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### Tortured Bodies, Loved Bodies: Gendering African Popular Fiction

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## Tortured Bodies, Loved Bodies: Gendering African Popular Fiction

As Kathleen Gregory Klein notes in her introduction to *Diversity and Detective Fiction*, “much contemporary detective fiction explores issues of cultural interaction—race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and more—as it moves through the investigation of serious crime.” (*Diversity*, 2) As such, the (hard-boiled) crime novel, the particular permutation of the detective form that interests me here,<sup>i</sup> remains, as it has been since its inception with Edgar Allan Poe’s inaugural Dupin stories, “—in the semiotic sense—a sign of its times.” (*Diversity*, 1) Peter Freese’s *The Ethnic Detective: Chester Himes, Harry Kemelman, Tony Hillerman* as well as Stephen Soitos’ *The Blues Detective* address crime fiction’s appropriation by minority authors in an American context, showing how non-white Americans signify on the form.<sup>ii</sup> Collections of essays such as *The Postcolonial Detective*, and *Race and Religion in the Postcolonial British Detective Story* describe how similar phenomena of appropriation have emerged internationally over the last three decades. In each case, these studies document the crime narrative’s capacity to explicate local scenes through transnational and trans-subjective prisms constructed from an assemblage of genre-specific tropes: urban settings, movement and migration, vernacular language, senseless violence, hyper-commodified human exchange, ubiquitous criminality, etc. In short, authors from around the globe, from the internal and external postcolonies, and from the various categories of the oppressed increasingly perceive this particular form of popular fiction as responsive to the features of rampant urban modernity in a manner adaptable to, if not demanding, local contingencies. These new texts thereby take their place as a “sign of their time” and place of production within a cosmopolitan yet insistently circumscribed frame of reference.

If, as the above titles indicate, crime fiction is a contentious form adequate to postcolonial transnational perspectives, women have insistently recuperated the genre as well. While women

have been involved in detective writing since its earliest years,<sup>iii</sup> their participation in the hard-boiled movement is much more recent. In their extensive 1999 study of the phenomenon, *Detective Agency, Women Writing the Hard-Boiled Tradition*, Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones tell us that, “since the late 1970s,” the crime novel, “written by women and centering on the professional woman investigator, has virtually exploded onto the popular fiction market.” (Walton and Jones, 1) Walton and Jones add that these women write “along hard-boiled formal and stylistic lines,” while “challenging the gender boundaries demarcated by earlier male writers and, indeed, potentially undermining the very system of values on which the male hard-boiled tradition is founded.” (Walton and Jones, 7) Thus, for them, women’s *noir* is growing exponentially and is singularly counterhegemonic.

Malian author Aïda Mady Diallo’s 2002 *Kouty, mémoire de sang* therefore participates in a growing trend—the publication of crime novels by Francophone African authors. She also contributes to another phenomenon: the emergence of works by women. While some of the broader implications of African crime fiction have been examined elsewhere,<sup>iv</sup> I here want specifically to discuss a sub-Saharan African woman author and the particular strategies and implications of this apparently dual agenda. The following essay will assess the meaning and valence of this gendering of the genre in an African context. It proposes that the novel uses the gendered body to expose and critique the West’s delight in pornographies of sub-Saharan African violence. It begins by challenging Foucault’s claims in *Discipline and Punish* that Western modernity is built on the foundational shift from a theatricalization of punitive pain to the instauration of a ubiquitous process of socially regulatory surveillance. Rather, for Diallo Europe’s violently punitive regime is not replaced but structurally and constitutively displaced, maintained elsewhere in, for example, the spectacle of African pain. In doing this, Diallo also

revisits Elaine Scarry's radically silent tortured and wounded body—a body that the Malian author genders and revocalizes. Diallo's critique does not exclusively address the West, however. She also pointedly challenges the masculinist tendencies preserved by her male African “partners in crime,” authors such as Abasse Ndione, Simon Njami, Achille Ngoye, and Bolya. The author's choice of a female protagonist remains significant across the novel's various logical strands. This choice is central to her critique of the West and to certain African male authors. Most powerfully, her lead character, Kouty, simultaneously abides by and systematically disturbs the expected continuity between gender and genre. By introducing recognizable tropes from the romance novel Diallo productively challenges what Tzvetan Todorov somewhat reductively yet usefully calls the “typologies” of crime fiction and by extension, the persistent hegemonic tendencies residing latently within this particular popular literary tradition. In so doing, she finally, and this through a strategic manipulation and blending of popular forms, breaks away from the strictures of genre, proposing instead an inaugural African writing free to represent increasingly global, and yet resolutely local subjectivities.

