlam, Shaun. "Mariama Bâ's 'Une Si Longue Lettre': The Vocation of Memory and the Space of Writing." *Research in African Literatures*. 29.2 (Summer 1998), 76–93.

## NEW APPROACHES TO THE FORM

Janet Gurkin's *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982) paved way for a clearer understanding of the significance of the emergent form. Generally dismissed as women's sentimental fare, Gurkin's invitation to dig deeper into "the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning" encouraged a revisiting of literary epistles. Of the development of this form, Gurkin writes: "Literary historians who investigate the origins and fortunes of the letter genre necessarily contribute to our general understanding of the novel itself, since epistolary narrative is primarily a product of that formative era in which the novel staked out its claim to status as a major genre" (intro 5). What this assertion in fact suggests is the co-emergence of two forms, one that was initially the domain of male writers and another that was popularized by women writers. Indeed, the epistolary form appealed to women writers who felt it effectively represented the social and political situation they were in: relegated to the domestic sphere and excluded from the politics of the day. Letters were intimate, private, tied to female concerns, and therefore removed from and not disturbing to the dominant, patriarchal order. The transfer of the form to the postcolonial African context is equally, if not more, momentous.

Bâ's characterization of her protagonist Ramatoulaye's position in the home is perhaps the most eloquent summary of the postcolonial women's national identity: she is excluded, isolated, and outside of the realm of any real involvement in the social and political events that define the nation. Her writing is an attempt to articulate this complex position and her relationship to national identity. The form of writing she chooses serves to underscore the individual nature of the postcolonial experience. Ramatoulaye and

Aissatou, although they share a gendered identity as ‘women,’ write and inhabit significantly different postcolonial situations. Ramatoulaye, who is born to a respectable family, experiences her identity as a woman in Senegal differently from Aissatou, who, as the daughter of a goldsmith is disapproved of by her husband’s aristocratic family. This attention to caste fractures the supposedly uniform representation of Senegalese female postcoloniality—to say nothing of *African* female postcolonial identity, in general. But it still successfully offers a statement about the collective mission of women to create a voice and acknowledged identity for themselves. Of the interconnectedness of women’s writing and national identity, Simon Gikandi writes in *Writing in Limbo*: “As the self struggles with its crisis of identity, so does the nation; as the nation strives for forms and styles of expressing itself, and yearns for a language in which to articulate what Benedict Anderson has aptly called its modalities, so does the subject seek its unique utterance” (217). *So Long a Letter* narrates the development of a post-independence woman, and she in turn serves as a symbolic representation of her nation’s coming-of-age. Through her rendering of Ramatoulaye’s epistolary quest to articulate and redefine her citizenship in the newly independent country, Bâ depicts Senegal’s coming to terms with its new identity as a liberated nation. Responding to that need for “forms and styles” and “a language in which to articulate” the national journey, Bâ utilizes the epistolary form, a form which encodes meaning through content and form. I argue that if the traditional novel form symbolically represents the nation, fully defined, standard, under the purview of the dominant patriarchal governing forces, then the epistolary novel represents the silenced, undefined, non-standard attempt to write into or against the national script and, even more critically, to add dimension to the postcolonial

experience.<sup>15</sup> Ramatoulaye's letter is an attempt to articulate her own national narrative, but exiled as she—and women—continue to be from political and historically significant platforms, her only alternative is to write from her space of isolation. The women's letter writing functions as a unique and necessary attempt to rewrite master narratives and to find methods for making themselves a *heard* part of the new nation. It further establishes a community of letter writers and recipients, a community made of women who are similarly engaged in the project of recreating their national landscapes.

Ramatoulaye, who initially believes that independence will be the impetus for change in the woman's place in the postcolonial nation, writes in her letter: "It was the privilege of our generation to be the link between two periods in our history, one of domination, the other of independence. We remained young and efficient, for we were the messengers of a new design. With independence achieved, we witnessed the birth of a republic, the birth of an anthem and the implantation of a flag" (25). That symbolic birth, accompanied by so many dreams and desires about the country, eventually gave way to disappointment. In spite of this new nation being (re)born, women were left out of political conversations that would effect real national change. As the many promises heralded by independence failed to materialize, so did the hopes about a transformation of the woman's place and identity in the postcolonial nation. Ramatoulaye and other women of similar class and background were educated within the French colonial system. As privileged members of this educated, literate social class, they envisioned themselves as creators of a new female national identity. Unfortunately, Ramatoulaye's letter

---

<sup>15</sup> See Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., and Tiffin, H. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge, 2002, a seminal text on the significance of writing in the colonial and postcolonial contexts.



documents instead the unfulfilled hopes represented by her failed marriage and her ongoing endeavor to rewrite her identity as a woman. Initially Ramatoulaye operates within a social system whose precepts she still obeys. She does not at first truly see herself as capable of sidestepping tradition or behaving in a way that elicits disapproval—hence her observance of the mourning practice for a husband who left her. The union with her husband is a product of that old, male-determined system. Ramatoulaye’s earlier description of the men’s desire to “possess” the women emphasizes not the romantic love that Ramatoulaye initially insists is or was the basis of her relationship with Modou, but, rather, the fact that for the men, their relationship to *their* women is predicated on possession, ownership, and the ability to show on a social level the wealth-in-persons represented by multiple wives, large families, and numerous possessions. Modou, as the novel later makes clear, obtains a second wife that he is ill-prepared to financially support. His debt increases with futile attempts to show his second set of in-laws that he is capable of providing for them and satisfying their wishes and wants. He purchases a car for Binetou, the second wife, puts her in a new home, and buys her mother, his mother-in-law, trinkets and objects to appease her appetite for material goods. His relationship to Binetou serves as his attempt to establish or affirm his social status as a man of means. Essentially, his maleness or masculine identity is defined by the same patriarchal system that repeatedly attempts to delimit the contours of Ramatoulaye’s identity as a woman. So although on the personal level Ramatoulaye’s transformation has begun, she is in advance of any large-scale societal shifts. She represents instead the potential and need for such changes to occur.

The epistolary novel in the African literary corpus builds from the French and British tradition, but there are a number of factors that make it, in its postcolonial incarnation, a uniquely African form. Gurkin's work examines the French and British seduction novels that were at the forefront of the epistolary tradition. Gurkin discusses the letter's function in bridging the distance between sender and recipient—the letter effects proximity and intimacy; establishing the letter recipient's role as confidant for the letter writer—a space in which the writer may disclose personal details; and asserting the value of the letter recipient whose role is so crucial that he or she is the sole distinguishing factor between an epistolary novel and a first-person novel. These aspects of the epistolary novel are significant because they establish the form's uniqueness, and, even more importantly, allow the narrative themes to develop in tandem with that particular form. The formal aspects of the epistolary novel are put into the service of advancing plot. In Bâ's novel, although Aissatou is only represented as an absent figure in Ramatoulaye's life, she is still the unseen presence that makes possible the epistolary setup. That Bâ presents her narrative in epistolary form rather than as a first-person narrative is critical. Where a first-person narrative would highlight the experiences of the protagonist—an emphasis which would effectively document Ramatoulaye's process of development—it would de-emphasize the importance of the female community that is so crucial to the African novel's letter-writing theme. The idea of female intimacy and a community of women is a recurring and meaningful subject of the novels discussed in this project. Such a community is made possible by the presence of other female characters who may or may not be the recipients of the epistles, but are affected by the realizations the letter writer makes through that process of writing. This epistolary

connection documents and testifies to the need in the women's lives to revolt against systems that fail to recognize them. Ramatoulaye writes in her letter to Aissatou, "Eternal questions of our eternal debates. We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present" (18-19). In Ramatoulaye's discussion of progress, she is careful to note that the process of "dismantling" is not about completely doing away with all markers of tradition, but about introducing modernity in a way that allows for female inclusion and value. The success of the project, as her letter suggests, lies in women arriving at a shared understanding of their postcolonial situations and then beginning to effect transformations in their personal lives.

In "Re-visions, Re-flections, Re-creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women," Elizabeth Campbell writes that the epistolary novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were primarily concerned with love and often detailed the experiences of women abandoned by untrustworthy male seducers. But, as Campbell observes, in the novels, "...emerging in the second half of the century, however, as in other types of modern novels by women, the women are concerned with much more than their love lives. They are concerned most of all with seeking their individual identity, and in doing so the epistolary novels they write do not always conform to the traditional style just described" (334). Campbell further suggests that the modifications in epistolary form and content become evident "at a time when women are both conscious of new freedoms available to them and angry about past and present repression" (334). In Bâ's work, the transition from the romantic preoccupation to the more political imperative is evident in Ramatoulaye's letter. She sometimes speaks nostalgically of her early love affair with her

husband, then she shifts and begins to lament her disappointment over his eventual abandonment of their family. In this respect, Ramatoulaye's letter bears echoes of early epistolary novel content. As her letter continues, Ramatoulaye turns her attention to more political and social matters; she writes of the society her daughters will one day inherit and of what legacy she will leave them. "I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world," Ramatoulaye writes (88). Ramatoulaye looks to the future; she analyzes "the decisions that decide our future" (88). And when she speaks of "our," she includes in this collective fellow women. She believes that "all women have the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed" (88). She recognizes the role she and others must play in changing their fate in their post-independence country.

It is clear from Ramatoulaye's letter, that as Gurkin argues in her work on epistolary form, "...not only are the physical letters primary agents in the plot, but the entire psychological action in the novel advances through the letter writing itself" (9). The psychological and psychical implications of Ramatoulaye's long letter cannot be overlooked. The epistle she pens is a literal representation of the journey she is on. It is undefined, providing no clear picture of what the destination's terrain will resemble or entail. A comparison of Aissatou's and Ramatoulaye's letters is certainly worth making: The meandering, retrospective nature of Ramatoulaye's epistle suggests uncertainty in a way that Aissatou's concise, unequivocal and short letter does not. Aissatou sums up her position in 25 lines; Ramatoulaye remains unable to fully achieve the same in 89 pages. Indeed, the epistolary focus is on Ramatoulaye, who unlike Aissatou, is remaking herself following her husband's death. The partial correspondence pattern therefore emphasizes

Ramatoulaye's epistolary journey, rather than Aissatou's, to underscore the self-defining struggle she is still engaged in. Ramatoulaye must continue to write, whereas Aissatou's writing is complete. Further, the weaving together of the two letters highlights, firstly, the divergent strategies through which the women go about their processes of self-realization. It further underscores the reality of multiple narratives being essential to the constitution of an inclusive, collectively beneficial meta-narrative. Indeed, rather than creating a reply letter for Aissatou in which Aissatou narrates her own life story and tells of her experiences as a woman in post-independence Senegal, Bâ presents her story as part of Ramatoulaye's narrative. Structurally, this serves to align the women on the same side of the national question. The text depicts the unity of a merged letter, a fitting symbol for the mutually supportive relationship of the two letter-writing women.

The letter form cannot be considered within the postcolonial context without some attention to what it signifies in terms of orality and literacy. African history shows that valuable cultural information was transmitted through verbal exchanges as pre-colonial and much of colonial African societies were oral cultures; the act of speaking—the value inherent in passing knowledge through speech acts—is therefore an important part of the colonial and postcolonial legacy in African countries. The emphasis on letters as attempts to give “voice” necessarily foregrounds the role of orality in the epistolary exchange. If the letter is the vehicle through which these women are attempting to speak or articulate their identities, then the letter is at once a product of speech-making and script-making. It is the symbolic projection of a voice as much as it is the literal documentation of the words being spoken. Equally significant is the fact that it highlights women's position at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. If orality represents the

old system based on tradition, and literacy/writing signifies progress and modernity, then the symbolic bridging of these two disparate temporalities, as embodied by the letter, is a statement about the situation of the postcolonial woman. Inhabiting a position somewhere between the old and the new, she struggles to speak or write her way out of the old and into the new. Ramatoulaye in fact writes, “Torn between the past and the present, we deplored the ‘hard sweat’ that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive” (19). Since no space yet exists for her, Ramatoulaye’s is a struggle not only to define herself, but also to demand a space of belonging in the postcolonial nation and challenge the authority of the governing forces.

The writing of letters is about creating a personal narrative that parallels the public narrative heretofore primarily penned by male members of society. The letter functions as an attempt to speak out against the issues that affect the public arena and trickle down to adversely affect the lives within the private space; having no public arena from which to verbalize their concerns, the women writers make do from the home space.<sup>16</sup> Initially excluded from access to education, women were seen as incapable of meaningfully contributing to political and national discourse. In “Muslim Women in a Multilingual Context: Orality and Literacy in Francophone Afro-Islamic Societies,” Ousseina Alidou summarizes the relationship between colonial women and education: Frenchmen were unfamiliar with “the principle of equality between men and women” and this contributed to persistent devaluation of female citizens. “Consequently,” Alidou writes, “...the female colonized African subjects were considered little in the colonial

---

<sup>16</sup> For more on women’s emancipatory gestures in literature, see Yaeger, Patricia. *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women’s Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

project of the so-called ‘French civilization mission,’ a project in which education in the French language was assumed to uplift them from their ‘state of savagery’” (55). As women were considered irrelevant to the creation of the ‘new colonial order,’ so were they disregarded in the aftermath of decolonization. Viewed by a patriarchal society as unequal members, Muslim women, like Ramatoulaye, who were granted access to education, formed a very small minority. In spite of this access to education, women were still expected to occupy the domestic sphere and fulfill their household obligations—even in the event that they also chose to seek an occupation outside the home. Ramatoulaye recalls, “Try explaining to them that a working woman is no less responsible for her home. Try explaining to them that nothing is done if you do not step in, that you have to see to everything, do everything all over again: cleaning up, cooking, ironing. There are the children to be washed, the husband to be looked after. The working woman has a dual task, of which both halves, equally arduous, must be reconciled” (20). Ramatoulaye here laments the difficulties of balancing tradition and independence.

The woman’s place, against which Ramatoulaye agitates, is one of little recognition and an undefined status. As Bower compellingly asserts, “In the private space of letters, women, so often silenced in public life, have personal freedom in which to rewrite the self and even, sometimes, to rewrite others” (5). This possibility of rewriting others underscores the interconnectedness of the women’s experience. It is not only a process of rewriting the nation for oneself, but one of creating new paradigms for national sisters. Ramatoulaye’s letter is an indirect criticism of the politics of her social world that exclude her and other women, in spite of being as educated as their male

counterparts, from having any political impact. In a telling conversation between Ramatoulaye and a former suitor, they discuss this predicament:

‘Nearly twenty years of independence! When will we have the first female minister involved in the decisions concerning the development of our country? And yet the militancy and ability of our women, their disinterested commitment, have already been demonstrated. Women have raised more than one man to power.’

Daouda listened to me. But I had the impression that more than my ideas, it was my voice that captivated him.

And I continued: ‘When will education be decided for children on the basis not of sex but of talent?’

Daouda Dieng was savouring the warmth of the inner dream he was spinning around me. As for me, I was bolting like a horse that has long been tethered and is now free and reveling in space.’ (61)

Here, Ramatoulaye and Daouda Dieng are supposedly equals engaged in an impassioned political discussion. He echoes her views that “Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, companions to be flattered or calmed with promises” (61). Ramatoulaye is similarly vocal in her critique of a society that circumscribes her potential in frustrating ways. However, the full import of their dialogue is undermined by the subtext of romantic interest. Later on in the novel, Daouda asks Ramatoulaye to become one of his wives. He is already married, but having long loved Ramatoulaye, Daouda hopes she will consent to becoming a second wife. In spite of the respectful nature of their earlier conversation, Daouda’s interest in Ramatoulaye effectively undercuts its seriousness and, furthermore, introduces the male-female marital dynamic that assesses the woman as something to be possessed. A true exchange between equals is forestalled by his desire to claim her. Daouda, arguably one of the more progressive male characters in the novel, cannot see past Ramatoulaye’s femaleness to



truly value her potential contributions to their society. This is the impasse that gives rise to Ramatoulaye's need to write and ultimately inspires her rejection of heteronormative bonds. She realizes that even as Daouda listens to her, his evaluation of her ideas is superficial. Admittedly, for Ramatoulaye too, this male-female dynamic has its appeal. She revels in Daouda's admiration. "Ah, the joy of having an interlocutor before you, especially an admirer," Ramatoulaye proclaims. Still yielding to male-female hierarchical relations, Ramatoulaye reduces a provocative discussion to a trivial assessment of her value as a woman worthy of admiration. She essentially objectifies herself by concluding the discussion that has taken place with a summation of how her charms have captivated the suitor. Thusly, her critique of a society that restricts female potential remains within the realm of futile discourse. Ramatoulaye at times shows powerful discontent with the social mores and politics of her country and society, but her occasional acquiescence to those same gendered politics highlights the enduring nature of societal mores. Of this recurring pattern of ambivalence in the novel, Christopher Miller, author of *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*, writes: "The tone of the ending is sharply different from the beginning: Ramatoulaye celebrates the liberation of women as an emergence 'from the shadows,' while at the same time she reaffirms the 'inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman'" (280). There is at once the desire to refashion the self, but also the indoctrination—religious, social, colonial—that keeps Ramatoulaye from fully emerging from the psychic imprisonment she endures. She is both product and producer of her own systems of subjugation. This multivalent portrayal is a powerful reminder of the psychic chains effected by colonialism and by the strict traditions of even postcolonial societies. Ramatoulaye eventually begins to show

her discontent with those systems by rejecting Daouda's marriage proposal, the acceptance of which would have her resubmitting to traditional and religious expectations of appropriate femaleness. She turns instead to the comparative freedom and supportive nature of the female bond that she has established with Aissatou. The rejection of Daouda is in essence an affirmation of the value of female community and union.

There are moments in the novel that show Ramatoulaye recognizing the effect her traditions, religion, and educational background have had on her. In those instances she emerges defiant, willful, and brave enough to part with tradition. After the death of her husband Ramatoulaye is approached by a string of suitors hoping to make her a wife. She breaks her silence and aggressively refuses all of them, including her husband Modou's brother who assumes he is doing her a great service. Ramatoulaye rejects the potential comforts of a remarriage, refusing to be inherited by another man. This refusal testifies to strength of character. However, there are other instances in which she gives into tradition. For example, she recalls her decision to remain with her husband after he reveals his decision to take a new wife: "Yes, I was well aware of where the right solution lay, the dignified solution. And, to my family's great surprise unanimously disapproved of by my children, who were under Daba's influence, I chose to remain. Modou and Mawdo were surprised, could not understand...." (45). Modou, Ramatoulaye's husband, and Mawdo, Aissatou's ex-husband, are befuddled by her decision to stay. In describing her dilemma, Ramatoulaye makes a distinction between "the right solution, the dignified solution," and her own choice to remain with the husband who has betrayed her, suggesting that this is in fact the "wrong" decision. Ramatoulaye recalls the love she once felt for her husband, and she feels an obligation to honor that memory by remaining. She also acknowledges

the practical aspects of her decision: “Leave? Start again at zero, after living twenty-five years with one man, after having borne twelve children? Did I have enough energy to bear alone the weight of this responsibility, which was both moral and material?” (39-40). Cognizant of the moral implications of the choice, of the statement it makes about her acceptance of the social mores that frequently frustrate her, and still willing to accept the status quo, it is in moments such as this one that the reader is asked to understand that not even personal revolutions occur overnight.

In deciding to leave her husband when confronted with the same situation as Ramatoulaye—Aissatou’s husband also takes a second wife—Aissatou pens a letter which concludes with the following:

At that moment you tumbled from the highest rung of respect on which I have always placed you. Your reasoning, which makes a distinction, is unacceptable to me: on one side, me, ‘your life, your love, your choice’, on the other, ‘young Nabou, to be tolerated for reasons of duty’.

Mawdo, man is one: greatness and animal fused together. None of his acts is pure charity. None is pure bestiality.

I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way.