I would like to begin by isolating how *Kouty, mémoire de sang* speaks to the postcolonial context. Useful in this regard is the opening of *Discipline and Punish* in which the parricide Damiens is brought to the “Place des Grève,” is pincered, has hot wax and lead pored on the resulting wounds, is drawn and quartered, and finally burned. The scene is one of theatrical horror in which the tortured body becomes an exemplary canvas on which the sovereign state illustrates its absolute power in broad and vivid strokes. Foucault then defines a panoptic sociality whose mechanisms of justice stand in stark contrast to the opening drama. This movement from theatrical agony to a disciplinary praxis signals, for Foucault, an epochal and constitutive shift toward Western modernity. While the panoptic perspective has become a

critical cliché, I want to return to the author's reduction of this transformation to a symbolic synecdoche: "the disappearance of torture." (Foucault, 13) In glaring contrast to the theorist's contention, *Kouty, mémoire de sang* suggests instead that the theatrical "scene of torture" has not been eliminated, but displaced—that panopticism and torture cohabit. Indeed, spectacles of lynching and various ritual forms of colonial exaction persist long after the putative abandonment of torture in the West.<sup>v</sup> Rather, physical degradation is assumed to exist only at the frontiers of civilization where it likewise stabilizes racial and ethnic boundaries. And, in the perverse logic of alterity, the other is subsequently designated as such precisely because s/he purportedly persists in a corporally antagonistic relationship systematically—but cryptically—exercised (just as it is vehemently denied to exist) in the West. *Kouty* opens in similar fashion to Foucault's study, without the obscure history lesson. Rather, the reader immediately confronts a stereotypical scene, an all-too-familiar (and "exotic") performance: African barbarity.

The deliberate racialization of this inaugural moment identifies it as a form of what Homi Bhabha has called "postcolonial mimicry," that is, a "discourse between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them." (Bhabha, 89) The opening evokes Western traditions of torture specifically implemented to police racial borders. Most dramatic among these has been the theatrical submission and torture of the black body.<sup>vi</sup> At the outset, the young protagonist, Kouty, witnesses the systematic extermination of her family. Her baby brother and father are murdered and her mother ritualistically raped by a Touareg militia. The latter have been sent to punish the mother, who as a Touareg has violated Targi taboos against miscegenation by marrying Kouty's Peul father. Within Targi culture, the dark skinned Peul constitute a black slave cast; just as the Peul refer to the historically nomadic Touareg as white. Thus, while clearly reminiscent of other African "tribal" conflicts such as those of Darfur, Rwanda, and Nigeria,

Diallo structures these in unsettlingly familiar, and yet displaced, terms: as an encounter between warring ethnic groups explicitly (re)framed as ritual white on black violence.

Like Congolese author Sony Labou-Tansi's much commented introduction to *La vie et demie* (in which Martial is tortured by the Providential Guide), African abjection becomes a hauntingly recognizable reminder of the West's systematic, yet repressed, cruelty and carnage; and the pleasure derived in witnessing this alien barbarity. Hidden in a grain silo, Kouty begins the story in another stereotypically African role: the mutely impotent witness. As events unfold, her father is "roué de coups" [riddled with blows]. When her mother reacts to her husband's beating by rushing forward, "l'autre agresseur [...] la saisit par les cheveux et la poussa dehors après lui avoir arraché son fils."(8) [the other aggressor [...] seized her by the hair and pushed her outside after having ripped her son from her arms] The leader of the militia then grabs the young child by the feet and "dans un mouvement vif...ses bras tracèrent un grand arc de cercle dans l'air... Le crane de l'enfant s'écrasa sur le mur."(9) [In a sudden gesture, his arms traced a semi-circle in the air. The boy's skull smashed into the wall] Still watching from the tower, Kouty "était paralysé par le spectacle d'en face où des fragments de cervelle étaient agglutinés."(9) [was paralyzed by spectacle across from her where fragments of brain clung] The next two pages, elaborate on this spectacular bloodshed. Though unaware of the young girl's presence, the militia's brutality nevertheless exemplifies racial policing. This becomes evident when one of the attackers growls, "Tu as osé nous humilié en couchant avec ce chien"(9) [You dared to humiliate us by sleeping with this dog] to the mother. Though she is "white," because she has relinquished her racial privilege (and her role as its fetish), she is made to experience her own absolute debasement. In response, the grief-stricken mother wordlessly sets herself on fire and dies.

Foucault would have us believe that these events represent an anachronistic judicial paradigm; and yet their disconcerting familiarity reminds the reader that the West remains embroiled in this particular mode of coercion as avid viewer and covert practitioner. The (white) Western reader is passive spectator; but by racial association with the Targi, s/he is also an active participant. The novel's opening therefore underscores the "torturous" relationship characteristic of the West's engagement with its (racial/ethnic) others—particularly with Africa and its Diaspora. When not enjoying images of childlike Africans at play (dancing, playing soccer, etc), pornographies of violence both public (in the media) and private (in police stations, in border detention, in urban slums) remain the privileged lenses through which the West sees (and consumes) sub-Saharan Africa's inhabitants. The author's effective deployment of violence is enhanced by the crime novel's genre-specific authorization to exploit torture's enduring capacity to provide the reader genuine, albeit perverse enjoyment. What Francis Lacassin calls, the "purifying violence" of hard-boiled fiction makes its usefulness. (Lacassin, 198) Diallo, in other words, exploits a Western commodification of theatricalized wounding while also recuperating its programmatic preoccupation with race.<sup>vii</sup>

What Diallo adds to this African appropriation of the genre is the question of gender. If race has been a preoccupation of crime fiction since its inception, gender has as well. Just as the ethnic/racial other is one of the privileged perpetrators of criminally deviant behavior, women, remain the archetypal victims of the genre's violence.<sup>viii</sup> In Diallo, as I have already noted, the opening scene is performed for and on the mother who witnesses the destruction of her family and whose bodily integrity is destroyed through the violence of rape. Tellingly, the rape and murder are not performed by a "barbarian other," but by the Western same (or, rather its symbolic substitute within the Malian context). The mother's final act, self-immolation, bears

witness to the torture she has endured and the subjective ineffability produced by a systematic infliction of pain.

Elaine Scarry brilliantly demonstrated twenty years ago, that this particular mode of coercion persists precisely because it succeeds in silencing the victim, that one of the primary goals of the torturer is to “destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of our self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world and eliminated.” Torture produces a pain that “so deepens that the coherence of complaint is displaced by the sounds anterior to learned language.”(Scarry, 54) The victim of torture loses the capacity for speech, is rendered mute, reduced to mere flesh. In the case of the African, this muting compounds an attributed verbal incoherence, which has founded historically his/her alterity. The torturing of the African body and his/her perception as pre-verbal function as a perverse tautology, one that *Kouty* very specifically addresses, both with reference to the African continent; and to one of the genre’s best equipped to both reproduce and challenge the West’s perception of Africa as a “bottomless abyss where everything is noise, yawning gap, and primordial chaos.”(Mbembe, 3)

In contrast to this objectified passivity, this speaking for the absolutely silent/silenced other, Diallo’s narrative instead proposes an African subject who speaks coherently; and who murders systematically, ritualistically, and cryptically: that is, whose criminal activity mimics that of the (white) agent within Western paradigmatic performances of social demarcation. In addition, *Kouty* extends Scarry’s thinking by explicitly gendering torture’s strategic and systematic subjective dismembering. Diallo does this by showing how the torturer’s victim is, in a sense, always feminized. That is, within traditional gender dichotomies, the feminine is the silent and passive object of penetration. Correspondingly, in the opening scene, Ousmane Tall,



Kouty's father, impotently witnesses his wife, Fathy's rape and is subsequently penetrated by the knife that slits his throat; the scene of her family's destruction penetrates her vision, after which she is sexually assaulted; finally, like her mother, Kouty is forced passively to endure the scene of her family's demise. In each case, the Targi are explicitly masculinized (they have the guns and knives, they engage in rape) and their victims are feminized. Kouty will spend the rest of the novel reversing this alignment of epistemologically determined (and distributed) forces.