Goodbye,

Aissatou (31-32)

In Aissatou’s letter, there is a marked difference in emphasis. Rather than assuming blame for her circumstances or even attempting to come to terms with what has occurred, Aissatou powerfully directs her anger at the cause: her ex-husband, Mawdo Ba. There is no equivocation. There are no romantic ruminations about the love they once shared or any desire to salvage something of that past. Rather, there is a powerful sense of self and

an understanding of having been wronged. Aissatou's choice to leave her husband signifies not only personal unshackling, but also a decisive rejection of traditional womanhood. In walking away from her husband, Aissatou walks away from a designation as wife and mother within a traditional system. She leaves the country with her children and becomes self-sustaining. As Ramatoulaye notes, "...examinations sat and passed took you also to France. The School of Interpreters, from which you graduated, led to your appointment into the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. You make a very good living. You are developing in peace, as your letters tell me..." (32-33). Aissatou claims her independence, and chooses not to revisit the role of wife or female companion to a male. This rejection of the conventional family unit and name in favor of selective attachment and forged intimacy—as presented through her relationship with Ramatoulaye—affirms Aissatou and Ramatoulaye's positions, albeit to varying degrees, as forerunners of new postcolonial female paradigms. While Aissatou's movement away from Senegal is significant for showing her strength and independence as a woman, it speaks volumes that her liberation can only be realized outside the formerly colonial space. This option of migration to Western countries is not available to every post colonial woman, and highlights Aissatou's privileged class position. Additionally, and perhaps more substantially, escaping the postcolonial context, while perhaps beneficial on an individual basis, does nothing to address or repair the fundamental problems faced by the nation. Ramatoulaye serves as a reminder of the very real constraints that keep women in similar positions from simply stepping out of—or traveling away from—their circumstances.

In her portrayal of Ramatoulaye, Bâ represents the complexity of the historical and political position postcolonial women find themselves in. Ramatoulaye accepts the dictates of tradition and allows them to be the governing principles of her life and behavior. She remains secluded, outside of the realm of any real political engagement as a result of this adherence to tradition. Nevertheless, this rendering of Ramatoulaye, especially in light of the more progressive presentation of Aissatou, truly captures the nuanced nature of postcolonial female subjectivity. The transition from colonialism to postcolonialism was far from seamless, and neither did it signal an instantaneous transformation in the way those societies conceived of their female citizens. Where Aissatou is a woman who finds her subjectivity away from her homeland and pioneers postcolonial diasporic migrations, Ramatoulaye represents something different; Ramatoulaye is the woman, much like Sissie in Ama Ata Aidoo's novel, the text I consider in the following chapter, who embraces the challenge of redefining herself and her place in the nation. For Aissatou, migration makes possible her survival. The implication is that if she remained in Senegal, she would not have been able to do for herself or her children what she is able to do by going to the United States. The United States, more advanced in certain respects regarding its treatment of female and race at this time, provided a more hospitable environment for Aissatou's independence. Ramatoulaye, by contrast, chooses what some would argue is the easier path—and perhaps an equal number would argue the opposite—in order to begin effecting change, however gradually and minimally, in the role of women in her postcolonial country. She begins the slow process of parting with tradition by refusing to be inherited as a second wife by a male relative. She redefines her relationship with her daughters by providing

them with guidance, not as a strict disciplinarian, but as a woman who acknowledges the changing landscape of her country and of women's place in it. A telling passage reads, "Was I to blame for having given my daughters a bit of liberty? My grandfather did not allow young people in his house....As for myself, I let my daughters go out from time to time. They went to the cinema without me. They received male and female friends....I created a favourable atmosphere for sensible behaviour and for confidence" (77).

Ramatoulaye seeks to usher in, in her own humble way, a new era of female independence and progress. It is important to consider that Ramatoulaye's household is made up of a majority of female members, daughters and friends. Ramatoulaye repeatedly discusses the changing dynamics, for women, of their postcolonial space. This preoccupation with the female question and preponderance of female characters is a significant nod to the novel's emphasis on female community and intimacy. It is only through these female bonds that either woman, Ramatoulaye or Aissatou, is able to understand the nature of a supportive and secure relationship.

Interestingly, in *Ramatoulaye and Aissatou*, Bâ creates dichotomous female characters, one showing the difficulties of negotiating a post-independence narrative when no script yet exists for a woman, and the other showing the alternative that exists in the form of escape from the context that prohibits female growth and progress.

Ramatoulaye remains on the ground and in the postcolonial state, attempting in her less than overtly radical way, to effect minor transformations in the role of the female citizen.

One passage has her celebrating the victory represented by learning to drive:

And I learned to drive, stifling my fear. The narrow space between the wheel and the seat was mine. The flattened clutch glided in the

gears. The brake reduced the forward thrust and, to speed along, I had to step on the accelerator. I did not trust the accelerator. At the slightest pressure from my feet, the car lurched forward. My feet learned to dance over the pedals...I won this battle of nerves and *sang-froid*. I obtained my driving licence and told you about it.

(54)

Ramatoulaye takes pride in learning to drive because doing so offers mobility and movement away from the home space. In another seminal postcolonial novel, *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga perfectly articulates the significance of that simple act of driving. Maiguru, the family matriarch, when confronted by her daughter about remaining with her domineering husband, responds by asking how exactly she is expected to leave without knowing how to drive. Her role within the domestic sphere is so defined that even the mobility signified by a car is denied her: “Nyasha would not compromise,” Tambudzai recalls. “She told Maiguru to learn how to drive. ‘And where do you think I would get the car from?’ her mother retorted. ‘Do you think I can afford to buy one?’” (102). Ironically, the household does in fact have two cars, but both belong to the male head of household, Babamukuru. This lack of physical mobility elucidates the female condition within a patriarchal household and a patriarchal system; the female identity is so fixed that the opportunity for movement or growth is explicitly circumscribed. In working against her fear to drive, Ramatoulaye takes an important step out of seclusion, and this is a movement that suggests the potential for advancement and involvement in the public sphere. Significantly, the car that makes possible Ramatoulaye’s movement is a gift from Aissatou. Earlier, I discuss the fact that Modou

buys a car that he can barely afford for his second wife, Binetou. Aissatou also buys a car for Ramatoulaye, and this creates an interesting parallel between the two couples. That Aissatou is the one who supports Ramatoulaye, at least in this instance, and provides her the means to care for her family, recasts the family unit with the notable insertion of a woman, Aissatou, in the space vacated by a man, Modou. Interestingly, whereas Ramatoulaye was dependent on Modou, with Aissatou she embraces the possibilities of self-sufficiency and independence, and Aissatou encourages this. The latter relationship promotes personal transformation and progress; in contrast, the former relationship was propelled by tradition and adherence to social obligation. The Modou-Aissatou substitution effectively challenges the belief that Ramatoulaye or any other woman must rely on a male figure for financial or emotional support. Reading the novel as a statement about or protest against the limitations imposed on women by heteronormative bonds as determined by rigid patriarchal cultures, the establishment of a woman-to-woman bond between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou clearly speaks volumes about the subtle critique of traditional male-female institutions being made by the novel. The rejection of re-marriage by both women, and the turn to other women for support, friendship, and emotional intimacy, suggests not only a rejection of conventional gender assignments, but also a refusal to adhere to dictates governing companionship. Even if only symbolically meaningful, Bâ's novel begins to rewrite the script for same-sex attachment and intimacy in a postcolonial African society.

In addition to the work the letter does to recast female identity and possible female intimacies in postcolonial contexts, the letter form in Bâ's novel is also meaningful on a temporal level. The receiver of the letter is always marked as absent,



removed not only physically, but also temporally, from the space occupied by the writer. The letter is penned and finished in a fixed moment, sent out, and received by a reader who occupies a different space and time. But in the act of writing, the letter writer *and* the letter are evoked in a specific moment and location. And each time the reader re-reads the letter, she is invoking the past. This invocation not only works to repeatedly resituate the writer in the reader's present, but it also functions to unite time and distance. With each reading, the writer is re-called into the present; with each reading, the reader effects a disruption of definitively marked time and space. This play on temporality so unique to the letter form mirrors, in an appropriately complex fashion, the temporal dimension of postcoloniality. Postcoloniality, a term suggesting a future "historical" moment exists precisely in its relation to coloniality, a supposedly past historical moment. For every attempt to inhabit a postcolonial moment or space, the past of coloniality is necessarily invoked. The future of colonialism, postcoloniality, lives only through its link to that fraught past. Indeed, this reading has far-reaching implications for the study of postcolonialism, and especially for the scholarship that maintains there is no postcolonialism because citizens of formerly colonized countries are still—and perhaps will be indefinitely—situated within a colonial continuum. Anne McClintock's introduction to *Imperial Leather*, "Postcolonialism and the Angel of Progress," for example, critiquing "postcolonialism" for being "prematurely celebratory" and "being haunted by the very figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle," champions the need to be more informed about the terms that are employed in race, culture, gender and other identity scholarship. McClintock criticizes the abundance of "post" words ("postcolonialism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, post-cold war, post-

Marxism, postapartheid, post-Soviet, post-Ford, postfeminism, postnational, posthistoric, even postcontemporary”) for positing an idea of historical-temporal terminality that neglects to take into account historical continuities. The letter form in African fiction offers much in the way of exploring the temporal implications of postcolonial nationhood.

#### DESIRE, INTIMACY, AND GENDER IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

In many post-independence African nations, debates rage about same-sex desire and the stigma attached to non-heteronormative desire and intimacy. In *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*, Dunton and Palmberg write: “In the press generally, commentary has largely been based on a couple of basic contentions. First, that homosexuality is an offence that can readily be conflated with other offenses, such as bestiality, child abuse and the marketing of pornography. Second, that—in the words of a 1987 Lagos publication—‘homosexuality is still largely a Euro-American perversion which has not yet any foothold in Africa’” (24). In a number of African countries that have been the subject of recent media attention, homosexuality is criminalized and forced into secrecy—even the public discussion of it may be grounds for imprisonment or death. LGBT and human rights’ discourse is only slowly beginning to make inroads in postcolonial African societies. I argue that Bâ’s work serves, in light of the provocative nature of such discussions about non-standard sexuality, as a subversive rejection of those systems that police desire. Framed as a conventional narrative, Bâ’s novel uses the letter to invoke female intimacy as a counter-narrative to traditional tales of heterosexual romance and love. Bâ’s novel clandestinely circumvents the prohibitions placed on unconventional romance and attachment. I further argue that the letter makes visible the

connection between two individuals as represented by the overt letter content, but it simultaneously draws attention to the covert or unarticulated subtext of the relationship. On one hand, the letter presents a façade of normalcy, of adherence to social expectation and propriety—it is after all a simple letter to a female friend—but on the other hand, the fact that this pattern is rewritten with the substitution of the male romantic attachment with a female one, suggests an awareness on the writer's part of the need to subtly critique the postcolonial African social *and literary* arenas in which nontraditional romantic bonds are censured or invisibilized. While Bâ's *Ramatoulaye* does not expressly articulate same-sex desire, the novel does clearly indicate the protagonist's dissatisfaction with the limitations of the traditional hetero-paradigm; it also highlights the depth of the deeper-than-just-friendship bond between *Ramatoulaye* and *Aissatou*. Such narratives written well before recent debates about same-sex desire in African serve as calls to arm, reminders of the need to maintain a critique of heteronormative structures that disavow and dehumanize unsanctioned identities.

Letter writing in Bâ's novel, and in the other epistolary novels I consider in this project, inspires a psychic transformation in the letter writer. The letter writer emerges, after the writing, with a more precise understanding of herself and of the inequalities that plague her in a post-independence nation. Letter writing is at once an attempt to refashion the self and physical proof of an existence; it is a veritable gesture of self-proclamation. It requires or implicitly demands that the recipient affirm the existence of the letter writer; unlike the diary form, the letter asks to be received, acknowledged. In Ba's work, letter writing is also about creating new worlds or new nations. In *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*, Amanda Gilroy and W.M. Verhoeven summarize the implication of

women's letter writing. It marks, they argue, "...a shift from perceiving women as epistolary victims to epistolary agents" (19). I would further argue that the epistolary form also represents a movement away from perceptions of women as victims in real historical contexts. Writing acts as a vehicle for fostering female agency. Instead of being the objects about which narratives are constructed, the women become the agents and writers of their own narratives. Bâ's work shows the manner in which the female protagonists transform their personal predicaments into journeys of fulfillment and self-realization—if not realized, at least attempted. In addition to helping articulate these personal narratives of (realized/unrealized) development, the epistolary forms appearing in postcolonial African literature offer an exciting lens into the significance of specifically *African epistolarity*.

In the European context, the emergence of the novel and then the letter form—and related female literacy—was tied to burgeoning class consciousness. The same connections can be made in the postcolonial African context for which social class settings were and in many respects still are nebulous. Gilroy and Verhoeven write of class in Europe: "...we see how letters became attached to different forms of cultural capital at different historical moments, to the emergent imperialist middle class in eighteenth-century England, to the mechanics of popular culture in mid-nineteenth-century America..." (20). Indeed, texts featuring letter writing are doing so to document the social transformations taking place in those various settings. The letters testify to women's heightened awareness of—or discomfort about—their place in the home and in the country. Also evident in the novels I consider in this chapter and in the following is a continuing modification of the women's relationship to letters. Bâ's novel is still tied to

the basic tenets of the European epistolary tradition that highlight romantic love and emotional attachment. Her protagonist borrows from the European notions of male-female romantic love, and, at least initially, does not examine the patriarchal foundation of those ideas enough to realize that they in fact perpetuate the gender inequality that has limited her potential. Ultimately, however, a transformation occurs in the replacement of the object of affection, traditionally male, with a female confidant. By the end of the epistle, a valuation of homosocial bonds based on equality has taken place. With Aidoo's later work, which I consider in Chapter 3, there is little preoccupation with romantic love. The heroine has turned her gaze on the postcolonial condition and is as concerned with global politics as her male counterparts. Sissie, Aidoo's protagonist, already recognizes the role (mis)conceptions of male-female romantic attachments have in restricting a woman's progress, and she is therefore not inclined to circumscribe her potential by falling prey to them; she therefore opts for a nontraditional, "anti-" mode of being. Sissie offers a suitable ending to the epistolary trajectory started by Jagua, who was at the very beginning of understanding her self and her place in an immediately post-independent nation, to Ramatoulaye, who continues that process of self-reflection and epitomizes a still-unrealized sense of national identification, to Sissie, who offers a concretized understanding of her identity as informed by her race, gender, and location. In the following chapter, I further discuss the implications of gender and intimacy, travel and migration, and location and national identity for the postcolonial woman through a reading of Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy or Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint*.

### CHAPTER 3\_From Where Do I Write?: Shifting Locations and Traveling Letters in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*

*Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) narrates the experiences of Sissie, a young Ghanaian woman who travels to Europe as part of an educational exchange program. While there, she observes her fellow Africans who have migrated for education and job opportunities. Sissie concludes that these immigrants have lost touch with their homeland and, further, have embraced the belief that Europe is superior to their African birth countries. In the final section, "A Love Letter," Sissie discusses these observations in a letter she begins writing to her former lover. The letter offers a critique of the internalized inferiority of her fellow Africans in Europe and of their reluctance to return home and help improve their country. However, Sissie's most harrowing criticism concerns gender identity in African countries and the expectations dictating male and female behavior. Sissie, the independent, straightforward, and cynical narrator of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel, incisively interrogates the male-female dialectic in post-independence Africa. A romantic relationship between Sissie and her former lover fails because of her refusal to conform to expectations of appropriate 'African womanhood'—based on subservience and docility: "They say that any female in my position would have thrown away everything to be with you, and remain with you..." Sissie writes in her letter, "Maybe I regret that I could not shut up and meekly look up to you even when I knew I disagreed with you" (117). Even as she contemplates what she could or should have done differently, there is a willful acceptance of this inevitable separation from her lover. If the only viable or socially sanctioned option is marriage—an institution that necessitates a certain type of

female behavior—Sissie’s refusal to accept this as her only recourse is provocative. I have argued in the preceding chapters that the postcolonial African nation is modeled on a patriarchal, heterosexual norm inherited from the colonial period and any deviation from this standard is seen as a threat to the new nation. Nations function as much through inclusion as through exclusion—the inclusion of those who maintain the status quo (generally those who reap the greatest benefits from social, racial, and class-based inequities) and the exclusion of those who threaten to destabilize this (im)balance. Sissie and the other female characters in the epistolary novels I examine threaten this conception of the nation by challenging its exclusion of non-normative identities; their experiences of and with unsanctioned intimacies and unconventional roles disturb the idea that the postcolonial African nation must be forever tied to patriarchal gender inequality and colonial class prejudice. The epistolary novels explore the possibilities of a new nation in which the legacies of colonialism and oppressive tradition are slowly disintegrating, giving way to new paradigms for (re)producing identity and the nation.

As novelists documenting that shift away from colonialism looked for ways to represent the emerging nations, they experimented as much with forms as with themes. The epistolary novel was effective in its ability to represent nontraditional narrative structure, while foregrounding the role and journey of the letter writing character. Unlike the traditional novel form, the epistolary novel mirrored the voices and experiences of the individuals relegated to the margins of their respective societies; in essence, the voices of the minorities. Letters were testaments to their ongoing struggle to establish a more inclusive and equitable nation. Sissie’s letter documents her struggle with traditional gender roles. Indeed, the final sentence of the letter reads:

You remember leading me out of the hall with the voices close behind us, then a broad murmur and finally fading away, while outside in the cold night, the shining snow looked so hard I thought it was always there, then you driving and driving and driving, then out of the car, and you pulling my coat closer around me and saying you didn't think it was heavy enough, then up some elevator, you opening a door, taking my coat, sitting me down in a chair, pouring me some liquor, you didn't even ask me whether I drank or not and what, and I was grateful, and you pouring yourself a drink too, and sitting yourself down in a chair, right opposite me and with the smile around your eyes, you saying, 'I know everyone calls you Sissie, but what is your name?' (130-131)

The repetition of the "you" in this passage underscores the limited presence of "I." In this interaction with the unnamed lover (who is initially a stranger), Sissie is led, driven, pulled, sat and questioned. She acquiesces to this control, but it is the implicit danger of losing herself in the lover's "you" that keeps her from seeking him out after their final separation. "Of course," Sissie recounts in the letter, "as everyone would just love to remind me, if I had any womanliness in me, it should have come out then. 'You know where he lived, didn't you? You should have just gone there and told him you are sorry...'" (118-119). She is repeatedly advised to play the role of the docile woman, to give into the traditional and unequal balance of male-female power, as defined by a patriarchal culture. In refusing to react as expected to the possibility of losing her lover,



Sissie rejects the traditionally accepted, culturally defined role of submissive, self-negating female.

The letter Sissie writes to her unnamed lover starts off without a specific name for him. He is simply “My Precious Something.” The letter closes off, also significantly, without a signature by the letter-writer. The marked absence of both the letter writer and the recipient’s names suggests that the writer and recipient are stand-ins for universal writers and recipients; thus, the themes that emerge through the novel’s exploration of those characters are allowed to exist as separate from them, not necessarily unique to or tied to the specific individuals, but generally representative of postcolonial men and women. Further, based on the premise that a name signifies a clear, articulated identity, the absence of those names suggests a lack of clear, articulated male and female African post-independence identities. The men represented by Sissie’s ex-lover are removed from their homelands and unwilling to return, and therefore linked by only tenuous threads to their identities as African men. Sissie meets a group of these men who have come to London for education or job opportunities at a students’ union meeting. She recalls that it was the same night she met the man who later becomes her ex-lover: “Do you remember the first time we met? At the students’ union meeting? And I got up to attack everybody, pleading that instead of forever gathering together and virtuously spouting such beautiful radical analyses of the situation at home, we should simply hurry back?” (121). Sissie’s impassioned pleas are met with quiet resistance and arguments in defense of the men’s decision to remain in Europe. She gradually begins to understand the extent to which the experience of colonialism has stripped her fellow countrymen of pride in their respective nations. “Then I didn’t feel ridiculous any more, only sad,” she recalls, “For that is also

the tragedy—trying to explain their decisions not to go home. So many versions and each new one more pathetic and less convincing than the one before” (121). Adding to Sissie’s disappointment is the fact that as immigrants in Europe the men reside in a political and social space that refuses to fully accommodate them, considering them inferior and second class. Without place, they are essentially nameless, figuratively trapped in the interstices of here and there. Significantly, the men remain unnamed throughout the story because, unlike Sissie, who at least wishes to return to her homeland if only to begin changing it and transforming the ideas surrounding postcolonial gender identity, they have no real place of belonging. The situation of the African men in Europe interestingly mirrors the situation of the African women in postcolonial African countries: they are similarly marginalized and treated as ‘less than’ by the dominant society. The epistolary novel powerfully captures this sense of being alienated and estranged.