The young woman's revenge completes the narrative as she mercilessly stalks the militiamen responsible for her family's death. Most noteworthy is how the protagonist systematically exchanges roles with the torturers. Killing each man in turn, she punishes the initial crimes against her family with an exquisite attention to each gory detail, and this in a way that reconfigures the opening scene's parameters of race- and gender-specific power. She shoots one man in the face after whispering her name in his ear; she stabs and bludgeons another; Kouty has a mob lynch another, she plunges hedge trimmers into the neck of yet another. For the last, the rejected suitor who had orchestrated the opening scene, she reserves a particular gruesome demise: "Je veux te voir souffrir mille morts tous les jours que Dieu fait. Tu iras en prison et par mes soins, et crois-le bien, tu subiras un traitement particulier! Je ferai de toi une loque humaine! Je veux te voir partir lentement." (165) [I want to see you suffer a thousand deaths every day that God makes. You will go to prison and I will make sure that while you are there you are subjected to a very special treatment! I will turn you into the shadow of a man! I want to see you die slowly.] In each case the victim becomes the object of Kouty's increasingly and phallically empowered femininity expressed both vocally and violently in stark contrast to her opening (symbolic) violation and silence.<sup>ix</sup>

To summarize to this point, if *Kouty* questions a continent's reduction to a stereotyped barbarity, the novel also differs from other African crime novels. Indeed, critiques of colonial violence and the transformation of Africa into a spectacular scene of pain is a feature shared by many if not most of the recent efforts by African authors<sup>x</sup> of both "serious" and crime literatures.<sup>xi</sup> Diallo's text distinguishes itself by emphasizing the role of gender in the production of ethnic and racial discourses; and the particular symbolic role of the female body in the violent structuring of difference. In doing this, it deliberately challenges the previously unexamined maintenance of an essentially passive "feminine" in earlier works of African crime fiction. Rather than uncritically accepting the gendered conventions of the genre's participation in, and deconstruction of, modernity, Diallo's text repeatedly ironizes the classical tropes of the form, amplifying its potential through repetition with what might call a "different difference."

At the outset, the most obvious shift is that Diallo's protagonist, Kouty, is a girl/young woman. This narrative displacement opens up the possibility for expressing certain sensibilities, which men may appear to lack—or more radically still, to question the sole attribution of select traits (violence, strength, saviness, empowered speech) to men; or again, to denaturalize the putative narrative objectivity (and objectifying impulse) of the masculine gaze. This reconfiguration means that the narrative has two axes of resistance: one in alliance with her male colleagues against various forms of global and local economic, class, and racial oppression; and another against them with respect to their continued exploitation of the feminine. These, therefore, appear to be the dialogical pathways of Diallo's text: she addresses the chilling effects of racism and neo-colonialism; and she speaks to the torturous misogyny pervading male crime writing.

It might be useful now to return to Bhabha's ambivalence with respect to postcolonial mimicry. It is, we recall from the passage already cited, "against the rules"; but is not the idea that such mimicry is "within them" equally important?(Location, 89) To this point, we have seen how *Kouty, mémoire de sang* fits among "utopian models of female agency" and how it makes use of the "exploitation of the transgression of social mores by the employment of disruptive humor and parody," which might include, among other things, "an irreverent 'feminizing' of male authority myths; the coded deployment of stereotypes...which signal to the reader the seeds of subversion."(Munt, 6-7) My argument to this point has been that the text's counterhegemonic effects arise from its disruptive ironization within formal boundaries. Nevertheless, in one of the first extensive examinations of crime fiction by women, Kathleen Gregory Klein asked the provocative and troubling question of such a gesture's possibility. Do not, she asks, "authors looking to vary the format without abandoning the formula [...] create exaggerated versions of the standard model..."? That is, could not, "in a general way, all novels featuring women private eyes [...] be described as parodies?" (Klein, 173) Could it be then, that *Kouty, mémoire de sang*, rather than contributing a radical alternative to her male counterparts' misogynistic narratives might merely be an ironic reversal (and preservation) of the essential female-male binary? Such cosmetic manipulations of the tropes specific to noir such as the violence used against women and people of color could negate any potential revolutionary viability. I don't think that this dilemma can be absolutely resolved within the strict parameters of the crime form. That is, to the extent that a text adheres to the formula of the genre, it inherits the basic assumptions and contradictions that constitute its original coalescence and constitution. In short, this particular tension cannot be settled unless the work of non-dominant crime writers is read according to different parameters—unless crime fiction, indeed popular fiction in general.

In particular, it might be that Klein fails to fully address the ways in which, for example, certain authors do not simply challenge or alter the tropes of crime fiction; they also situate crime fiction itself elsewhere, as a symptom of broader phenomena that transcend genre-specific concerns. This for example, is one important implication of Kouty's muteness in the face of her family's torture and murder. This gap or silence speaks to a historically concrete relationship of power where violence and wounding are the currency. Yet, beyond this literal interpretation, precisely because of the medium in which this image is communicated, writing, the text also underscores how reducing the African body to a mere organism, to matter, through torture assures (and confirms) its inability to write (for) itself. Thus, again to add to Scarry's theorization of torture, the preverbal scream, the subjective decomposition, that torture produces finds its dialectical negation in the spiritual distinction of writing exclusively dedicated to whiteness. Because they appropriate a genre that has always challenged the difference between low- and high-brow cultures, and occupy a subject position condemned to silence, African crime novelists and their work critique the West's racial instrumentalization of the literary by exploiting a genre that, from the origins of a nascent literary modernity in the nineteenth century, erodes the aesthetic strata implicit in the Bourdieusian concept of distinction. Poe, the "father of crime fiction" has been drafted into the exclusive high literary establishment; yet, and this against his own pretensions, his single greatest literary accomplishment may ironically have been to inaugurate the most popular of literary genres. The African men writing crime fiction such as Ndione, Bolya, and Ngoye systematically exploit this doubled and troubled origin of crime fiction; and Diallo participates in this process while contributing to the chorus of voices rising from what Christopher Miller calls the "deafening silence" that is the absence of African women writers before 1976. (*Theories of Africans*, 247) That is, the mute (and illiterate) tortured black

body is brought into communication with the mute (and illiterate) tortured female body. Both figures are made to operate a viral assault on the crime genre and the broader literary realm to which it is more or less precariously attached. That is, rather than accepting crime fiction as a stable and unproblematic (albeit more or less marginal) literary category, non-dominant authors underscore the precariousness of the genre in ways that undermine the broader category of the literary and its relationship to hegemonic operations of social production and control. The result of this work is to break through the ceiling separating low- and high-brow literatures; and to demonstrate (and question) the ways such distinctions assure literature's function as fundamentally undemocratic social legislature.

Like many authors in Africa and elsewhere,<sup>xii</sup> the author sets the crime genre against itself and establishes a dialogue with (and within) the literary. Yet, while this may represent an effective strategy in its own right, I believe that her text's most radical gesture lies still elsewhere. In the introduction to the *Omnibus of Crime*, detective novelist Dorothy Sayers famously asserts that there is no place for romance in a novel of detection.<sup>xiii</sup> Likewise, in another famous programmatic declaration, author S.S. Van Dine insists that "there must be no love interest" in a properly written detective story.<sup>xiv</sup> Significantly, Cameroonian author Mongo Béti, one of the founding figures of the Francophone African literary canon, had early on intimated the inappropriateness of "rose literature" in an African context, proposing instead a model expressive of an ideological imperative:<sup>xv</sup> the struggle against colonialism and subsequently, neocolonialism. While Béti attaches the adjective "rose" to what he calls the "picturesque," the self-exoticizing depiction of a putative traditional and folkloric African past, the term "rose literature" nevertheless necessarily evokes women's literature and its association with romantic love. Thus, two counterliteratures,<sup>xvi</sup> crime fiction and the African novel, have