#### FORM & FUNCTION OF THE POSTCOLONIAL LETTER

Gloria Anzaldua, a champion of Third World Women writers and nonconventional narrative patterns, urged women of different countries, cultures, and ethnicities in her seminal text, “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third-World Women,” to write in order to make their voices part of national narratives. In that essay published in the eighties and still relevant decades later, Anzaldua encourages marginalized women of color to break with the patterns that Western, predominantly male, white writers shape their works by. Anzaldua takes issue with the expectation plaguing non-white women writers to mirror the forms valued by the non-marginalized members of society. Anzaldua challenges the implication that the only valuable narrative patterns are those produced by specific segments of society and which fit a traditional mode of writing. In

that same essay, to testify to her rejection of these literary rule and standards, Anzaldua blends not only different types of texts, but also different languages. She finishes off a letter with a poem, starts off an essay with a quote from a diary entry, and intersperses angry diatribes against a restrictive patriarchy. Combining these different forms and strategies, Anzaldua exemplifies the idea of a text's form serving as a vehicle for its function and message and this perspective is especially useful for reading the letter section of Aidoo's novel. The form of Aidoo's novel is unusual: In parts, it is written as poetry, in others as prose, journal entries, spoken word and impassioned diatribes. There is in fact no distinction made between words spoken aloud and words thought to one's self. And there appears to be no real regard for grounding the reader temporally or spatially. *Our Sister Killjoy* shows key mutations of traditional novel form: a whole page is taken up by just one sentence. A poem follows a page that is a unique blend of excerpts from speeches, essays, journals, and a variety of other historical or recognizable extra novelistic texts. Aidoo's text refuses to conform to generic conventions in the same way that Aidoo's protagonist, Sissie, also refuses gender conventions. Through the form and the content of the letter section, both Aidoo and her narrator pose a challenge to the *gendered* order of things. The form of the narrative defies not only standard epistolary patterns, but symbolically speaks to the radical nature of Aidoo's protagonist. The letter in the fourth section of the novel is a perfect metaphor for Sissie; it is removed from the principle narrative, apart and different, but instrumental to the constitution of the narrative whole. Aidoo's novel effectively mirrors the condition of the postcolonial African nation, fragmented along class, gender, and social lines, divided between those who embrace tradition and others who are invested in recreating their worlds.

The letter that closes out the novel—a label which may or may not adequately encompass Aidoo’s literary project—does not bear the usual telltale signs of a romantic epistle. Sissie’s stream-of-consciousness letter to her unnamed former lover shares a key similarity with the letter written by Bâ’s Ramatoulaye. For both women, the letter is more an attempt to make sense of their social world and its gendered dynamics than it is a tool for real correspondence. The letters function on a key level as introspective journeys for the fictional writing characters. Indeed, the absence of a final recipient—the letters are never in fact sent out—suggests that the letters were never intended to be read by a sole reader. Significant to the contemporary texts adopting this letter pattern of unreciprocated correspondence is the evident political and social criticism voiced through the letters. This criticism is as much literary as it is extra-literary. Aidoo and Bâ’s works are strategically negotiating the idea of private spaces and public issues. Both women use their narratives comprised of female letter-writing protagonists to begin exploring a set of possibilities for gender and even sexual identity that cannot or is not being addressed through the extra-literary sociopolitical process. There is an awareness of the import of using the letter form, a form traditionally associated with the home arena and appropriate minority, to espouse provocative political and social concerns about postcolonial progress. Where Bâ’s novel only begins to hint at a more progressive postcolonial African female identity, Aidoo’s charges ahead with its depiction of an unconventional protagonist. Bâ has her protagonist situated in an enclosed room of the house. Aidoo places her protagonist in a new country, and in the moment of writing the letter, on a plane between countries without one fixed geographical location. Sissie is without defined national affiliation as she sits on an airplane penning her letter, and although she

looks forward to her return to her home country, Ghana, the implication of her physical placement is that there is no real space of belonging in that country. No room has been made for the progressive female identity she represents.

#### READING POSTCOLONIAL INTIMACIES

In this partially epistolary novel, the sexual attraction between two female characters serves to destabilize rigid conceptions of maleness and femaleness and also invites an examination of new avenues of romantic attachment available to postcolonial women. Where Jagua and Ramatoulaye's narratives provide a nuanced, if hidden, exploration of female-to-female intimacy and begin to hint at new paradigms for conceiving of post-independence female gender identity, Aidoo's work offers a far more explicit examination of the dynamics inherent in those social relationships. This narrative of illicit same-sex desire plays out in the interactions between Sissie and the German woman, Marija, whom she meets on the first leg of her travel:

Sissie felt Marija's cold fingers on her breast. The fingers of Marija's hand touched the skin of Sissie's breasts while her other hand groped round and round Sissie's midriff, searching for something to hold on to.

It was the left hand that woke her up to the reality of Marija's embrace. The warmth of her tears on her neck. The hotness of her lips against hers. (64)

Prior to this incident, Sissie feels the "heat" or sexual tension in her interactions with Marija, but she ignores them. The incident in which Marija makes a sexual advance allows Sissie to confront the nature of their blossoming friendship and what it signifies for her identity as a woman. She momentarily fantasizes about a potential relationship

with Marija and finds herself drawn to the possibility of this intimacy: “Once or so, at the beginning of their friendship, Sissie had thought, while they walked in the park, of what a delicious love affair she and Marija would have had if one of them had been a man” (61). Sissie, so accustomed to the conventional picture of heterosexual romance, is only able to envision herself in a relationship by imagining the other woman as a man. Instead of taking for granted that desire plays out along clearly demarcated paths, the narrative uses the subtext of that brief homoerotic encounter to explore attraction and what various types signal for gender identity. Essentially, by analyzing the nature of romantic bonds, Sissie attempts to understand what has effected the situation her postcolonial sisters are in. She prods the balance of relationships to understand why they have traditionally maintained inequality between the genders. A psychic transformation occurs in Sissie allowing her to see herself differently, and this re-envisioning makes possible her final decision to eschew a traditional attachment with her former lover. There are multiple layers to that romantic exchange between Sissie and Marija. Ranu Samantrai, for example, suggests in “Caught at the Confluence of History: Ama Ata Aidoo’s Necessary Nationalism,” that the novel positions the two women together as a means to interrogate feminism from two differing perspectives: “...though the condition suffered by the two groups of women produce similar characteristics, they have different histories and thus demand separate theorization. The oppression against which Sissie rebels does not mirror the oppression experienced by Marija. She cannot, therefore, follow European feminism’s path toward liberation” (146). Through that lens, the kiss between the two women may be read as a gesture on Marija’s part to reach out to Sissie in an attempt to form a collective feminism unsplintered by racial or cultural disparities. Other critics

have read the kiss as a simple testament to Marija's loneliness and emotional isolation—her husband Adolf is always at work, leaving her to care for their young son alone. I argue, however, that given the social and historical African context from which Sissie emerges—one in which same-sex desire is not only taboo, but punishable by death—this narrative moment speaks to greater political concerns. It paves the way for ongoing examination of female intimacy, the political and social contexts that proscribe it, and how the character's personal transformations signal progress in dismantling those restrictions.

In "Out in Africa," Gaurav Desai calls attention to literature that both enables and counters the lack of visibility surrounding alternative sexualities in African societies. Granted, he is not proffering a visibility for African homosexuality that would "see," "classify," and "other" based on a Western model; rather, he is invested in the project of "opening up a space for considerations of African sexual practices in all their fluid forms" (*AL* 737). The difficulty of opening up this space, as Desai explains, lies in the fact that researchers are cautious about raising issues or questions in non-Western cultures that may procure a charge of "cultural insensitivity." Desai writes: "An impasse – suspicious of the historically ethnocentric renderings of non-Western sexualities as 'primitive,' the 'insider' prefers to draw attention away from any non-normative sexual practices; at the risk of not being offensive, at the risk of not being unethical, the 'outsider exits,'" and so critical information remains buried. To show just how unexamined the field of homosexuality is in African studies, Desai cites the work of Chris Dunton, "Wheytin be Dat?" which is one of few early works written on the subject of alternative African sexualities. Desai writes: "Through critical readings of a variety of

African literary texts written since the 1950s, Dunton argues in his essay that with few exceptions, African writers tend to present homosexuality monothematically.

Homosexuality is, in these texts, ‘almost invariably attributed to the detrimental impact made on Africa by the West . . .’” (AL 737).

Desai’s essay opens with a reading of Wole Soyinka’s novel, *The Interpreters*, in which an African-American homosexual student of African history attempts to discuss “indigenous African homosexuality” with a journalist in Africa only to be implicitly told to desist from that line of questioning. Desai next cites the work of Ifi Amadiume, which investigates “the institution of woman-to-woman marriages in precolonial Nnobi society” but refuses to consider the implications concerning alternative sexualities that this particular marriage system possibly offered. Instead, Amadiume warns against such a reading of the cultural practice, stating that it would be “shocking and offensive to Nnobi women’ for whom lesbianism remains a foreign practice” (AL 740). Desai ends his essay by suggesting that “it was not *homosexuality* that was inherited from the West but rather a more regulatory *homophobia*” (742). Desai’s essays brings up compelling points both about the nature of scholarship being done on—and literature being written about—non-Western societies, and also about cultural practices in those non-Western societies. This project begins to raise and address questions about how literary works portray sexuality and of the various ways traditional and, more especially, nontraditional intimacies are represented in African literature.

On the night Sissie and her unnamed lover meet, he rescues her from the verbal onslaught of a group of African men at a students’ union meeting. Sissie is arguing with the men, criticizing them for never returning to their home countries. The unnamed lover



notices that tempers are flaring on both sides, so he intervenes and guides Sissie away from the crowd. Their meeting begins with this gesture of salvation—he rescues her. But Sissie cannot long endure that dialectic of savior-saved, male hero-female victim, which is one she associates with traditional African expectations about gender: subservient female to strong, dominant male. Sissie slowly rebels against this dynamic. She does not want a relationship predicated on social mores dictating how she should behave as a woman, how a partner should behave as a man, or if a partner must even be a man. The relationship therefore ends with the lover walking away and Sissie choosing not to go after him. Her letter recounts the details of this relationship to ultimately show her interest in rewriting those stifling gender scripts. She refuses to conform to social expectations; therefore, the usual romantic dialectic is overturned. This in itself is an important rewriting of the European epistolary tradition that would have the spurned woman pining away for her departed lover. In “Re-visions, Re-flections, Re-creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women,” Elizabeth Campbell writes: “In many novels the story opens with the seduction letters, takes us through the woman’s resistance and final seduction, and closes with her sorrow, anger, isolation, and very often her impending death, unless she resists the seducer, in which case the novel may end with a marriage” (334). According to Campbell, this general pattern can be observed in the majority of epistolary novels written before the twentieth century. African literary epistolarity appears to push gender dynamics in a more radical direction than the European epistolary tradition does. Content not just to question the female role, the letters in the African fictions here considered engage in a project of defining a new female role and establishing new parameters for the postcolonial woman.

## NAMES AND NAMING

Names and naming serve a thematic purpose in this novel, specifically as it pertains to determining one's identity or defining a new one. When Sissie and the German women initially meet, Sissie reveals that her name is also Mary: "My name? My name is Sissie. But they used to call me Mary too. In school...I come from a Christian family. It is the name they gave me when they baptized me. It is also good for school and work and being a lady" (24). "Our Sister" or "Sissie," for short, here hints at the process of Anglicization that many of those colonized by the British experienced. The colonization process involved Christianizing the colonized and encouraging them to adopt "appropriate" standards governed by religious principles.<sup>17</sup> They were assigned names that went hand in hand with this reformation process. Even more importantly, the subtext of naming and enforced propriety indexes the burden of societal pressure on individual identity, especially as it pertains to stigmatized or taboo aspects of that identity. Sissie's rejection of the "appropriate" Christian name mirrors her rejection of "appropriate" female behavior. Sissie, furthermore, eschews a romantic relationship that would have her disempowered by a male counterpart. She is unwilling to give up her unique identity, wary of the psychological and emotional damage that may result from doing so. It is worth noting that the titular reference to Sissie is prefaced by "Our." Who is included or excluded by the universal "our?" It would seem, initially, that the use of "our" signals a connection between Sissie and similarly situated Africans, but, ultimately, her experience in the UK during which she shows the breach that exists between her and the African males who choose to remain in Europe instead of returning to help their

---

<sup>17</sup> Karanja, James. *The Missionary Movement in Colonial Kenya: The foundation of Africa Inland Church*. Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2009 provides an in-depth look at Christianizing strategies as examined in one specific location.

respective countries, gives the lie to this interpretation. In the pivotal scene in which Sissie makes the acquaintance of the man who eventually becomes her ex-lover, she argues with a roomful of African men who have a long list of reasons for why they choose not to return to their home countries. Sissie is baffled and disappointed by what she considers a disregard for the welfare of their continent. “The place seemed full of [Black people],” Sissie observed, “but they appeared to be so wretched, she wondered why they stayed” (85). A distance is established between Sissie and that community of men, especially after the rupture of her relationship with her ex-lover, one of the meeting’s attendees. The break essentially underscores the untenable nature of the traditional male-female pattern. Sissie’s homoerotic interactions with another female character are highlighted, as is her rejection of a romantic relationship with the ex-lover, who is repeatedly referred to by Sissie as “My.” This unnamed lover is “My Precious Something,” “My Love,” “My Darling,” “My Dear,” always addressed by a term that highlights his relationship to Sissie as one predicated on possession. The lover becomes “hers,” an object to be owned, devoid of any real defining characteristics except in relation to her. He belongs to her, she essentially says. It is an overstated attempt to highlight her refusal as a woman to be possessed or objectified by a man. Sissie’s discomfort with this structure propels her inversion of the balance. The novel previously shows similar inversions by Sissie of the power balance. She inverts the expected balance of social power when she creates a dynamic with Marija, the German woman, which involves Marija being submissive and assuming the typically “female” role to Sissie’s more dominant “male” one. Sissie frequently plays with power dynamics to show how such structures can be dismantled and reconstituted. In doing this with her ex-lover, she

shows her investment in reproducing the African female in a way that is not tied to submissiveness and patriarchal control. The narrator's "Our," the antithesis to the possessive "My," effectively creates a community of women, co-writers of Sissie's letter, and co-challengers of society's status quo. There is an implied equality in this sisterhood of "Ours," far different from the "My" that prefaces all references to Sissie's former lover. For Sissie, a strong-willed woman, the challenge she faces in that failed relationship involves feeling that she does not behave in properly feminine ways, as defined by an inflexibly traditional culture, and feeling discontented from the expectations surrounding her femaleness and her identity as a romantic or sexual partner.

#### TRAVELING WHILE POSTCOLONIAL

This exploration of her national and gender identity is instigated for Sissie by travel to Europe. The experience of negotiating her race and gender in a foreign country is critical to Sissie's process of self-redefinition in Africa. Further, the opportunity to travel is an important factor in the narrative given the restrictions on African mobility during the colonial period. As research on colonial Africa has shown, the colonial period did not offer much in the way of international travel opportunities for Africans, much less African women. Even travel within the continent—to and from neighboring towns, cities, or countries—was strictly monitored, and in many documented cases, required a pass. Travel that *did* occur usually did so in the context of labor and employment. And the travelers tended, generally, to be male. Restrictions on mobility were crucial to carrying out the colonial project of control. In "Am I A Man?: Gender and the Pass Laws in Urban Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930–1980," Teresa Barnes writes of the practice:

This was a construction at the intersection of nationality, gender, identity, and citizenship known as the pass laws...the pass laws were used for nothing less than control of the economic options of working African people. For example, passes (generally known as chitupa or plural, zvitupa) stipulated for whom and for what level of payment an African man could work; where he could travel; where and with whom he could live. (59)

While it is important to acknowledge the differences among countries, regions, and periods, Barnes's work on the subject underscores the role travel and movement had in defining male identity during the colonial era and after. The pass practice was more than a system of surveillance; it provided an "official" excuse for the constant harassment of African men. On the streets, they were frequently stopped, physically or verbally harassed, and forced to produce a pass before being allowed to continue on. Many times, the stop and search resulted in the arrest and prosecution of males who were unable to provide a pass. Barnes notes that during this period the number of prosecutions that occurred in the colony was staggering: "...in each year of the colonial era, many tens of thousands of men were charged and prosecuted for infringements. These men thus became criminals in the eyes of the colonial system and suffered accordingly" (61). Identity for the African man effectively became linked to the performance of national belonging and simultaneous restriction within that national space. African male identity under the pass law system required constant proof of one's right to belong to the nation. National identity was based on the repeated assertion of one's right to belong and move freely, even as that right of belonging and movement were being severely curtailed by a

racist government. As Barnes importantly notes, passes were only issued to men and therefore “served as markers of gender difference.” They became in a sense “...one mechanism for the social construction of gender” (61).

For women, mobility was not as restricted as it was for their male counterparts. Nevertheless, in “The Fight for Control of African Women’s Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939,” Barnes notes that there were recurring attempts to similarly monitor or restrict female movement.<sup>18</sup> In South Africa, for example, women’s movements became tied to their relationships with a male figure. A married woman was officially seen as employed by her husband and therefore sufficiently controlled. An unmarried woman, however, was not allowed freedom of movement in the same way. Only in urban areas was the mobility of the single African female less restricted for reasons related to sexual exploitation. Colonial administrators were more lenient with African female mobility in urban and mining areas because of the perceived usefulness of female availability in those areas: “...the settlers thought that black men needed constant access to black prostitutes to ward off the ‘black peril’—sexual relations between black men and white women, one of the settlers’ great cultural phobias” (603). Although Barnes’s work largely focuses on the incidents of movement-control in southern Africa, the same policies were officially or unofficially enacted in various colonial African states. Under a system predicated on the usurpation of individual and collective power, authority over physical space and physical bodies was crucial to maintaining control. Much discussion about migration in the colonial African context centers on labor and

---

<sup>18</sup> For more on the pass control system in colonial Africa: Eales, Katherine. “Passes, Patriarchs and Privilege: Johannesburg’s African Middle Classes and the Question of Night Passes for African Women,” in Philip Bonner, Isabel Hofmeyr, Deborah James, Tom Lodge (eds.) *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality and Culture in 19th and 20th Century South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989.

focuses primarily on men. This is, in certain ways, a reassertion of the masculine tie to the nation and the relegation of women to the margins or periphery. But women were not in fact a negligible part of rural and urban migratory patterns. Even in the postcolonial context, travel is significantly linked to fraught negotiations of national, gender, and even class identity. The significance of travel in African societies is captured by the phrase “been-to,” a popular term used to refer to the financially well-off who were able to travel to other parts of the world, most often Europe or North America. The term has since lost some of its original cache as a classificatory label for the elites of African society. But in its inception, it was and in particular ways still remains a marker of ongoing class formation in postcolonial African nations. Not everyone who travels nowadays and earns the appellation “been-to” is necessarily an elite member of African society, and so the reproduction of the nation involves not so much clear demarcations of identity, but rather, renegotiations of it.

Aidoo’s novel effectively captures and articulates that post-independence change in migratory patterns by not only showing how travel becomes more global, but also how women are gradually included in that global landscape. Aidoo’s attention to this shift in cultural and social movement underscores the evolution of class positions occurring in post-independence African societies. Travel becomes increasingly linked to individuals belonging to the professional middle class. Travel, which may have been for leisure or government-sponsored programs such as that which Sissie takes part in, is shown here as based on choice and of temporary duration. Those who travel do so because they are able to. The ability to do so becomes a marker of class. Those who had been privy to a colonial education and who subsequently shifted into the upper echelons of society were

the only individuals who were initially able to travel. The novel makes evident that following independence, global travel became a much more prominent part of African postcolonial societies. Education and travel bursars were granted to African students to go to European capitals. Sissie sees firsthand the number of African students studying in Europe, either as recipients of bursars from the governments at home or as “recipients of the leftovers of imperial handouts...” (86). Sissie observes that both men and women were benefitting from these opportunities to travel and receive an education: “Every man claimed that he was a student, and so did every woman.” However, the gendered dimension of these programs is immediately exposed: “The men were studying engineering or medicine or law...The women were taking courses in dressmaking and hairdressing...” (85-86). The academic studies chosen by the two groups reflect the gender inequalities that persisted after colonialism “officially” ended, showing how Victorian (or European) ideals of womanhood that had been imposed on African colonial societies affected the choice of an educational path. In spite of the small advancement evident in the changing patterns of travel, the roles of African women were still in dire need of radical transformation following independence. Additionally, Sissie’s cynical observations about the nature of the exchange programs highlight the surveillance potential inherent in them. By providing these programs to the formerly colonized, the former colonizers are able to continue monitoring and even determining the outcomes for these students. Touted as a sign of post-independence advancement, these programs were in fact reflections of an enduring system of control and manipulation. Sissie, who the narrative shows as standing outside of these (post)colonial machinations, recognizes them and critiques them during her European visit. Sissie, an individual who does not equate a



pilgrimage to Europe as a sign of advancement, feels that a return to the continent will be a sure means of ensuring her country's progress and growth. Her letter discusses the postcolonial individual's obligation to home, the significance of migration and movement away from colonial "homes," and the individual's negotiation of belonging. Her letter serves as a symbolic vehicle through which the ideas of self and nation are explored in relation to evolving ideas of gender and sexuality.

#### HEART OF DARKNESS: A REWRITING

Aidoo's letter-writing protagonist is a multilayered character. In Hildegard Hoeller's work on Aidoo's novel, he offers an important reading of this postcolonial female character, suggesting that Sissie's travel not only signals a change in African literary patterns of travel, but very necessarily rewrites the traditional travel narrative of the white, conquering male figure.<sup>19</sup> In "Ama Ata Aidoo's *Heart of Darkness*," Hoeller writes: "...Aidoo, 'reversing the direction of a classic colonial genre, the travel narrative, through which Europe typically represented its soon-to be or already colonized other, [also] reverses the gaze that constitutes Europe and its presumed obverse. This time around it's her protagonist's 'Black-Eyed Squint,' not a white, usually male gaze, that functions as the all-seeing eye' " (131). The male gaze, of which much has been made in feminist studies, advances the view that the "gazer," in having the authority to gaze upon another, establishes himself as subject and asserts the other's position as object. Through this heteronormative, male, white perspective, women, citizens of developing countries, and other marginalized groups have been deemed unequal to the authoritative and categorizing male rule. This paradigm of 'who sees' and 'who is seen' reinforces social

---

<sup>19</sup> Hoeller champions a reading of Aidoo's novel as a rewriting of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.

hierarchies that have historically privileged the Western or European perspective. The significance of Sissie being the “gazer,” both as the citizen of an African country and as a woman, cannot be overstated. Indeed, not only does Sissie gaze, she does so with a profoundly critical eye that earns her the appellation “Black-eyed Squint,” a descriptive label which may be said to refer to her scrutiny of the world around her and the Black-centered, or race-based, lens through which she assesses that world. A squint suggests keen appraisal and Sissie’s critical observation of the world is one that rewrites the (post)colonial narrative in useful, textured, and provocative ways. Of this fact, Hoeller writes: “Sissie vaguely understands her journey as a symbolic and political one, one that needs to be seen within the framework of larger historical forces: she is sent to make good on past injustices....Sissie [is] part of *Wiedergutmachung*, an apology for a history of imperial expansion and racial domination” (134). Even as she acknowledges the historical apology inherent in Europe’s promotion of these cross-cultural programs, Aidoo’s protagonist does not embrace the gesture of atonement easily or without challenge. Sissie turns a discerning and critical eye on everything she witnesses, from the geography of the new countries to the people that inhabit them. Clearly, the moment serves as a redemptive gesture for colonial history’s powerful and violent degradation of blackness. Sissie makes an attempt to perpetuate the same sort of race-based dehumanization Africans experienced for centuries. As Hoeller accurately notes, Sissie’s journey into Germany mirrors the journey of Joseph Conrad’s protagonist into Africa: “...the inaccuracies, even overt racism, of Aidoo’s portrayal of the “pig-coloured” natives (stereotypical names, heavy accents, simple minds, odd customs) seem to mirror Conrad’s depiction of Africa and its inhabitants” (132).

In reading Sissie as a re-imagining of Conrad's European colonial protagonist, Kurtz, Hoeller offers a useful lens through which to read the text. However, in his comparison between Conrad's Marlow and Aidoo's Sissie, Hoeller minimizes the significant dimension of gender and race. Inadequate attention is paid to the way these two areas mark Sissie's presence in the European space. Hoeller briefly acknowledges the function of gender by stating: "As a woman, she realizes that it is not only virgin land that was raped in the name of expansion, domination, and wealth" (135). Although Hoeller acknowledges a certain gendered dimension to the revisiting of these historical issues, he sidesteps the full implications of the language of plunder and rape, as articulated by Aidoo's black, female protagonist by creating a parallel between Sissie and Kurtz that does not address the hierarchies of power that, given the historical context, make such a substitution as yet impossible. The weight of Ghana's colonial history shadows Sissie's experience in Europe. As does the weight of her own racial identity. In an early scene in the novel, Aidoo rewrites a provocative episode in Frantz Fanon's seminal work, *Black Skin White Masks*. The often cited passage describes an incident that reveals the black male as the object of the white gaze:

"Look! A Negro!" It was a passing sting. I attempted a smile.

"Look! A Negro!" The circle was gradually getting smaller. I was really enjoying myself.

"Maman, look, a Negro; I'm scared!" Scared! Scared! Now they were beginning to be scared of me. I wanted to kill myself laughing, but laughter had become out of the question. (91)

The young observer points at Fanon and announces to his mother “Look! A Negro!” In that instant, according to Fanon, the black man recognizes himself as an object determined and categorized without his consent. This moment signals a psychic split for the black male; there is, on one hand, a diminishing awareness of his right to self-identify, and, on the other, the resigned acceptance of that object status. Aidoo’s novel presents a similar scene involving her protagonist, Sissie.

Suddenly, she realized a woman was telling a young girl who must have been her daughter:

‘Ja, das Schwartzte Mädchen.’

From the little German that she had been advised to study for the trip, she knew that ‘das Schwartzte Mädchen’ meant ‘black girl.’

She was somewhat puzzled.

Black girl? Black girl?

So she looked around her, really well this time.

And it hit her.... (12)

Significantly, as Sissie realizes that she is the person being turned into a spectacle, she rejects this attempt to be categorized as an object and she returns the classificatory gaze. She reverses the role of subject and object, refusing unlike Fanon, to be made less by a demeaning gaze. Instead, she observes “That all that crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of the pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home....She looked and looked at so many of such skins together. And she wanted to vomit. Then she was ashamed of her reaction” (12). Even as Sissie claims her right to gaze and classify-thereby affirming her worth as an individual

and not an object, she rejects the power to dehumanize that comes from making someone else into an object. As evidenced in this and other passages in the book, Sissie recognizes power and its effect if wielded maliciously. She relishes this power, but alternates between feelings of shame about its potential. In this episode, Sissie identifies both with the colonizer and the colonized. Sissie is presented in the process of overcoming the psychological ramifications of her colonial history. While those psychological implications of the scene are worth noting, the gendered dimension provides an important gloss on Fanon's earlier description and its impact on the field of postcolonial studies. If Fanon devoted little time to defining a paradigm that would examine the nuances of postcoloniality and womanhood, instead regarding the postcolonial situation through a universal (see: exclusively male) perspective, Ado wages a literary war against this limited vision of postcolonial identity through her character Sissie's experience of being "othered." The moment makes visible a crucially gendered dimension of (post)colonial national politics, and serves to also emphasize the stark absence of this dimension in previous considerations of national identity after independence. The experiences had by the "Negro" man are not identical to those had by the "black girl" and so different assessments and theorizations must be crafted for each. Aidoo's work makes manifest the experience of the black postcolonial woman.

#### THE JOURNEY HOME

As the novel closes out, Sissie is aboard a plane, figuratively poised between nations. Occupied by her letter writing, Sissie enters into a sort of reverie from which she does not snap out until she hears that they have reached Africa. The momentousness of that return is concisely captured. The flight attendant announces that the airplane has

crossed the Atlantic and if the passengers look down, they will be able to see the African continent. At the mention of Africa, “Sissie woke up” (133). Immediately after waking, she begins to read and reread the letter that she has been writing to her ex-lover. She wonders what the point is of “this type of post mortem correspondence,” and then she decides that she is “never going to post the letter” (133). The decision not to post the letter comes after a brief moment in which Sissie contemplates the verdure of the continent: “Dry land, trees, a swamp, more dry land, green, green, lots of green.” The land solidifies for Sissie the idea of home. However, Sissie’s connection to home, as intensely as she feels it, is tainted by the fact that she is a woman at odds with the conventions that are supposed to define her. She has had a same-sex encounter that introduces untraditional patterns of intimacy. She rejects a relationship that would firmly establish her place as a traditional African woman. The placement of Sissie on an airplane represents the search for a place of belonging, for a place to call home. Even as she hangs suspended in mid-air, Sissie clings to the promise of return (of belonging). Also relevant, however, is the fact that the narrative never presents Sissie in this so-called home space. She is shown as a foreigner or visitor in Europe, and then in motion between locations. For Sissie, “Below was home with its unavoidable warmth and even after these thousands of years, its uncertainties. ‘Oh, Africa. Crazy old continent . . .’” (133). One of the key uncertainties is the place Sissie will occupy as a radical, progressive woman living in a postcolonial moment. Of the idea of female homelessness within the nation, Coly provides a useful summary: “...Experience of place as non-place emblemizes the fate of homelessness of the daughter of/in the postcolonial house....Her European experience both illustrates the limitations of her mode of dissenting with the gender politics of home and reaffirms the

postcolonial nation as the place to be and go home” (4). If the traditional national daughter is excluded from the national space, the national daughter who refuses to conform to appropriate gender rules is doubly condemned. An evident schism exists between the desire for home and the absence of a place in the home. Sissie’s national identity as African is reaffirmed when she spies the continent—so much so, in fact, that she forgets all thought of England. The letter, the tenuous link still connecting her to England, is rendered null and void. Having written it, there was no longer any need for it. When that tie is finally severed aboard the plane, Sissie assumes full ownership of her continental identity; she feels and embraces her connection to Africa, admires the verdant greens of the landscape, rejoices to be home at last. The irony, however, is that in embracing her “Africanness,” her national identity as African, her identity as an African *woman* is disavowed. The return home superficially allots her a place in the nation, but it is not a place that has seen any modification since post-independence, and it is not a place that welcomes the evolved *female* Africanness Sissie embodies. The narrative makes clear that the desire for a post-independence national identity and the desire for a *gendered* post-independence national identity have not yet been realized; Sissie, for all her excitement about the return to Ghana, is still effectively without a home; she is symbolically without a place in an African nation that is still tending to the ‘wounded male ego.’

Sissie shares a striking similarity with the female protagonists discussed in preceding chapters. As is the case with Jagua and Ramatoulaye, home for Sissie is a site that offers promise. In spite of the women being uncertain of their place in a post-independence nation, they embrace their postcolonial states with the hopes of enacting

gender-based transformations. Jagua, being of the uneducated, lower working class, does not truly have the option to leave; and in any case, she is still wedded to her country, both to the vitality of the city and to the rejuvenating qualities of the village. Ramatoulaye, who is of a higher social class and educated, does have the option to leave the country and follow in the footsteps of her best friend Aissatou who finds independence and security in the United States. Ramatoulaye, however, decides to remain at home and begin fashioning, in her own small way, a more progressive female identity. We see this through her overcoming her initial reluctance to drive. Sissie, in parallel fashion, attempts to convince fellow Ghanaians that they should return to the continent in order to work for its betterment. In light of the challenges Ghana experiences even after independence, Sissie's efforts are met with disdain and refusal. It bears pointing out that the call to home is not a simple statement about returning to one's birth place. Indeed, the meaning of "home" changes after independence in terms of what it means for individual as well as national identities. Home becomes a site of negotiation and renegotiation, a site of dislocation and relocation. The postcolonial condition is one of redefining one's place of belonging, and we see through Sissie's struggle to define home for herself (and for others) that it is a complex and multilayered process.

It is after her varied engagements occur that Sissie pens the letter. Of particular interest is the way the letter functions in Aidoo's text in comparison to its function in the previous texts considered. In spite of the fact that the letters written in the texts symbolize distance and separation, they also crucially function as attempts to re-establish filiative links, connections with loved ones—fellow countrymen and women—who are no longer in the nation-state. In the postcolonial context, these attempts to establish the boundaries



of belonging, to re-establish a sense of national community, is reflective of ongoing negotiations of identity. That letters at once function to show the disruption of national boundaries, and simultaneously serve as attempts to reconstitute sites of inclusion, speaks to the prevalence and relevance of this recurring form in contemporary African literature. In *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Rosemary George references Edward Said's distinction between filiations and affiliations: 'Filiations' are "...the ties that an individual has with places and people that are based on his/her natal culture; that is, ties of biology and geography..." 'Affiliations' "...are what come to replace filiations, are links forged with institutions, associations, communities and other social creations" (16). I borrow from that premise to posit the following: Jagua, Ramatoulaye, and Sissie have filiative ties with their natal space; their letters attempt to assert those filiations and re-establish those ties for their loved ones who have traveled to different locations. This marks a shift in the constructions of definitive and clearly demarcated home spaces. Rather, and in light of the resistance on the part of the nation to reconfigure itself in a way that allows women to belong, a number of the female characters in the novels are carving new identities and traveling to new spaces. The letter writing in these texts is being used to highlight the need to rewrite the nation in a way that allows for female belonging and prompts a reimagining of fixed identities, fixed communities, and fixed borders. In her work on black women's writing and migration, Carole Boyce Davies speaks to this need to reconfigure the postcolonial woman's relationship to home and nation: "Writing home means communicating with home. But it also means finding ways to express the conflicted meaning of home in the experience of the formerly colonized. It also demands a continual rewriting of the

boundaries of what constitutes home” (129). The language of writing and re-writing is an especially salient reminder not only of the thematic role that letter writing offers in these post-independence texts, but also of the actual need to figuratively and literally rewrite social scripts that persistently render invisible a large segment of the population in postcolonial societies. The language of re-writing also indicates transformative possibilities which necessarily hinge on critique and change.

Is there something simplistic or reductive about Sissie’s stubborn embrace of home? Can home be that uncomplicatedly inhabited? Is there enough alienation from home—the critically productive sort of alienation—to allow Sissie objectivity and a real awareness of what home is? These are all questions that may be raised by a reading of Sissie’s seemingly uninflected nostalgia for Ghana. But, in fact, the text spotlights Sissie’s experiences in Europe as a way of adding a reflective dimension to her yearning for home. In fact, as Davies relevantly notes, “Migration and exile are fundamental to human experience. And each movement demands another definition and redefinition of one’s identity” (128). It is in those new locations and her experiences there that she is able to put “home” in context. This diametric opposition of locations also brings up another very pertinent question: To what locations and from where are the letters sent? With the exception of Sissie, who pens her letter aboard a plane but does not send it, the letter writers I examine are penning letters from postcolonial nation-states to Western or European metropolises. Jagua sends her letter from Nigeria to England. Ramatoulaye writes her letter from Senegal and it is intended for the United States. Sissie, en route to Ghana, originally intends to send her letter to England. These epistolary patterns underline the dependence of postcolonial nations on Western ones. Home is being

disrupted at the same time as the letter writers are fighting to reconstitute it; they struggle with the realization that home as affiliative is superseding the idea of home as filiative. George writes that "...identity is linked only hypothetically (and through hyphenation) to a specific geographical place on the map....Home in the immigrant genre is a fiction that one can move beyond or recreate at will" (200). While I wonder about the implications of "moving beyond" home, as if it were a challenge to be overcome, I find compelling George's attention to the hypothetical connections forged between individuals and home-spaces. These filiative links become even more pronounced in the face of ongoing migrations and movements away from natal spaces. At the heart of the letters that are sent out is the desire to remind the recipients of home, to inspire some sort of recognition and acknowledgement of a shared space and history, to reconstitute a community, even if the borders of that community are increasingly modified. As Coly notes, for postcolonial subjects, there is no longer such a thing as a simple, uninflected idea of home. Rather, home has become an "emotionally, politically, and ideologically loaded matter" (intro). The challenge of the postcolonial moment, as articulated through the texts I consider, is that of reconciling ongoing movements away from "home" (departures from a national space) with the need to return in order to build a thriving, progressive post-independence nation. These epistolary novels elucidate a number of concerns about the possibilities of postcolonial progress and the exact contours of national growth. The novels shed light on issues concerning personal and public identity, national and global belonging, as well as gender and sexual policing that are particularly provocative topics facing the postcolonial nation today. The epistolary form, in its merging of the privacy of the letter's inception and construction with the public nature of its deployment, in its unique ability to disturb

narrative expectation, in its ability to encode covert desire and unconventional intimacies, underscores the complexity of defining individual identity amidst social and political flux. The letter effectively represents and embodies this difficulty, while also calling attention to the need to broaden the contours of “appropriate” gender, sexual, or national identity in evolving nation states.

## Chapter 4\_TECHNOLOGY AND THE POSTCOLONIAL STATE

Chimamanda Adichie's newest novel, *Americanah*, has drawn significant critical attention for its treatment of blog writing, or, more specifically, for the content of the blogs written by the protagonist, Ifemelu. I focus here not only on the content, but on the formal insertion of technology-driven writing forms in the novel. Indeed, technology adds an interesting dimension to writing-based negotiations of postcolonial identity. In the African novels examined in the preceding chapters, epistolary forms are either inserted into the narratives, or are the forms through which the narratives are developed. In those novels, some of which are products of immediately post-independence moments, the letters are testaments to concerns about the development of the nation, the dismantling of patriarchal structures, and the inclusion or exclusion of particular identities that go against tradition. In Adichie's novel, the blogs speak to alternate forms of self-determination and self-projection in a globalized (or globalizing) world. The impetus for writing is a desire to identify one's self in a particular national context. Writing serves to recontextualize the self in a specific space. It is as much a process of self-identification as it is a gesture of self-assertion. *Americanah's* incorporation of blogs into the narrative in a way that breaks the narrative stream, narrative interruptions as I have previously described them, is symbolic of a potential restructuring of the national space. These narrative moments are important attempts to disturb the so-called normalcy of the nation and to examine the ways race, gender, sexuality, and identity are configured within it, as well as to decide what needs to be done to render obsolete the preconception that exists about the nation, (i.e., that it is a fundamentally heteronormative space defined

by its inclusion of traditional men and women and its exclusion of those who go against age-old mores about social identities).

Adichie's protagonist in *Americanah* is a young Nigerian woman who moves to the United States to pursue a college education and is subsequently exposed to race and racism in America. She begins writing a blog that documents her experience of feeling like a cultural outsider. Ifemelu's experiences of discovering "blackness" in America signify on two levels: first, those experiences speak to how identity is imposed on the individual—how identity is in many respects constituted outside the self and then thrust upon and negotiated by the individual.<sup>20</sup> The first blog entry that is referenced in the novel is titled "Understanding America for the Non-American Black: What Hispanic Means." In the piece, she writes: "Hispanic means the frequent companions of American blacks in poverty rankings, Hispanic means a slight step above American blacks in the American race ladder....All you need to be is Spanish-speaking but not from Spain and voila, you're a race called Hispanic" (106). For Ifemelu, whose experience of being black in Nigeria is generally uninflected by the presence of other races, this discovery about the racializing process in America unsettles her. She observes a system that persistently seeks to categorize individuals and she begins to write about the implications of this classification. Each time a blog entry is introduced into the narrative, it mirrors the disturbance of Ifemelu's psyche. It represents, also, a disturbance to the self-contained narrative, a break with the formal elements of the traditional narrative, and a struggle to interject a voice that disturbs or disquiets. Ifemelu's blog does not simply document mundane observations; rather, she writes about experiences of blackness in America that

---

<sup>20</sup> Joan Scott offers a keen assessment of identity-making experiences and argues for the value of such experiences as historical evidence. See Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer 1991), 773-797.

are politically loaded, socially fraught, and discomfiting to those who read and comment on her entries. She writes about subjects that make individuals cringe, but she does so as an outsider in a way that allows for some discussion. She is not attacking the nation; rather, she is offering her take on the way it functions. Importantly, Ifemelu is positioned as an outsider, as a marginal figure who is temporarily granted access to that nation and therefore not integrated into the national whole. Thus, these observations do not establish her as American, but rather, undergird her sustained link to Nigeria. By reflecting on her place, her identity in a new national space, she begins to probe her relationship to Nigeria. She examines what being Nigerian means to her, what the experience of being outside of the natal space but still a self-avowed Nigerian (and African) suggests for her identity. These moments of interruption/self-reflection are moments with the potential to redefine national citizenship and they are moments that allow for the possibility of envisioning a more progressive future for that postcolonial space. Ifemelu and *Our Sister Killjoy's* Sissie resonate in large part because their connectedness to their respective African countries is (re)established from a distance—both of them are out of the country while they try to redefine who they are within that country. They are also keen observers of racial and gender politics in the European and American places they visit. Sissie is a squint-eyed observer; Ifemelu is an equally critical examiner of social nuance. Their observations are propelled in part by both women's quest to understand themselves, both within and outside of their homelands.

The recurrence in the literatures I examine of writing-based journeys of self-making represent the process of navigating the complicated psychological aftermath of colonialism. These texts suggest new ways of imagining the self that are as much

meaningful on the personal level as they are in terms of nation building. After all, it is the newly constituted citizens who effectively define the boundaries and borders of inclusion and exclusion. Ultimately, these narratives show individual attempts to stretch the boundaries of the nation to allow for broader, more complex, and richer identities. These narratives therefore require attention to the formal underpinnings—that is, the strategies used to advance specific messages about the nation and the identities within it. Writing-focused narratives are testimonies in a very key sense to colonial and postcolonial trauma. They are attempts on the writing character's part to process and possibly transcend the experience by reimagining the self in the context of the traumatic space. Additionally, these epistolary narratives offer powerful if subtle critiques of normalizing discourses surrounding national identity and postcolonial space. Colonialism and patriarchy created African women's identities as "women" in very specific, restrictive, male-determined ways. Post-independence African novels that feature female characters writing letters (or other such forms of personal texts) represent the women's symbolic attempts to regain control over their minds and bodies; in essence, they are writing to rewrite and reclaim themselves. African female characters use their writings, writings which frequently emphasize nontraditional views, unsanctioned intimacies, and unpopular beliefs about a woman's role, to assert control. The recurring depiction of writing by women in postcolonial African literature offers a subtle critique of the existing definition of womanhood and implicitly demands its reexamination. African literature imagines alternatives to the postcolonial, patriarchal nation-state through the possibilities inherent in the process of writing.



The blog form that appears in Adichie's novel and the 419 e-mail I subsequently discuss form interesting counterpoints. One of the significant points of comparison is that unlike the letter that has one designated or intended recipient, the 419 e-mail is sent out to multiple recipients. Similarly, the blog is generally "received" or read by a wide audience. In an increasingly technology-based world, the forms of writing being presented in postcolonial novels speak to a wider reach. They emphasize connectedness but also hint at questions of authenticity tied to this greater reach. In Adichie's novel, Ifemelu experiences moments of self-doubt during which she is not sure she should continue writing the blog. She is, after all, blogging from a space of semi-anonymity, and she feels somehow compromised by this inauthentic exchange with the public. Her anxiety grows along with her popularity: "Her readers tripled. More invitations came.... Yet a part of her always stiffened with apprehension, expecting the person on the other end to realize that she was play-acting this professional, this negotiator of terms, to see that she was, in fact, an unemployed person who wore a rumpled nightshirt all day, to call her 'Fraud!' and hang up" (306). This passage bears echoes of the previous discussion of letters as means of performing a self that the writer wishes to inhabit. It is a dissembling that has at its heart a desire to own or fully inhabit the persona being presented. Fundamental to these writerly performances is the desire to experience a transformative experience, a self-making change. In spite of Ifemelu's anxiety surrounding this public identity, or rather, through the discussion of it, the novel underscores the power of the digital sphere as a medium that undermines, in productive ways, the fixedness of identity, be it national, sexual, gendered, or social. As presented in the novel, the Internet and the writing it enables provide an opportunity for individuals to

engage with themselves and with others, and with the range of identificatory possibilities available to them in a world made infinitely larger by the digital sphere. These epistolary (or techno-epistolary) forms dismantle various symbolic walls: the divide between the personal and the public, the divide between self and other, as well as other models of separation based on distance, time, and location. In expanding the world of the individual from the local to the global, these digital media effectively expand the range of individual identity. The novels that feature such expansions therefore offer messages with extra-literary significance.

Self-invention is at the heart of the epistolary novels I consider, the 419 letters examined in this chapter, and Adichie's blog-driven narrative. Writing allows the writers to reconceptualize themselves and also hints at the possibility of a changed reality. Where this self-(re)defining project was sustained to a certain degree, as we see in immediately post-independent novels, by a more intimate exchange between two individuals, we see it taking on ever wider reach with the increasing use of technology-based mediums. The writing being done in the narratives mirrors the actual writing of the novels by the authors; in both cases, an imaginative space is created to explore possibilities regarding identity that have not been sufficiently addressed by the nation. Particularly where women are concerned, the nation is being challenged because of its embrace of tradition instead of progress. Letters, blogs, e-mails, and other such tools used to explore constructions of self in postcolonial African novels introduce often discounted perspectives on class, sexuality, intimacy, tradition, and female and male identity. They function as testimonies to the postcolonial individual's experiences. Adichie and Aidoo's novels further shift the boundaries of the postcolonial female by exploring her

interrogations of self outside the national space. This inclusion of travel or migration adds an important critical dimension to the question of home and sites of belonging. In the end of both stories, the female protagonists return to their homelands and feel that they have finally returned to a place of belonging. Albeit a happy return, they do not experience seamless re-integrations. After all, the issues that exist regarding the woman's place in the independent nation have not disappeared. Rather than providing a statement about the transformed sociopolitical situation of the country, the novels choose instead to represent the transformations occurring in the women. These private evolutions signal future possibilities for their respective countries.

I propose that 419ers are similarly attempting to rewrite the place of the marginalized, in this case the underemployed or unemployed, in postcolonial African societies, and they are doing so through a medium that illuminates questions of literacy, class position, globalization, and technology. A point worth noting about e-mail as the chosen form of communication is best articulated in William Decker's *Epistolary Practices*: "In the absence of a material exchange there generally exists an absence of record, as few e-mail correspondents appear to download—much less print—their online discussions" (236). The implications for this sort of impermanence remain to be seen. What, if any change, will 419ers effect in the political and social landscape of their respective countries—and the continent as a whole? What will be the repercussions of the underhanded manner through which these changes are pursued? These 419 letters share meaningful similarities with the letters of the epistolary novels explored in earlier chapters. The writings are subversive; whether the letters encode illicit, unsanctioned desire, or are narratives of financial manipulation, they operate on unofficial levels

because the ultimate goal is to change how the official structures operate. For the women whose letters cipher same-sex desire and other restrictions to individual identity, letter writing is the first step in the process of revolution. For the women who see the letters as a means through which to rewrite their social space, epistles function as a provocative first step in questioning and destabilizing the status quo. And for the individuals engaged in 419 or advance-fee frauds, letter writing is sometimes about using illegal means to effect positive outcomes. In all these letters, there is a clear element of performance and dissembling. The individuals engaged in these letter-writing transactions use the performance to begin ushering in a phase of authenticity heralded by new social identities. The letters may initially dissemble, but they are being used in the long term to champion negotiations of identity and place. These writings are therefore stimulating, highly provocative testaments to the possibility of individual and social transformation.

#### 419 LETTERS RECEIVED

On February 24, 2010, I received my first 419 e-mail. It was from a Miss Nora Ahmed of “Ivory Coast West Africa” who had found herself in dire straits and was in need of some altruistic intervention. She wrote, in all caps, “...I AM CONTACTING YOU BECAUSE I NEED YOUR HELP IN THE MANAGEMENT OF A SUM OF MONEY THAT MY DEAD FATHER LEFT FOR ME BEFORE HE DIED. THIS MONEY IS USD 7.5 MILLION AMERICAN DOLLARS AND THE MONEY IS IN A BANK HERE IN ABIDJAN.” There was at once exigency, financial intrigue, and a personal plea. It was difficult not to be hooked by the drama and the all-caps urgency. She continued: “MY FATHER WAS A VERY RICH COCOA FARMER AND HE WAS POISONED BY HIS BUSINESS COLLEAGUES AND NOW I WANT YOU TO

STAND AS MY GUIDIAN [sic] AND APPOINTED BENEFICIARY AND RECEIVE THE MONEY IN YOUR COUNTRY SINCE I AM ONLY 19 YEARS AND WITHOUT MOTHER OR FATHER.” In spite of the orthographical error, the letter seemed to be a genuine cry for help, written, s/he would have us believe, by a desperate 19-year-old girl with no one else to turn to. The description of a young, helpless female was undoubtedly a shrewd choice made to appeal to the emotions of the e-mail recipient. The final paragraph concluded with a plea to the reader to respond; by so doing, the e-mail writer would verify his or her identity, and begin the transaction. In her final paragraph, “Miss Ahmed” wrote, “I AM WAITING FOR YOUR URGENT REPLY AND I WILL CALL YOU AS SOON AS I HEAR FROM YOU. I WILL SEND TO YOU A COPY OF MY PICTURE SO THAT YOU WILL KNOW THE PERSON YOU ARE HELPING.” With this emphasis on verification, the e-mail sender anticipated the value of establishing credibility and legitimacy. By replying, the letter recipient would implicitly seal the contract; he or she would accept the terms of the negotiation and acquiesce to the intimacy of the electronic-epistolary exchange. In making the e-mail recipient (potentially) responsible for her welfare, “Miss Ahmed” was enacting an emotional transaction along with the proposed financial one. An orphan, “without mother or father,” she beseeched the e-mail recipient to stand in as her guardian. The e-mail was intriguing in its unique blending of the familiar and unfamiliar status of the parties involved. The “young lady” obviously sent the e-mail to an unknown individual with the goal of establishing a relationship. But in her greeting, she addressed the unknown e-mail recipient as “Dearest One,” attempting to prematurely establish an emotional bond. As I

received and read more of these letters, I decided to consider how, specifically, such patterns of intimacy intersected with epistolary performance and identity.

A second e-mail letter arrived in my mailbox on Friday, March 5, 2010, from a Miss Wendy Bongo. Ms Bongo, attempting peremptorily to establish legitimacy, addressed the fact that she was sending her letter to an individual she did not know. She wrote: "...this message might come to you as a surprise because we never meet [sic] or communicate with each other before, please let this message never come to you as a surprise since I am contacting you for goods and in good faith." She went on to write that she was searching for a "very reliable Person," but how she concluded that I was just such a person, she did not explain. Like Miss Ahmed, Miss Bongo was from the Ivory Coast, had lost her father, a deceased international businessman, and was looking for someone to help her manage \$6.8 million, which she had supposedly inherited from him. In exchange for a share of the money, Wendy was asking her e-mail recipient to assist her in leaving the Ivory Coast and establishing herself in the United States. Miss Ahmed and Miss Bongo's letters were different in certain respects: Where Miss Ahmed had emphasized her helplessness and desperation—she was after all a 19-year old girl whose father had passed away—Miss Bongo did not provide specific details about her age, and was arguably less interested in eliciting the reader's sympathy or empathy. Miss Bongo made it clear that her final goal was to "secure a business opportunity." Rather than relying on a strictly emotional plea, Miss Bongo relied instead on the urgency of the matter. The words "urgent" and "urgency" were used repeatedly, as were statements meant to emphasize the haste with which the arrangements needed to be made. In place of making her e-mail recipient feel that she had selected him or her uniquely for the

transaction, Miss Bongo finished her letter by stating that if he or she was not interested in helping her, he or she was to let her know as quickly as possible, so that she could make alternate arrangements. There was less of the soft touch that characterized Miss Ahmed's letter. But, even a summary comparison of the two evinced some recurring patterns. The two letters were professedly written by young women in need of assistance; both young women had lost their fathers and had received sizable inheritances upon the passing; their narratives were intended to appeal to the emotions of the e-mail recipient and were therefore characterized by loss, desperation, and hope. Exorbitant amounts of money were thrown into the mix to appeal to those recipients for whom emotions may not have been primary motivators.

The third letter I received did not have a signature line, but the letter writer attempted to establish intimacy in much the same way the previous letters had done. The e-mail recipient was addressed as "Dear Partner." He continued: "I assume you and your family are in good health." There was solicitous concern for the reader, a seemingly innocuous regard for his or her family. This was quickly followed up by the writer identifying himself. He explained that he was "the Foreign Operations Manager in African Development Bank Group" in Burkina Faso. Presenting himself as a bank manager gave the e-mail recipient the impression of a credible source, a respectable member of Burkina Faso's financial world. He continued on in the same style as Ms. Bongo, preemptively addressing the trust factor of sending an e-mail to an unknown person: "This being a wide world in which it can be difficult to make new acquaintances and because it is virtually impossible to know who is trustworthy and who can be believed, I have decided to repose confidence in you after much fasting and prayer." This

letter writer invoked spirituality through references to his “fasting and prayer” to quickly address possible points of resistance. For a reader in the West—where being a churchgoer and having a spiritual life is associated with goodness and moral rectitude—the mention of the writer’s religious practices may work to allay the e-mail recipient’s initial concerns. This bank manager mentions that the money was left in his bank after the account holder died in a “private jet crash.” In order to continue flaunting status and wealth, he is very specific that the crash involved a “private jet,” not a regular plane. Closing out the letter, he mentions how the money will be divvied up eventually: 90% will be split between the two of them, and 10% will go to charity. Playing the role of the altruistic, goodhearted individual, the e-mail writer again attempts to manipulate his reader into believing in the goodness of the venture. No mention is made, however, of any endeavor on the writer’s part to locate the family of the deceased man and return the wealth.

In a fourth letter I received, a young orphan named Franklin (in his e-mail address) or Franklyn (in his signature line) from the Ivory Coast requests help from a “RELIABLE AND TRUSTWORTHY INDIVIDUAL OR COMPANY” willing to help him with \$8.5 million. Franklin/Franklyn mentions that his relatives want to kill him and that the situation at home is grave. As is the pattern with a number of 419 letters, Franklin/Franklyn’s letter references the political realities in his country. A key aspect of 419 letters is their acknowledgement of world events, in the countries they claim to be from and in the world at large. This strengthens the believability factor of the narratives. But even more meaningfully, it shows the extent to which the scammers are plugged into global occurrences. Far from being uninformed criminals, the players of the 419 game are



global citizens in the very real sense of the world; they use this knowledge of world affairs to create their narratives of deception. The scammers play with the misconceptions that abound about them, simultaneously mocking and feeding the inaccuracies. In Franklin/Franklyn's e-mail he mentions the "POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY IN MY COUNTRY." 419 letters often rely on stereotypes about their home countries, or about Africa in general, to disarm their potential victims or create a sense of familiarity for the reader.

#### YAHOO YAHOO AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Sefi Atta's 2010 collection of short stories, *News from Home*, includes "Yahoo Yahoo," a tale that explores Yahoo Yahoo boys, the moniker given to the individuals engaged in international internet scams. In the story, Augustine, the protagonist Idowu's "419 trainer," repeatedly tells him, "You can be anyone you wanna be" (247). Located within a historical period in flux, Idowu and others like him recognize the possibilities for their own futures. Atta's novel precisely captures the anxiety surrounding the possibilities of this self-recreation in the character of Augustine, whom Idowu ridicules for lying ("fabulizing") and performing as more than he actually is: "But I'd never met anyone who behaved like Augustine before. He was a performer. I could tell he was putting on a show for his own enjoyment as much as mine, as if all he needed was an audience of one, and that was enough for him" (231). Augustine often puts on an American accent. Attempting to impress his schoolmates, he tells stories of living on Lekki Peninsula, one of the wealthy areas in Lagos. He says his father was a chef, and that he grew up eating American food "like spaghetti and meatballs and burgers and fries" (225). To Idowu, Augustine's affectations and exaggerations make him laughable. However, and in spite of

Augustine's comicality, he understands far more than Idowu the dynamics of their social world. Augustine states, "In this place, we may all be in the same, em, em, vicinity, but there are invisible barriers between us. It is a class system. A class system, you hear me? You know what a class system means? I don't think you do" (230–231). Augustine himself may not fully understand what a class system is, but he certainly understands the ways in which it determines his existence. In the same way Augustine borrows from the affectations and markers of high-class status, so too do the 419ers mirror the existing—perhaps borrowed from European epistolary patterns—tradition of letter writing. In "E-mail Fraud: Language, Technology, and the Indexicals of Globalization," Jan Blommaert and Tope Omoniyi observe: "...the authors of these texts are also culturally literate in the sense that they know that some messages, in order to be understandable, require specific genre and stylistic characteristics" (598). The 419 letter writers perform a level of formality and respectability that they believe will make their narratives more convincing.

To note the extent to which a typical 419 letter aligns with the conventions of epistolarity, I examine a sixth letter received on April 6. Mrs. Stella Toure began her letter with a salutation intended to establish intimacy between her and her e-mail targets. "Hello my dear," her letter read. The greeting, a seemingly generic feature of a conventional letter, establishes an immediate connection between writer and reader. Mrs. Toure's letter continues with an introduction and the sharing of personal information about herself. This is a way of creating familiarity and of making the reader feel that he is informed about and somewhat involved in the life of the writer. If we recall from preceding chapters, the letters exchanged between the writing narrators and the letter recipients relied on the divulgence of private information that effected a closed circuit of

communication between writer and reader. Ramatoulaye's letter to Aissatou, for example, invoked shared memories and stories. Mrs. Toure's letter attempts to do the same following that convention of intimacy, but her effort ends up being one-sided in the absence of a real relationship with the e-mail recipient. In previously discussed epistolary examples, the exchange is also one-sided, a pattern that emphasizes the letter writer's engagement with self-making through writing, and the eventual projection of the self that has been defined—or is being defined—in the epistle. The recurrence of this epistolary pattern suggests its significance for reading the trope in postcolonial African fiction. It is a trope meant to assert the importance of postcolonial connections and intimacies, while underscoring the even more important role of the individual in establishing those bonds. Stylistically, the letter makes use of Standard English. Unlike some of the other letters I received, Mrs. Toure's is noticeably simple, devoid of the linguistic flourishes that some of the other letters use to exaggerate the writer's status. Mrs. Toure's does not try to impress her reader with titles and social standing. Rather, she writes to elicit her reader's sympathy and concern. She does not sell herself through credentials; instead, she sells a story of woe and misfortune. She uses short, informative paragraphs that present her thoughts in coherent, easily digestible sections. She strategically breaks apart her narrative so that the reader's attention is kept. Mrs. Toure knows enough about keeping a reader engaged to create a narrative heavy on emotional appeal. The tone of her letter is relaxed and not overly insistent. She is careful about how she invites the reader in to her drama. All of this speaks to an awareness of the performative nature of the letter and of its ability to present a self that is suitable for public spaces. To end her letter, Mrs. Toure writes, "Thanks and may God bless you." She signs it "Mrs. Stella Toure and Son

David.” The signature line is not only meant to disarm her reader (after all, which mother with a son and a relationship with God would be dishonest?), but even more patently, it creates a sense of narrative closure that is a standard feature of the epistolary structure. The conventions of the letter are therefore used to achieve particular ends. Blommaert and Omoniyi write that there appears to be an “...awareness of genre conventions for drafting messages such as these, designed to travel through the globalized communication systems, crossing continents and time zones” (587). In effect, the writing of these letter e-mails allows the letter writers—many of whom we have reason to believe are at least marginally educated but unable to find gainful employment—to perform social mobility and class ascension. These 419 scams are as much about seeking wealth as they are about the desire to possess a different identity. In each narrative, in each creation of a fictional character whose life has been unexpectedly transformed by a windfall, the 419 e-mail writer convinces himself that he is just one more click of the send button away from experiencing the same fate. The 419er sells and buys his own lie.

English, the language in which the letters are written, suggests an attempt to transcend one’s station in life and inhabit a new one; its use is a way to pretend that one’s social standing has been rewritten. The use of this language, particularly in Anglophone Africa where language is colored by the historical legacy of colonization, plays on the idea of using the tools of the colonizer against him. English functions, because of that historical colonial legacy, as a symbol of status. Indeed, literacy was and continues to be a signifier of class and place, and access to it has usually been reserved for those selected by colonial administrators. The adoption of the language by the somewhat educated, non-elite citizens speaks to an effort to bridge the gap between classes, to perform belonging

until belonging to the “elite” class actually becomes a reality. Indeed, such get-rich-quick attempts seem to be the general practice guiding many in African countries even today. The urgency to jump social stations can be traced back to the end of colonialism during which colonial officials evacuated key positions in government and administration. Individuals handpicked by the colonizers rushed in to fill those roles, often without adequate preparation or training. The roles became more about performance than about the actual carrying out of responsibilities. The postcolonial legacy in Africa is characterized by this slapdash movement towards wealth, often without the necessary steps to make the process a sustained, successful one.

#### 419 LETTERS AND POSTCOLONIAL REMAKING

I propose in this chapter that 419 letters function as attempts to rewrite or redefine social standing. I further argue that the desire for instant wealth is not only about financial gratification, but about the transformation of class position that would be inherent in such a windfall. Even more significantly, the confluence at this historical moment in African countries of technology, writing, language, and discourses of wealth, privilege, or lack thereof, suggests an emergent class consciousness. The post-independence state is still colored by political, social, and financial instability. These e-mail scams—the letters being written—are tied to negotiations of cultural value. In *Epistolary Histories*, Amanda Gilroy and Wil Verhoeven examine “...how letters became attached to different forms of cultural capital at different historical moments, to the emergent imperialist middle class in eighteenth-century England, to the mechanics of popular culture in mid-nineteenth-century Africa, and to the currency of academic writing and new technologies in our late-twentieth-century global village” (20). A parallel can be

drawn between letters and England's national coming to consciousness, and letters and the shifting social dynamics of 21<sup>st</sup> century African nations. Where letters of eighteenth-century England signaled an emerging middle class, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa 419 letters are similarly tied to an emergent class consciousness. E-mail writing perfectly emblemizes the shifts occurring in postcolonial African states by engaging themes of literacy, identity, technology, and money, all of which continue to undergird considerations of African postcoloniality. Those who are unable to read and write struggle against the limitations this illiteracy places on them. This population that has been denied access to writing, reading, and other forms of intellectual value struggles to access it, and to determine how it may be used to shape or shift their postcolonial identity.

Atta's story perfectly captures the contours of a national crisis—a crisis which I partly define here as the performance of progress without real advancement—that has attended the turn to advance fee crimes. In their desperate attempts to acquire wealth and show their advancement, 419ers miss (or perhaps are never afforded) legitimate opportunities for social growth and instead make do with the tenuous trappings that suggest such progress. Atta's portrayal of her young protagonist's introduction to a computer is telling: "I was nervous. The café was like an examination hall. Actually, more like a typing examination. No one was talking and all I could hear was the tap-tapping of their keyboards... 'This is what is called a mouse...' The screen came to life. 'This is what is called logging on...' The screen blacked out, returned in dazzling colors and patterns, then settled into a page. 'This is what is called the internet...'" (221). In Atta's story, Idowu states his belief that "Those who sent money in response to our begging letters were somehow relieving their guilt about how extravagant their lives

were, or they were prejudiced about Africans and believed we were all desperately in need” (246). Idowu is unfamiliar with even the basics of the computer and is daunted by this first lesson. Two things are worth noting. First, in spite of the literature that exists suggesting young 419ers are educated but disenfranchised and underemployed, the fictional narratives suggest that even the educational systems leave the young citizens unschooled in fundamental ways. Idowu mentions having taken a computer class that did not teach him anything about computers. Secondly, the manner in which Idowu learns about the computer is important. It is not within official structures of education and learning, but through unofficial channels. If the real education comes through underhanded sources, if the official structures of power are corrupt or failing, then it is unsurprising that scamming is the avenue chosen by some. The narrator provides a useful assessment of technology in developing countries: “The internet was anachronistic. That was exactly the word for it. Outside, there were stagnant gutters, because the drainage system was permanently blocked. Indoors, I was tapping into the future, as people did in science documentaries when voice-overs with echoes announced: ‘Tap into an undiscovered territory and discover the unknown’...” (221). Those markers of underdevelopment and poverty when juxtaposed with symbols of advancement and progress (as represented by the computer and Internet) are further proof of the fundamental progress that remains to be made in the postcolonial African state. In the essay, “Africa: Varied Colonial Legacies,” Tejumola Olaniyan discusses the continued legacy of the colonial encounter on African countries. He provides a synopsis of the pervasive practice of using symbols of advancement as substitutes for actual growth and writes of “a general arrest and devastation of the colonized societies’ capacities for self-directed

evolution,” a legacy which he sums up as “the perpetual crisis and instability of the African state” (271). Indeed, the infrastructure that would permit real progress and development does not yet exist and the narratives being created about postcolonial Africa attest to this crisis while simultaneously gesturing at possible avenues for change.

## GLOBALIZING INTIMACIES

Where the letter is assumed to be a connection between two or more individuals who are aware of each other’s existence, the e-mail—particularly the 419 e-mail—can be sent to one or more individuals who have no real knowledge of each other. Indeed, an e-mail functions differently from a letter, which exists in a physical space and has a tactile presence. Although the e-mail is directed, has a coded trace, and does inevitably make contact, the authenticity of its attempted intimacy is questionable. I propose in this chapter that 419 letters, and the nature of e-mail communication they advance, rework the idea of authenticity and intimacy, the traditional basis of epistolary exchanges. Whereas these techno-epistolary objects ostensibly bridge distances and foster accessibility, they in fact corrode the very nature of epistolary bonds. They, and the technology that makes them possible, do not strengthen links between correspondents. Rather, they advance inauthentic bonds. This is one of the many bleak aspects of the 419 phenomenon and a less than positive aspect of technology’s place in contemporary modes of communication. What 419 letters do is undermine this very real need that individuals have in an increasingly globalized world to feel connected. 419 letters create a counter-narrative to stories—stories similar to the ones analyzed in earlier chapters—in which connections are sustained across distance and across national boundaries. 419 letters travel the same distances, follow the same travel routes, but do so discursively. The added dimension of



technology makes this discursiveness especially potent; technology promotes speedier, farther-reaching communiqués, which essentially facilitates speedier, farther-reaching pseudo-intimacies.

Scholars of 419 have suggested that these letters represent a reversal of the victim-victimized dynamic that has underpinned narratives of postcolonial nations for decades. 419 letters very literally represent the empire writing back, the margins writing back to the center, and doing so with hostile intent. In his work on 419ers, Daniel Jordan Smith attempts to texture existing assessments of the 419 phenomenon. He writes: “The young men and women in Nigeria’s burgeoning cybercafés who write, reproduce, and recreate the many genres of scam letters that appear in e-mail in-boxes around the world are creating cultural objects that illuminate the authors’ interpretations and critical understandings of inequality and corruption, not only in Nigeria, but in the larger world system” (616-617). Considered through this lens, 419 e-mail scams may be read as a reverse exploitation by developing countries of the developed countries that have historically benefitted from siphoning away their resources. These so-called attempts to avenge the historical injustice done to Africa provide a useful critical dimension to ongoing discussions of 419 and allow for added nuance to the topic, and this in turn stops the discussion of 419 from being a simple, uninflected critique of African criminality. To better understand the driving force behind the phenomenon, or rather, the motivating factor for those involved in the phenomenon, in “Nigeria Tackles Advance Fee Fraud,” Mohamed Chawki begins his exploration of 419 letters with a quote from a scammer: “Why do some very clever people do this instead of a legitimate job, which may pay just as much but without the risk of prison? It’s because I enjoy the power. The power of the

burglar or the car thief or mugger is physical. The power of the con artist like me is mental” (2). The 419 exchange provocatively scrutinizes the reversal of historical hierarchies of powerless and powerful.

In order to reframe 419 in a way that allows for richer analysis, it pays to consider the historical genesis of the phenomenon. Nigerian advance fee fraud... first emerged as a worldwide phenomenon in the 1980s, following the dramatic decline in oil prices that left Nigeria’s national economy reeling (Adogame 555-557). The 1980s were also a period in which Nigeria’s military retook and retained control of the government through coups, establishing a period of more than 15 years of uninterrupted military rule. The declining economy and the military’s entrenched power contributed to the growth of Nigerian advance fee fraud in a number of ways (Smith 617). The 1970s were a period of economic prosperity in Nigeria, owing in large part to the booming oil industry. This upturn in the economy increased access to education and the young embraced the vibrant possibilities newly open to them. The 1980s were greeted, especially by that young population, with general optimism about the future. Unfortunately, this golden era did not last long. The economy plummeted, the military regained control of the government and restricted the opportunities available to the young and educated who were seeking gainful employment and legitimate avenues for advancement. The fact that a significant number of 419ers may be young, educated Nigerians who engage in the illegal activity as a way to make ends meet or as a way to survive in the face of their failing national economy makes important headway in reshaping discourse of Nigerian 419ers. In “The 419 Code as Business Unusual: Youth and the Unfolding of the Advance Fee Fraud Online Discourse,” Adogame surmises the criminalization of Nigeria and Nigerians as a result of

advance fee frauds: “For instance, ‘Travel Warnings’ about safety and security conditions in Nigeria, and ‘Tips for Business Travelers to Nigeria’ emanating from the US Department of State (Bureau of Consular Affairs) and the US Embassy in Nigeria are, at the very least, alarming and derogatory” (570-571). Such simplistically negative depictions of the country and its citizens, Adogame writes, do not consider the provenance of the advance fee fraud in Nigeria, a perspective which would add a necessary critical valence to the seemingly self-evident criminality of the 419 enterprise. The scams are not without the complexity of historical legacy. In fact, 419 may have been influenced in part by the perfidy Nigerians witnessed in their government leaders. The military governments of the 1980s and 1990s were unapologetically corrupt, and “they created a climate in which ordinary citizens believed that they would have to resort to any means available to achieve their own economic aspirations” (Smith 617). The narratives created by 419ers about exorbitant sums of money “siphoned from Nigeria’s coffers” strongly resonate with the methods employed by the country’s own corrupt leaders to steal wealth. Indeed, a number of African countries have been plagued by a seemingly unending stream of corrupt government leaders. Those in positions of authority have abused that privilege and stolen from their country. And those disempowered and disenfranchised by the pervasive corruption have chosen to mimic it with the hopes of reclaiming some of the lost wealth. This redemptive, or at the very least explanatory, perspective on the 419 scam has typically not been as widely shared as the perspective that considers the Nigerian advance fee scam a simply corrupt enterprise. In Chapter 5 of *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*, Tolu Odumosu and Ron Eglash discuss Oprah Winfrey’s treatment of the topic during a 2007

show episode. The episode was criticized by Nigerians in and outside the country for characterizing the Nigerian 419ers as ‘crooks’ and the unwitting American targets as ‘victims’. In the essay, “Oprah, 419, and DNA: Warning! Identity Under Construction,” Odumosu and Eglash write: “The reaction to this show...was overwhelmingly negative and the subject of a great many blog posts and articles” (94). Online communities with traffic generated primarily by members of the “Nigerian diaspora” expressed their anger about Oprah’s unbalanced discussion of the topic and her unfavorable portrayal of Nigerians. Interestingly, these discussions took place in cyber communities, a fact which in a small way testifies to the varied, not solely scam-related, uses of forms of technology and digital media in Nigeria and by Nigerians.

The use of technology for 419 purposes provides an intriguing subtext to this chapter’s discussion of globalization. Blommaert and Omoniyi note that 419ers appear to be technologically savvy. They are familiar with “the world of virtual communication” in a way that facilitates their successful manipulation of the internet. The fact that the 419ers are able to set up multiple, untraceable e-mail addresses, manage the complicated stream of outgoing and ingoing messages, and seek out reliable service providers, speaks to “highly developed computer literacy.” According to Blommaert and Omoniyi, “The people authoring these messages are streetwise in the world of the Internet. They are fully competent users of the technology of globalized communication” (585). It would appear that technology works hand in hand with the equalizing impetus of the 419 project. If part of the goal of these advance fee scams is to take back from the West and thereby level the playing field, the facility with which the 419ers have claimed and manipulated technology suggests an attempt to use the tools of the (former) oppressors to carry out the

exploitation. Odumosu and Eglash write of the potential to rebalance power hierarchies provided by technology: “The possibility that migrants, and the sociogeographic contexts where they live in the countries of origin and destination, have taken technology and used it in ways that developers never expected raises the question of the relationship between power and technology for powerless social groups and regions” (27). Marginalized populations using technology to effect social transformation is a testament to the growing importance of digital media in postcolonial societies, but it also brings to the forefront ever-present questions about unequal access to those technological tools. Do marginalized groups in fact have access to technology to the same extent that non-marginalized populations do? Does the access marginalized groups have to technology—for example, 419ers’ access to the Internet, digital medias, etc.—ensure future advancement and certain empowerment? Indeed, technological advancements have been made historically by Western countries with the wherewithal to turn innovative ideas into reality. Developing countries have been recipients of handouts or spectators of advancements that have usually left them struggling to keep up, or resignedly falling behind. Technological advances in the developing country, although being used for criminal intent in this context, highlight the anxiety to reach the height of modernization and development attainable, some believe, only by Western countries. The advance fee scams appear to be strategically geared towards creating equal distribution of resources and wealth, as well as recouping losses, monetary and otherwise, that colonized countries suffered at the hands of their former colonizers. The 419 schemes are aimed at countries, the United States, for example, that some argue continue to exploit less powerful countries, but may or may not have had a direct colonial relationship with them. In

making these retaliatory gestures, 419ers are provocatively texturing conceptions of globalization and national borders. Scholars who reject globalization as a wholly positive phenomenon take issue with the uneven dissemination of cultural value. They argue that certain countries always appear to be on the receiving end of the global current. The 419 scam begins to unsettle this hierarchy of gain and loss, while also bringing to the forefront related questions about levels of marginalization and access to technology that have no ready or simple answers.

Increasingly, 419 scholarship has attempted to move beyond an uncomplicated condemnation of Africa's advance fee network. In fact, a number of essays on the topic, as shown in this chapter, have traced the emergence of the practice, linking it to more than a fundamental corruption of African (see: Nigerian) individuals. Undoubtedly, without such texturing of the issue, the business of 419 simply becomes another way of painting the developing country in a negative light. Atta's work offers a compelling portrayal of the dimensions and complexities of the e-mail scam enterprise. In a powerfully loaded passage, Augustine chastises Idowu for feeling bad for the *mugus* (the fools who fall for their scam). Augustine informs Idowu that they have been taken advantage of by the *oyinbos* [white people] for years. He asks Idowu if he has read Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* or *Stupid White Men* by Michael Moore. Idowu admits that he has not read the book, but provides interesting insight into his lack of knowledge about the topics Augustine mentions: "[Augustine's] cousin worked in a bookshop at Falomo Shopping Center. [Augustine] borrowed books and returned them, as if the bookshop were a library, he said. No one bought the books he read, or missed them. They stayed on the shelves for years, while the Christian books by

Creflo Dollar, Bishop T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen and Joyce Meyer were gone in a matter of days” (266). The books about the history of colonialism in African are ignored. Instead, books that encourage the pursuit of personal wealth, written by preachers who have been criticized for their lavish lifestyles, are bought. Their message, cloaked as gospel truth and delivered from the pulpit, spurs 419ers along their path of illegal gain. Rather than reading about the historical circumstances that have altered the course of their country, the men and women who buy the books prefer to work toward immediate and abundant wealth. This passage in Atta’s book further highlights the divide between official and unofficial structures of education and society in general. The unofficial system allows for the African countries and citizens who have been—and continue to be—affected by colonialism and imperialism to understand what such oppression means in their daily lives. They do not need to read those books to see things as they are; their daily lives are a constant reminder. But the difference between knowing how unfair and unequal things are, and actively doing something about it is what separates Augustine and his ilk from Idowu. Augustine’s approach to global inequality is of a more intellectual nature than the school-going Idowu’s. Augustine’s views about his country’s history of inequality allow him to consider his scams a rebalancing of historical theft. Idowu, however, operates from a space of conscience, a space that compels him to consider only the immorality of the fraud.

Whose perspective has more value and whose responsibility is it to right or “write” historical wrongs? Idowu, who wants to be a journalist in the future, does not feel it is his duty to fix his country. Augustine, who some would argue is a self-serving criminal, feels that he must in one way or another fight against the system of Western-

haves and Southern-have-nots. Indeed, the 419ers are effectively posing a challenge to the existing social system. This complication of the moral question is also explored in Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You By Chance* (2009), which narrates the fictional account of a young man connected to the world of 419. Nwaubani's novel follows Kingsley Ibe, a young Nigerian son, who finds himself lured into the world of 419 when he is unable to secure other employment. Kingsley graduates from university with a degree in engineering, excited about the possibilities this education will offer. Unfortunately, Kingsley chases job opportunity after another, sends out applications one after another. When this route proves ineffective, Kingsley begins to consider the option of working for his uncle Boniface ("Cash Daddy"), who is a notorious 419er. On one of his initial visits to ask his uncle for help in paying off debts the family has incurred as a result of Kingsley's father's hospitalization, Kingsley is sent out of Cash Daddy's office for wearing worn down, falling-apart shoes. Cash Daddy asks, " 'Are those shoes?' He frowned and looked worried" (113). Kingsley, who has never before scrutinized his own appearance, goes off with Cash Daddy's "Protocol Officer" to get a new pair of shoes. Kingsley's experience in the shoe store marks an important change in his perspective: "After politely declining several of my escort's recommendations, I finally made my pick. They had one of the lowest price tags of all the shoes in the shop, but they were probably the most civilized. Unostentatious, respectable, gentlemanly. I slipped my feet into the pair of black Russell & Bromley shoes. Honestly, there are shoes and there are shoes. As I tried them on, it felt as if dainty female fingers were massaging my feet. A revolution had taken place" (114). Following this introduction to the riches of Cash Daddy's life, Kingsley's father passes away, and his brother is admitted to university to



study engineering. Kingsley worries about the debts his family now faces, especially in the absence of the primary breadwinner and therefore makes the decision to join his uncle's 419 business. He at first rationalizes this decision: "But I was probably worrying myself for nothing. They were just a bunch of e-mail addresses with no real people at the other end anyway. Besides, who on this earth was stupid enough to fall prey to an e-mail from a stranger in Nigeria?" (177). Although Kingsley's conscience continues to plague him, he reminds himself of all that he will be able to do for his family. He assumes an "entry-level position" in his uncle's company and becomes an integral part of the business.

If a possible goal of the 419 scams is to remedy historical wrongs and redistribute wealth to impoverished African nations, what does one make of the emphasis on "self-enrichment" and individual wealth? *I Do Not Come to You By Chance* provides some answers through the figure of Cash Daddy. Kingsley notes "that Cash Daddy was personally responsible for the upkeep of the 221 orphans in the Daughters of St. Jacinta Orphanage, Aba. He tarred all the roads in my mother's local community. He dug boreholes, installed streetlights, built a primary health care center." Kingsley also makes good on the wealth he accumulates through his role in his uncle's 419 business: "...I received a letter from the Old Boys' Association of my secondary school requesting my contribution toward a new classroom block. I replied immediately to say I would fund the whole project. I knew what it felt like to endure classrooms that had no windows, no doors, and no tiles on the floors...So, no matter what the media proclaimed, we were not villains, and the good people of Eastern Nigeria knew it" (263-64). Nwaubani muddies the line between good and bad, forcing the reader to confront the ethical and non-ethical

aspects of the 419 machinery. It becomes difficult to align one's self with Kingsley or the *mugus* he takes advantage of. The 419 enterprise challenges superficial moral judgments. Interestingly, 419 letters erode the distinction between public and private spheres in a way that traditional epistolary forms have not. Because of the nature of the narrative charade—the stories shared are untrue, the names used are made up, and the promises offered are specious—there is no real private identity, and neither is there a true public one. But there is an attempt to establish one. The scammers are engaged in a project of rebalancing wealth and of redefining their class positions. The 419 letter, in addition to being a tool of manipulation, must also be considered in terms of its latent subversion and revolution. Clearly, the business of scamming the West, and of taking money before it can be taken by corrupt African leaders, is its own form of “underhanded” rebellion.

#### POST-SCRIPT

Although with this dissertation I advance an argument about the epistolary trope in post-independence African literature, I do not suggest that it appears with any uniformity across all novels that incorporate the form. Examining the occurrence of epistolarity in its many modes allows for a productive and nuanced analysis of the identity-focused questions being interrogated in contemporary African literature. I suggest that wholly epistolary novels or epistolary frames inserted into the narrative (narrative interruptions) provide a useful addition to discussions of evolving postcolonial identity. Further, these forms allow for the articulation of womanhood (and personhood, in general) in light of persistently limiting definitions of “woman” in the postcolonial African space. The presence of these forms in postcolonial narratives promotes ongoing examination of formations of identity, a subject with significant extra-literary social and

political value. In light of discourses that group all postcolonial experiences under one umbrella, I call for attention to the specific ways each narrative uses epistolary forms to engage the postcolonial question. In Adichie's novel, for example, the use of blogs (online diary-letters—diaries because they are personal, but also letters because they are generally geared towards the public) to tell Ifemelu's story, at least in part, necessitates a discussion of how technology, migration to new national spaces, and the return home simultaneously inflect the protagonist's exploration of her postcolonial identity. Indeed, by discussing blogs as an epistolary form, I intentionally expand the definition of this narrative device and add a useful perspective to the ways such fracturing forms should be read in African fiction. With this project, I redefine the way epistolary frames, epistolary forms, and epistolarity are conceived of and understood in postcolonial African fiction, and I call for increased attention to the narratives and identities those forms make visible in the postcolonial nation.

## CONCLUSION\_Private Selves, Public Others, and the Place of Technology

This project has focused on letters as literary tropes used figuratively and even literally to breach national boundaries and disturb traditional social and cultural categories. Letters have further served to maintain ties between home spaces and diasporic locations, and also functioned as tools in personal journeys to recast and represent the self—self (as private construction) and self (as public persona). Through their letters, protagonists such as Jagua Nana, Ramatoulaye, and Sissie, as well as a number of the other characters discussed, have attempted to redefine themselves outside of the strict categories provided by their traditional societies. These narratives penned shortly after independence were concerned with personal identity within a formerly colonized, newly liberated, patriarchal and traditional culture, and the letters examined in this work testify to attempts at self-making during that specific moment. Contemporary African novels that include themes tied to technology and digital media are products of a later postcolonial moment in which identity is tied to public mediums, technological advancements, and a more global focus. In these narratives, no longer is the nation a space consolidated within a fixed geographical location. Rather, it is a dynamic, social construct comprised of individuals who are products of shifting boundaries and changing borders.

The preceding chapter discussed 419 letters as a form, albeit criminal, of e-mail correspondence and briefly examined blog writing as tied to explorations of migrant identity in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. The protagonist of Adichie's novel, Ifemelu, grows up in Nigeria, lives in the United States for an extended period of time,

then returns to Nigeria where she finds herself feeling like a cultural outsider. She documents her experiences through various forms of writing, first as the author of a popular blog, and then as a staff member for a Lagos-based magazine. Technology and writing meaningfully intersect in her exploration of identity. Sefi Atta's "Yahoo Yahoo" and Adaobi Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* similarly examine the increasingly widespread use of technology-based media—Internet blogs, e-mails, social media sites, among others—and the transformative effect these mediums have on identity and on the idea of place and home. There are fewer and fewer ways to categorically distinguish between the here and there, or the "I belong here" and "You belong there." In a world that continues to grow more and more connected, how do we define and demarcate lines of belonging and exclusion? How do we map the dissonance or convergence between the personal and public self? Do digital borders simply replace physical borders or do digital technologies effectively render null all forms of borders?

Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities posits a sense of belonging based, not on regular interaction with members of the theoretical community, but on the embrace of an idea of belongingness—to a group which may be as large as a nation, or in this day and age, a group as small as a Facebook list of friends.<sup>21</sup> Anderson's concept is particularly relevant today given the heightened focus on immigration and identity. In the United States, debates rage over proposed immigration reforms that would grant illegal or undocumented immigrants the opportunity to earn citizenship.<sup>22</sup> Similar disputes

---

<sup>21</sup> For more on Anderson's groundbreaking work on the notion of communities: Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> For more on provocative debates on immigration policies and citizenship in the United States, see <http://www.cfr.org/immigration/us-immigration-debate/p11149>; <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/19/amnesty-losing-emotional-punch-immigration-debate/2567509/>

regarding citizenship are taking place in various parts of the world. We are being asked to reimagine our communities and our place within them. We are being asked to interrogate what constitutes a community, who gets to belong and why, who is excluded and why. The rapid development of technology worldwide and our increased reliance on it, coupled with opportunities for mobility, are challenging us to find new ways of recodifying identity. Technology and digital media are significantly reshaping social networks and, even more germane to this project's focus, affecting global discourses surrounding postcolonial identity.

Exposure via internet technologies to different parts of the world and the ideas that emerge from those various locations allows individuals to inspect their own ideas and, if needed, adjust accordingly. In addition, the intensity with which we embrace these sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, to name a few, and the connected opportunity for self-presentation hints at a strong desire to have our identities acknowledged and validated. We are who we are by virtue of being "seen" or regarded as such. More so than ever before, we are engaged in a process of self-transformation and self-presentation. Digital media begin to subversively and complexly rearrange our notion of identity and the full implications of this revolution remain to be seen. Undoubtedly, digital media and technological gadgets allow us to examine our places in the world and to acknowledge, for perhaps the first time, the experiences of global "others." Consequently, we have begun to concretize our sense of self, our sense of our own identity, by evaluating those others. We are who we are by learning who we are not. But, and this is a question that begs further discussion, what self ultimately gets concretized? Assuming that we present a public self and there is, perhaps, a private self,

which self do we embrace as the true one? Do digital media ultimately facilitate self-making or self-splitting? It would seem that digital media is pushing identity out of the realm of “I” and into the realm of “We.” One may argue that our identity these days is less about ourselves and more about our self in relation to—or as a product of interaction with—others.

In African countries, increased access to technology over the past few years, primarily mobile technology, is effecting a revolution in how people communicate: with whom, from where. This rapid rise in communication tools is also calcifying generational divides, facilitating the exposure of the younger generation to new networks and new perspectives, and allowing traditional beliefs and mores to be poked and prodded in the service of social and political progress. Digital and social media are able to influence millions of people; they alert individuals spread throughout the world to events occurring in one specific location. Facebook and other such platforms have facilitated political activism in Africa and the Middle East and led to the ousting of corrupt political regimes. In Egypt, for example, Facebook inspired the activism and protesting that culminated in the “resignation of President Hosni Mubarak and the dissolution of the ruling National Democratic Party.”<sup>23</sup> Digital technologies are clearly being used to rally for change and are beginning to appear with notable frequency in narratives to attest to the need for social and political reform in postcolonial states. Postcolonial African literature is documenting the changing tides of the postcolonial nation, as well as the various factors giving way to that change.

---

<sup>23</sup> For more on the role of Facebook and other social media sites in the 2012 Egyptian revolution: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/19/books/review/how-an-egyptian-revolution-began-on-facebook.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

The content and form of postcolonial African literature is undergoing a dynamic shift. What constitutes a work of literature is evolving along with the social revolutions being made possible by technological innovations. Writers are creating formally and stylistically inventive works that testify to the heightened role of technology in our lives. Teju Cole, a Lagos-born, New York City-based writer, exemplified this literary transformation when in March 2011 he published “Small Fates,” Twitter-published, tweet-length narrative snapshots of the experiences of everyday Lagosians. These kernels blurred the line between fact and fiction. Drawn from real-life occurrences, but published on Twitter as snippet-style stories, Cole’s “Small Fates” garnered attention for possibly ushering in a new digital media-propelled narrative style. Matt Pearce, in a review of the tweets, wrote: “Cole brings a literary horsepower to his tweets that’s a little hard to tease apart with conventional critical methods.” As proof of the earlier point about digital media encouraging knowledge of other parts of the world, Pearce noted that if not for Cole’s tweets about Nigeria’s most populous city, he’d “know nothing of Lagos’ people outside of its population: that it’s nearing those of Los Angeles and New York City, if not surpassing them already.” He went on to suggest that critics did not yet have a “familiar rubric” for reading this brand of literary product.<sup>24</sup>

Traditional novels can be analyzed within traditional critical frameworks, but the challenge of African literary criticism becomes finding new, nuanced lens through which to analyze emerging postcolonial writing that incorporates shifts in the mediums of telling. There is as yet no critical paradigm for such literary innovations, nor is there a critical framework for the incorporation of epistolary-type or technology-fueled narrative

---

<sup>24</sup> Matt Pearce’s review can be found here: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/death-by-twitter/>



patterns. But this absence of a critical framework may well be the impetus for reinvigorated scholarship around postcolonial African literature—in its many iterations and forms. Perhaps one of the most compelling descriptions of the nature of such technology-based narratives comes from an Australia-based blog that reviewed Cole’s “Small Fates.”<sup>25</sup> The blogger writes: “But I want to suggest here that Twitter can be the work as much as the workbook, recalling video-game academic Espen Aarseth’s useful distinction between ‘ergodic writing i.e. writing still emergently based in evolving energy, and canonical writing e.g. unchangeably published.’” Increased attention, as I have called for in preceding chapters, to the formal and thematic changes taking place in African literature will prove useful for future work in postcolonial and diaspora studies, as well as African literary criticism. Further, the idea of narratives generated by “evolving energy,” as described by Aarseth, is truly compelling given the evolving nature of the postcolonial African state.<sup>26</sup> Narratives that capture this current—a current fueled by passionate exploration of identity, dissatisfaction with tradition and status quo, and desire for change and transformation—must be analyzed for what they make visible and what they begin to testify to about the postcolonial nation.

---

<sup>25</sup> Australian blog review of Teju Cole’s “Small Fates”: <http://meanjin.com.au/articles/post/twitter-the-novel-tejucole-teju-cole/>

<sup>26</sup> For more on Aarseth’s definition of “evolving energy,” see <http://scholar.google.com/citations?user=xxdwlx8AAAAJ&hl=en>

## APPENDIX: 419 LETTERS

### EXAMPLE 1

**Date:** Wed 24 Feb 06:55:42 EST 2010

**From:** Nora Ahmed <nora49@btinternet.com> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Not Spam](#)

**Subject:** FROM MISS NORA AHMED

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

FROM MISS NORA AHMED  
IVORY COAST WEST AFRICA

DEAREST ONE,

I AM MISS NORA AHMED FROM IVORY COAST AND I AM CONTACTING YOU BECAUSE I NEED YOUR HELP IN THE MANAGEMENT OF A SUM OF MONEY THAT MY DEAD FATHER LEFT FOR ME BEFORE HE DIED. THIS MONEY IS USD 7.5 MILLION AMERICAN DOLLARS AND THE MONEY IS IN A BANK HERE IN ABIDJAN.

MY FATHER WAS A VERY RICH COCOA FARMER AND HE WAS POISONED BY HIS BUSINESS COLLEAGUES AND NOW I WANT YOU TO STAND AS MY GUIDIAN AND APPOINTED BENEFICIARY AND RECEIVE THE MONEY IN YOUR COUNTRY SINCE I AM ONLY 19 YEARS AND WITHOUT MOTHER OR FATHER.

PLEASE I WILL LIKE YOU TO REPLY TO THIS E-MAIL SO THAT I WILL TELL YOU ALL THE INFORMATION SO THAT THIS MONEY WILL BE TRANSFERRED TO YOU SO THAT YOU WILL GET ME PAPERS TO TRAVEL TO YOUR COUNTRY TO CONTINUE MY EDUCATION THERE. I AM WAITING FOR YOUR URGENT REPLY AND I WILL CALL YOU AS SOON AS I HEAR FROM YOU. I WILL SEND TO YOU A COPY OF MY PICTURE SO THAT YOU WILL KNOW THE PERSON YOU ARE HELPING.

THANKS.

MISS NORA AHMED.

## EXAMPLE 2

**Date:** Fri 5 Mar 07:28:36 EST 2010

**From:** WENDY BONGO <wendy.bongo@btinternet.com> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** From: Miss.Wendy bongo

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

From: Miss.Wendy bongo

E-mail: [bongowendy@yahoo.fr](mailto:bongowendy@yahoo.fr)

Greetings,

I Hope all is well with you, this message might come to you as a surprise because we never meet or communicate with each other before, please let this message never come to you as a surprise since I am contacting you for goods and in good faith. My name is Miss.Wendy Bongo from Ivory Coast West Africa, I was searching for a very reliable Person, who will assist me in my investment plans over there in your base,

I am very pleased to come across your contact details and I will use this opportunity to request for your assistance in my investment plans in your area, I have some reasonable amount worth US\$ M6.8 which I inherited from my late father who was a traditional ruler and an international business man before his death, now I am ready and wanted to relocate out of this country and come over there to your area so that I will secure a business opportunity. I wish to invest in Agricultural Project and Real Estate in your base because we do not have fair investment opportunities here in our country because of frequent political crisis. plz your assistance is highly needed to enable me achieve my goals.

Your urgent response is highly needed so that I will give you full details. Please if you are not in a good position to work with me I will appreciate you inform me immediately so that I will start making an urgent alternative arrangement with another person without much delay.

Contact me via e-mail [bongowendy@yahoo.fr](mailto:bongowendy@yahoo.fr)

I am eagerly waiting for your urgent response.

Remain Blessed.

Faithfully Yours

Wendy Bongo.

### EXAMPLE 3

**Date:** Sun 28 Mar 17:19:49 EDT 2010

**From:** Chelsea Kouma <chelseakouma@live.com> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** With trust.

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

*Hello,*

*How are you today? I hope you are fine. My name is Miss Chelsea Kouma, 23 years from Liberia in West Africa. I am single girl looking for honest and nice person. Somebody who i can partner with. I don't care about your colour or ethnicity. I would like to know you more, most especially what you like and what you dislike. I'm sending you this beautiful mail, with a wish for much happiness. I am looking forward to hear from you.*

*Yours,  
Miss Chelsea*

#### EXAMPLE 4

**Date:** Wed 31 Mar 16:17:24 EDT 2010

**From:** "M.E" <e\_2020@gala.net> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** Dear Partner,

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

**Dear Partner,**

**I assume you and your family are in good health.**

**I am the Foreign Operations Manager in African Development Bank Group here in Burkina Faso . This being a wide world in which it can be difficult to make new acquaintances and because it is virtually impossible to know who is trustworthy and who can be believed, i have decided to repose confidence in you after much fasting and prayer. It is only because of this that I have decided to confide in you and to share with you this confidential business.**

**In my bank; there resides an overdue and unclaimed sum of nine million six hundred thousand United States dollars (\$9,600,000.00). When the account holder suddenly passed away in a private jet crash, he left no beneficiary who would be entitled to the receipt of this fund. For this reason, I have found it expedient to transfer this fund to a trustworthy individual with capacity to act as foreign business partner. Thus i humbly request your assistance to claim this fund.**

**Upon the transfer of this fund in your account, you will take 45% as your share from the total fund, 10% will be shared to Charity Organizations in both country and 45% will be for me.**

**Please if you are really sure you can handle this project, contact me immediately**

**I am looking forward to read from you soon.**

**Thanks**

**Yours Good friend,**

## EXAMPLE 5

**Date:** Thu 1 Apr 15:38:09 EDT 2010

**From:** Franklin Asika <f\_asika@cantv.net> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** HELLO

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

MY GREETING TO YOU,  
IT MAY COME TO YOU IN A SURPRISE. I AM AN ORPHAN FROM SIERRALEONE.  
I HAVE AN INHERITANCE I WANT YOU TO HELP HANDLE FOR ME THE  
AMOUNT IS EIGHT MILLION FIVE HUNDRED THOUSAND UNITED STATES  
DOLLARS (8.5 MUSD) WHICH IN INHERITTED FROM MY LATE FATHER, AND I  
INTEND TO INVEST THIS MONEY IN YOUR COUNTRY.

I AM PRESENTLY HERE IN ABIDJAN COTE D'IVOIRE (IVORY COAST) WHERE I  
GOT YOUR E-MAIL WHEN I AM SEEKING FOR RELIABLE AND TRUSTWORTHY  
INDIVIDUAL OR COMPANY WHOM THIS MONEY COULD BE TRANSFERRED TO  
PRIVATE/COMPANY ACCOUNT FOR SAFEKEEPING UNTIL WHEN I  
EVENTUALLY GET OVER TO YOUR COUNTRY TO COMMENCE ON THE  
INVESTMENT PROGRAM AND MY EDUCATION. BUT BASE ON MY LOW  
KNOWLEDGE IN THE BSUINESS FIELD, I ACTUALLY NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE  
IN TRANSFERRING AND INVESTING THIS MONEY IN YOUR COUNTRY.YOUR  
EFFORTS IN ASSISTING ME WOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED.

DUE TO THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INSTABILITY IN MY COUNTRY AND  
ALSO MY FAMILY RELATIVES WANT TO KILL ME AND CLAIM MOST OF THE  
INHERITANCE AFTER CLAIMED ALL OF MY LATE FAHER PROPERTY AND ALL  
THAT IS LEFT IS THE MONEY DEPOSITED IN THE BANK I HAVE DECIDED TO  
PUSH OVER THIS MONEY FOR INVESTMENT IN YOUR COUNTRY. I DEMAND  
YOUR ABSOLUTE HONESTY AND SINCERITY IN GETTING THIS MONEY SAVE  
AND WELL GUIDED WHEN REMITTED ABROAD FOR ANY CHOICE OF BUSINESS  
THAT YOU MAY COME UP TO THAT IS MOST VIABLE AND PROFIT  
ORIENTED.YOUR INDIGENOUS ASSIATANCE IS THEREFORE HIGHLYSOLICITED  
AND I COUNT ON YOU TO MAKE THIS DREAM A REALITY.

ON COMPLETION OF THIS TRANSACTION IN GETTING THIS MONEY WELL  
SECURED AND GUIDED WHEN REMITTED ABROAD, AND YOUR INDIGENOUS  
ASSISTANCE I WILL EQUIRE IN SECURING A GOOD INVESTMENT BASE WHERE  
THIS MONEY WILL BE INVESTED PROPERLY, I WILL HANDSOMELY LET YOU  
HAVE 15% OF THE TOTAL MONEY, FOR YOUR ASSISTANCE RENDERED TO ME.

ACCEPT TO RENDER THIS ASSISTANCE TO ME AND I AM LOOKING FORWARD  
FOR A FRUITFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU AS SOON AS THIS TRANSACTION  
IS PERFECTLY DONE.

AWAIT TO READ FROM YOU .

SINCERELY.

FRANKLYN ASIKA.

## EXAMPLE 6

**Date:** Tue 6 Apr 06:27:52 EDT 2010  
**From:** Stella Toure <tourestella@cptelnet.com> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)  
**Subject:** From Mrs. Stella Toure.  
**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

From Mrs. Stella Toure.

Hello my dear,

My name is Mrs. Stella Toure, former staff of Air Afrique hostess a nationality Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa. I am a widow being that I lost my husband some year's ago. My husband, late Dr. Isaiah Toure, was a serving director of the GOLD exporting board until his death. He was assassinated in September (2003) by the rebels following a political uprising.

Before his death, he had an account with a bank in a Suspense account here in Cote D'Ivoire up to the tune of Five million United State dollars (\$5,000000.00). However, due to my bad health situation occasioned by cancer of the lungs, i wish you to do me a favour to receive this fund to a safe account in your country or any safer place as the beneficiary so that you will invest it in a good business venture like real estate and industrial production for the benefit and education of my son, David and he is only 17yrs old, who will be coming to stay under your kind custody after the transfer for his education and future because my health is failing me.

At this present, I am too weak and down and am afraid that I might not survive my situation but God knows the best and I pray that whatever happens to me, you should take care of my son David for me.

I shall be going in for a surgery operations of the cancer of the lungs soon and desire this money to be transferred to you fast. I do not wish to leave this money in the bank because bankers might take advantage of my son's age who is just 17years old and too young to handle this kind of money.

My late husband relatives who should have handled this situation for me are not good type. Since my illness, they have succeeded in stealing most of my late husband's properties except this money which they do not know about and I do not want my only son David to get involved with them because they are dangerous and greedy.

I will be submitting your name to the bank where my late husband deposited this money and confirm you as our family friend whom I wish this money to be transferred to. We have also mapped out 75% for ourselves, 25% for your cordial assistance. If you will handle this for me, please forward this information as follows for further instruction on what to do.

1. Complete Name.....

2. Complete address.....
3. Telephone number.....
4. Fax number.....
5. Date of Birth.....
6. Profession.....

Thanks and may God bless you.

Mrs. Stella Toure and Son David.



## EXAMPLE 7

**Date:** Mon 12 Apr 05:26:43 EDT 2010

**From:** alima.mohammed@btopenworld.com [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** Dearest One,

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

Dearest One,

I am Miss Aalima Mohammed., 21 years Old from Cote D'Ivoire. I am the survived daughter of chief/Dr. Mustafa Mohammed, my father was into shipping company business a major cocoa exporter while some of his business associates are based in Kuwait, and a cum politician here in my country. I misplace the contact he gave me to contact a friend of him by name. Dr. Ibrahim Yusuf who leave in Kuwait, I only have his address Street No. 8. Shuwaikh Industrial Area Safat 13005 Safat KUWAIT, but I cant find his e-mail address nor phone number. So after my doing research on the internet I found your profile which I was motivated to contact you for assistance.

I was born out of tragic fate. My mother died from cancer sickness, I have a Younger brother who met his untimely death with my father during a conference meeting last year. My father went for a conference meeting and take my Younger brother along with him, but it was sad to hear that my farther and my Younger brother was poisoned by their business associate because of their greediness that my farther worn a contract of \$15000 USD Fifteen Million Dollars after the last election healed in my country.

My father and my Younger brother were rushed to the Hospital and my brother died a day after their admission to our family clinic while my father spent three good painful days before he died. My father secretly told me that he has the sum of \$8000 000 USD deposit in one of the security company here for our family. I don't have trust on my relation here to assist me because they have even overshadow all the properties of my late father and left me empty hand, I am contacting you now to act as if you are my family member in Abroad to help me retrieve this Box from the company so that I can join you over there. After the successful of this transaction I promise to part with you %20 out of this total sum of \$8000 000 USD Million

I shall guide you more information that is related to this transaction as soon as I hear from you.

My Love and Regards to you

Miss Aalima Mohammed

## EXAMPLE 8

**Date:** Mon 12 Apr 14:11:55 EDT 2010

**From:** "Mr John O.Charles" <collinstaylor993@rogers.com> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** A GIFT FOR YOU.

**To:** undisclosed recipients ;

Dear Friend,

This might sound strange to you but go through it as it might interest you as the Lord directed me to contact you. I hope all is well together with your family, if so glory be to God almighty. It is my pleasure to inform you that i have succeeded in transferring those funds out of my country with the assistance of a Japanese investor. Presently I'm in Japan for investment projects with my own share of the total sum.

Meanwhile, I didn't forget your past efforts and attempts to assist me in transferring these funds despite that it failed us some how as we did not conclude the transaction together due to some factors. Now contact my secretary (Mr. Larry Okoh) in Nigeria on e-mail address ( [mrllarry\\_okoh@megamail.pt](mailto:mrllarry_okoh@megamail.pt) ) Ask him to send you the total Amount of \$2,000,000.00 us dollars which I kept for your compensation for all the past efforts and attempts to assist me in this matter.

I appreciated your efforts at that time very much. So feel free and get in touch with my secretary i have instructed him to send the draft to you. Know that it was issued in a certified bank draft cheque, which you will cash in any bank approved or owned by government of any country.

Please do let me know immediately if you cash the money so that we can share the joy together after all the sufferings that we went through at that time. Right now, I am very busy because of the investment projects, which my new partner and myself are having at hand.

Finally, remember that I have forwarded instruction to the secretary on your behalf to send the draft/cheque to you immediately, so feel free to get in touch with Mr. Larry Okoh, he will send the money immediately to you

without any delay.

Note, below here is the required information's you will send to my secretary:

1. Your full names
2. Your house address
3. You're direct Telephone number.

Thank you and congratulations as God has done it.

Best Regards,  
Mr John O.Charles.

## EXAMPLE 9

**Date:** Tue 13 Apr 11:14:28 EDT 2010

**From:** DENNIS KOUASSI <dennis.kouassi@btinternet.com> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** Beloved one

**To:** undisclosed recipients: ;

Dearest Beloved,

Base on your profile i am happy to request for your assistance and also to go into business partnership with you, I believe that you will not betaryed my trust which i am going to lay on you.

I am Master Dennis Kouassi, the only son of my late parents MR.and MRS LEONARD KOUASSI. My father was a highly reputable busnness magnet-(a cocoa merchant)who operated in the capital of Ivory coast during his days.

It is sad to say that he passed away mysteriously in France during one of his business trips abroad year 12th.may 2004.Though his sudden death was linked or rather suspected to have been masterminded by an uncle of his who travelled with him at that time. But God knows the truth! My mother died when I was just 4 years old, and since then my father took me so special.

Before my father gave up to the ghost in hosiptal, he called me secretary on his sick bed in the hospital and told me that he has a deposit of sum of five Million United State Dollars.(USD\$5. 000 000) with one of the prime bank here in Abidjan. And he (my father) reveiwed to me where he kept all the documents for the deposit and he used my name for the next of kin in depositing the money. Now all the deposit documents of the money are with me.

I am just 24years old and a university undergraduate and really don't know what to do. This is because I have suffered a lot of set backs as a result of incessant political crisis here in Ivory coast. The death of my father actually brought sorrow to my life.

I am in a sincere desire of your humble assistance in this regards.Your suggestions and ideas will be highly regarded. Now permit me to ask these few questions:-

1. Can I completely trust you?
2. What percentage of the total amount in question will be good for you?

Please I realy want to relocate to your country with the fund and have a new life altogether. I am tired of staying here.

Pending on your respond confirming to help me, then I will go to the bank where the fund is deposited, to tell them I want the money to be transffered to my family foreign partner on my behalf.

Thank you so much.

My sincere regards,

Dennis Kouassi

## EXAMPLE 10

**Date:** Sat 24 Apr 10:44:11 EDT 2010

**From:** "mrs\_g\_caldwell68@cantv.net" <mrs\_g\_caldwell68@cantv.net> [Add To Address Book](#) | [This is Spam](#)

**Subject:** Dear Beloved one.

**To:** mrs\_g\_caldwell68@cantv.net

Dear Beloved one.

Calvary greetings to you in the name our Lord.

I am Mrs. Gloria Caldwell, a citizen of United Kingdom, I am 56 years old, I am suffering from a long time cancer of the breast. From all indication my condition is really deteriorating, and my doctors have courageously advised me that I may not live beyond the next two months; this is because the cancer stage has reached a critical stage.

I am married to Late Mr. Jones Caldwell, a Cocoa and Diamond merchant here in Cote D' Ivoire before his death on the 19th November 2006. We were married for 20 years without a child. He died after a brief- illness that lasted for only four days. Ever before his death we were both born again Christians and have sown into many ministries. Since his death I decided not to remarry, but feeling quite lonely if not the Lord who has been my comforter. Before the death of my late husband, he deposited the sum of \$8.5 Million with a Bank in Cote D' Ivoire. Presently this money is still in the custody of the Bank here in Cote D' Ivoire.

Having known my condition I decided to donate this fund to a church, organization or good person that will utilize this money the way I am going to instruct here in. I want a church, organization or good person that will use this fund to help the orphans, widows and the less privileged ones that need financial assistance. Using part of this money to provide facilities for God's work, taking the gospel to a greater height is my major reason of donating this funds out.

The Bible made us to understand that Blessed is the hand that giveth". I took this decision because I don't have any child that will inherit this money and my husband relatives are not Christians and it had been their wish to see my husband dead in order that they might inherit his wealth since we have no child. These people are therefore not worthy of this inheritance, this is why I am taking this decision.

Meanwhile, I am not afraid of death hence I know where I am going. It is only a sinner who's death is painful I don't need any telephone communication in this regard because of my health hence the presence of my husband's relatives around me always. I don't want them to know about this development and I know that With God all things are possible.

As soon as I receive your reply I shall give you the contact of the Bank in Cote d' Ivoire. I will also issue a letter of authorization to the bank that will prove you the present beneficiary of this money. I also want you to always remember me in prayer.

My happiness is that I lived a life of a worthy Christian. Whoever that wants to serve the Lord must serve him in truth and faith, "serving him with all you have, knowing that naked we come and naked we must go, any delay in your reply will give me room in sourcing for another good person, church, and organization for this same purpose. Please assure me that you will act accordingly as I Stated herein.

Hoping to receive your response immediately.

Thanks and Remain blessed in the Lord.

Your Beloved Sister in Christ.  
Mrs. Gloria Caldwell

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adesokan, Akin. "New African Writing and the Question of Audience." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Fall 2012), 1-20.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Anchor, 2007.
- . *Americanah*. New York: Knopf, 2013.
- Adogame, Afe. "The 419 Code as Business Unusual: Youth and the Unfolding of the Advance Fee Fraud Online Discourse." *Asian Journal of Social Science*, Vol. 37 (2009), 551-573.
- Agho, Jude and Francis Oseghale. "'Wonder Women': Towards a Feminization of Heroism in the African Fiction: A Study of the Heroines in *Second Class Citizen* and *God's Bits of Wood*." *Education*, Vol. 128, No. 4 (Summer 2008), 603-613.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy, or Reflections from a Black-eyed Squint*. New York: Longman, 2002.
- Akpan, Uwem. *Say You're One of Them*. New York: Back Bay, 2009.
- Alessandrini, Anthony C. "Fanon Now: Singularity and Solidarity." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 7 (November 2011), 52-74.
- Alonso, Andoni and Pedro J. Oiarzabal. *Diasporas in the New Media Age: Identity, Politics, and Community*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2010.
- Altman, Janet Gurkin. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Arac de Nyeko, Monica. "Jambula Tree." ebrary, Inc. *Jambula Tree: A Selection of Works From the Caine Prize for African Writing*. Oxford: Auckland Park, South Africa: New Internationalist Publications, 2008.
- Armah, Ayi Kwei. *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. African Writers Ser. London: Heinemann, 1968.
- Atta, Sefi. *News from Home*. Northampton: Interlink Books, 2010.
- Bâ, Mariama. *So Long a Letter*. African Writers Series. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1981.

- Barber, Karin. Ed. *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.
- Barnes, Teresa. "‘Am I a Man?’: Gender and the Pass Laws in Urban Colonial Zimbabwe." *African Studies Review*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (April 1997), 59-81.
- . "The Fight for Control of African Women's Mobility in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1900–1939." *Signs*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Spring 1992), 586-608.
- Beebee, Thomas O. *Epistolary Fiction in Europe, 1500-1850*. Cambridge: University Press, 1999.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Blommaert, Jan and Tope Omoniyi. "E-mail Fraud: Language, Technology, and the Indexicals of Globalisation." *Social Semiotics*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (December 2006), 573-605.
- Bower, Anne. *Epistolary Responses: The Letter in 20th-Century American Fiction and Criticism*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1997.
- Brown, Lloyd W. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981.
- Campbell, Elizabeth. "Re-visions, Re-flections, Re-creations: Epistolarity in Novels by Contemporary Women." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 41 (1995), 332-348.
- Chawki, Mohamed. "Nigeria Tackles Advance Free Fraud," 2009 (1) *Journal of Information, Law & Technology (JILT)*,  
<[http://go.warwick.ac.uk/jilt/2009\\_1/chawki](http://go.warwick.ac.uk/jilt/2009_1/chawki)>
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York and London: Routledge, 2005
- Columpar, Corinn. "The Gaze as Theoretical Touchstone: The Intersection of Film Studies, Feminist Theory, and Postcolonial Theory." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2002), 25-44.
- Coly, Ayo A. *The Pull of Postcolonial Nationhood: Gender and Migration in Francophone African Literatures*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010.
- Comaroff, Jean and John L. "Home-Made Hegemony: Modernity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in South Africa." *African Encounters with Domesticity*. Ed. Karen T. Hansen. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 37-74.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: HarperCollins, 2013.



- Cooke, John. "African Diaries." *World Literature Today*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Spring 1987), 211-213.
- Cornwall, Andrea. Ed. *Readings in Gender in Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.
- Corti, Lillian. "Colonial Violence and Psychological Defenses in Ferdinand Oyono's 'Une vie de boy.'" *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 2003), 44-57.
- Cunliffe-Jones, Peter. *My Nigeria: Five Decades of Independence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Currey, James. *Africa Writes Back: The African Writers Series & The Launch of African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey Ltd., 2008.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi. *The Book of Not*. Oxford: Ayebia Clarke Publishing, 2006.
- . *Nervous Conditions*. Seattle: Seal, 1988.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*. New York: Routledge, 2005.
- Decker, William Merrill. *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1998.
- Denzer, LaRay. "Domestic Science Training in Colonial Yorubaland, Nigeria." *African Encounters with Domesticity*. Ed. Karen T. Hansen. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 116-139.
- Desai, Gaurav. "Out in Africa." *Genders*, Vol. 25 (1997). Reprinted in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson (eds.), Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007.
- Dunton, Chris and Mai Palmberg. *Human Rights and Homosexuality in Southern Africa*. Uppsala, Sweden. *Current African Issues*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (November 1996).
- Dunton, Chris. "'Wheyting Be Dat?' The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Fall 1989), 102-128.
- Durkin, Keith F. and Richard Brinkman. "419 Fraud: A Crime without Borders in a Postmodern World." *International Review of Modern Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Autumn 2009), 271-283.

- Eales, Katherine. "Passes, Patriarchs and Privilege: Johannesburg's African Middle Classes and the Question of Night Passes for African Women," in Philip Bonner, Isabel Hofmeyr, Deborah James, Tom Lodge (eds.) *Holding Their Ground: Class, Locality and Culture in 19th and 20th Century South Africa*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1989.
- Ekwensi, Cyprian. *Jagua Nana*. London: Heinemann, 1961.
- Emecheta, Buchi. *The Bride Price*. Oxford: University Press, 2008.
- . *The Joys of Motherhood*. New York: Braziller, 1979.
- . *Second-Class Citizen*. New York: Braziller, 2001.
- Evans, Jessica and Stuart Hall. Eds. *Visual Culture: The Reader*. London: Sage Publications, 1999.
- Falola, Toyin and S.U. Fwatshak. *Beyond Tradition: African Women in Cultural and Political Spaces*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2011.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 2008. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove, 2008.
- . *The Wretched of the Earth*. 1963. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Evergreen Black Cat, 1968.
- Fonchingong, Charles C. (2006). Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 135-147.
- Foucault, M. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. New York: Random House, 1990.
- George, Rosemary Marangoly. *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial relocations and twentieth-century fiction*. Cambridge: University Press, 1996.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Gilroy, Amanda and W.M. Verhoeven. Eds. *Epistolary Histories: Letters, Fiction, Culture*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000.
- Glickman, Harvey. "The Nigerian '419' Advance Fee Scams: Prank or Peril?" *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (2005), 460-489.

- Gordon-Chipembere, Natasha. Ed. *Representation and Black Womanhood: The Legacy of Sarah Baartman*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Grinker, Roy R., Lubkemann, Stephen C., and Steiner, Christopher B. Eds. *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2010.
- Gutkind, Peter C.W., and Peter Waterman. *African Social Studies: A Radical Reader*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977.
- Habila, Helon. *Measuring Time*. New York: Norton, 2007.
- Hansen, Karen Tranberg. "Introduction: Domesticity in Africa." *African Encounters with Domesticity*. Ed. Karen T. Hansen. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 1-33.
- Hildegard, Hoeller. "Ama Ata Aidoo's *Heart of Darkness*." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Spring 2004).
- Hoad, Neville. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Hodgson, Dorothy L. and Sheryl A. McCurdy. Eds. *'Wicked' Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001.
- Homaifar, Nazaneen. "The African Prostitute: An Everyday Debrouillard in Reality and African Fiction." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (December 2008), 173-182.
- Associated Press. (2013, June 24). Africa's Anti-Gay Laws: A Look At Uganda, Malawi And More. The Huffington Post. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/24/africa-anti-gay-laws\\_n\\_3491565.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/24/africa-anti-gay-laws_n_3491565.html)
- Irele, Abiola. *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- "Orality, Literacy, and African Literature." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 74-82.
- Japtok, Martin. *Postcolonial Perspectives on Women Writers from Africa, the Caribbean, and the US*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003.
- Karanja, James. *The Missionary Movement in Colonial Kenya: The foundation of Africa Inland Church*. Göttingen: Cuvillier, 2009.

- Kortenaar, Neil. *Postcolonial Literature and the Impact of Literacy: Reading and Writing in African and Caribbean Fiction*. Cambridge: University Press, 2011.
- Larrier, Renée. "Correspondance et création littéraire: Mariama Bâ's Une si longue lettre." *The French Review*, Vol. 64, No. 5 (April 1991), 747-753.
- Larson, Charles R. *The Emergence of African Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972.
- Lazarus, Neil. "Great Expectations and After: The Politics of Postcolonialism in African Fiction." *Social Text* 13-14 (1986) 49-63.
- Liddell, Janice L., and Yakini Belinda Kemp. Eds. *Arms Akimbo: Africana Women in Contemporary Literature*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999.
- Lindsay, Lisa A. "Money, Marriage, and Masculinity on the Colonial Nigerian Railway." *Men and Masculinities in Modern Africa*. Social History of Africa Series. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. 138-155.
- Loomba, Ania, et al. "Beyond What? An Introduction." *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Eds. Ania Loomba et al. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 1-38.
- Maraire, J. Nozipo. *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter*. New York: Delta, 1996.
- McElaney-Johnson, Ann. "Epistolary Friendship: La prise de parole in Mariama Bâ's Une si longue lettre." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 1999), 110-121.
- McClintock, Anne. "The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-colonialism.'" *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 628-636.
- Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. 1957. Trans. Howard Greenfeld. Boston: Beacon, 1967.
- Michelman, Fredric. "The West African Novel Since 1911." *Yale French Studies*, No. 53 (1976), 29-44.
- Miller, Christopher. *Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990.
- Miller, Nancy K. *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Feminist Review*. 30 (Autumn 1988) 61-88.
- "Movement Begins for Homosexual Rights in Africa." Nina DeVries. December 25, 2012. <http://www.voanews.com/content/africa-gay-rights-lbgt/1572136.html>
- Msibi, Thabo. "The Lies We Have Been Told: On (Homo) Sexuality in Africa." *Africa Today*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (Fall 2011), 54-77.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: Oxford UP, 1999: 833-44.
- Mwangi, Evan M. *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, and Sexuality*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009.
- Nasta, Susheila ed. *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991.
- Ngcobo, Laretta. "African Motherhood – Myth and Reality." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 533-541.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood*. London: Penguin, 2003.
- "Writing Against Neo-Colonialism." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 157-164.
- Nwaubani, Adaobi Tricia. *I Do Not Come to You By Chance*. New York: Hyperion, 2009.
- Okpewho, Isidore. *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004.
- "Oral Literature and Modern African Literature." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 83-91.
- Olaniyan, Tejumola. "Africa: Varied Colonial Legacies." *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray. Companions in Cultural Studies. 2. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000. 269-80.
- "Postmodernity, Postcoloniality, and African Studies." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 637-645.

- Osaghae, Eghosa E. *Crippled Giant: Nigeria since Independence*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.
- Ousmane, Sembene. *God's Bits of Wood*. African Writers Ser. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995.
- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects." *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. Ed. Oyeronke Oyewumi. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 3-21.
- Oyono, Ferdinand. *Houseboy*. African Writers Ser. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990.
- Palmer, Eustace. *An Introduction to the African Novel: A Critical Study of Twelve Books by Chinua Achebe, James Ngugi, Camara Laye, Elechi Amadi, Ayi Kwei Armah, Mongo Beti, and Gabriel Okara*. New York: Africana Publishing Corporation, 1972.
- Parascandola, Louis J. "'What are we blackmen who are called french?': the dilemma of identity in oyono's *UN VIE DE BOY* and sembène's *LA NOIRE DE . . .*." *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (2009), 360-378.
- Parry, Benita. "Resistance Theory/Theorizing Resistance or Two Cheers for Nativism." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 274-278.
- p'Bitek, Okot. *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*. African Writers Ser. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1984.
- "Play about gay man staged in Uganda, where death penalty was proposed for homosexuals." Associated Press. *The Washington Post*. August 20, 2012.
- Quayson, Ato. "Postcolonialism and Postmodernism." *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. 646-653.
- Ranchod-Nilsson, Sita. "'Educating Eve': The Women's Club Movement and Political Consciousness among Rural African Women in Southern Rhodesia, 1950-1980." *African Encounters with Domesticity*. Ed. Karen T. Hansen. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992. 195-217.
- Reyes, Angelita. "The Epistolary Voice and Voices of Indigenous Feminism in Mariama Ba's *Une si longue lettre*." *Moving Beyond Boundaries*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies. Black Women's Diasporas. 2. New York: New York University Press, 1995. 195-217.

- Robertson, Claire, and Iris Berger. Eds. *Women and Class in Africa*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1986.
- Roos, Bonnie. "Re-Historicizing the Conflicted Figure of Woman in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer 2002), 154-170.
- Rosello, Mireille. *Infiltrating Culture: Power and Identity in Contemporary Women's Writing*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996.
- Samantrai, Ranu. "Caught at the Confluence of History: Ama Ata Aidoo's Necessary Nationalism." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Summer 1995), 140-157.
- Schipper, Mineke. "'Who Am I?': Fact and Fiction in African First-Person Narrative." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 16, No. 1, Special Issue on Methods of Approach (Spring 1985), 53-79.
- Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer 1991), 773-797.
- Shohat, Ella. "Imaging Terra Incognita: The Disciplinary Gaze of Empire." *Public culture Spring*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring 1991), 41-70.
- Smith, Andrew. "Nigerian Scam E-mails and the Charms of Capital." *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2009), 27-47.
- Smith, Daniel J. *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Stam, Roberta and Ella Shohat. "Traveling Multiculturalism: A Trinational Debate in Translation." *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*. Eds. Ania Loomba et al. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. 293-316.
- Sterling, Cheryl. "Can You Really See through a Squint? Theoretical Underpinnings in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (2010), 131-150.
- Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . "The Shallow Grave: Archetypes of Female Experience in African Fiction." *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Special Issue on Women's Writing (Summer 1988), 143-169.
- Taiwo, Oladele. *An Introduction to West African Literature*. Camden: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1967.

“Uganda to pass anti-gay law as ‘Christmas gift.’” November 13, 2012.  
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-20318436>

Veit-Wild, Flora. “Women Write About the Things that Move Them. A Conversation with Tsitsi Dangarembga.” *Moving Beyond Boundaries*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies. Black Women’s Diasporas. 2. New York: New York University Press, 1995. 27-31.

“Who’s Afraid of Black Sexuality?” Stacey Patton. December 3, 2012.  
<http://chronicle.com/article/Whos-Afraid-of-Black/135960/>

Yaeger, Patricia. *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women’s Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.