historically been resistant, one literally (crime fiction), and the other, metaphorically (the anticolonial African novel), to romance. *Kouty, mémoire de sang* challenges these long-standing strictures against demonstrated affect by hybridizing the generic formulas that regulate her narrative and in which the boundaries delimiting genres and projects are starkly drawn and marked by a phallic will to power. In fact, while the Gallimard's famous crime collection *Série Noire* published *Kouty, mémoire de sang*, with minor alterations it could just as easily have appeared in the equally famous Harlequin romance collection instead. This shift in my reading of the novel becomes possible with the appearance of the character Eddy who introduces romance fiction into the equation, both by his appearance and through his reading habits. Having a male character enable this generic move toward romance significantly amplifies the epistemic disruption the novel strives for.

Eddy is a young white nobleman sent to Africa by his parents to learn the value of hard work. His description immediately locates him as the “male lead” in classical heterosexual courting pair, as a romance novel's idealized male:

...Eddy. Quelle beauté! Il était blanc, se nommait en réalité Édouard et était issu d'une famille de l'aristocratie française. Comme il trouvait son prénom ringard, il se faisait appeler Eddy...Eddy avait l'assurance et l'aisance des gens riches et conscients de leur pouvoir. Sa prestigieuse généalogie et les récits qu'on lui avait faits des glorieuses batailles de ses ancêtres faisaient toute sa fierté.(31)

[...Eddy. What a handsome man! He was white, his real name was Edouard and he came from an aristocratic French family. Because he thought his name was lame, he went by Eddy... Eddy had the self-confidence and ease of the rich who know their

power. His prestigious genealogy and the stories he had been told of the glorious battles fought by his ancestors gave him immense pride.]

Here he is a classically configured upper class Adonis who fulfills the bourgeois fantasy of social ascendancy and material ease. In addition, given the events to this point, the fact that Eddy is white cannot go unnoticed. How, for example, does he square with the racial crimes of the opening scene? The difference quickly becomes apparent; whereas the Targi violently silenced and feminized the black body, Kouty increasingly feminizes Eddy, though less violently than those she kills out of revenge. Before this happens however, Eddy's gaze first silences Kouty as had the Targi in the opening scene. The difference is that here, her reification happens within the parameters of romance fiction; she is frozen in her beauty rather than her pain.

Une tenue très simple, avec un décolleté arrondi et une taille bien dessinée...Elle était...élancée, Ses dents étaient d'une blancheur éclatante et ses yeux noirs bordés de longs sils...Des sourcils épais structuraient l'architecture de son beau visage. Sa chevelure était abondante, frisée, retenue sur la nuque par une lanière de cuir ...(30-1)  
 [A simple outfit with a rounder neckline and a finely drawn waist... she was willowy. Her teeth were of a startling whiteness and her eyes framed by long lashes... Heavy eyebrows structured the architecture of her beautiful face. Her hair was abundant, curled, and held at the neck by a leather lace....]

This scene transfixes the female protagonist, reproducing in an erotic register the violent bodily fragmentation that had earlier silenced her. Even more significantly, language itself performs the task of reducing her to a series of disembodied feminine parts open to Eddy's covetous gaze. However, her apparent submission to the heteronormative imperative quickly gives way to something else. Two short pages after this passage, the young woman completes a

rapid and complex maneuver in which she switches gender parameters, and those of genre as well. If Eddy-as-love-interest potentially disrupts the crime form, his ambiguous masculinity disrupts the generic expectations of the romance novel; and this for his behavior rendered symbolically through his reading habits.

--Tu es bizarre, Kouty. C'est comme dans les romans à l'eau de rose que ma sœur dévore...Tu es belle et mystérieuse. Tu es seule, toujours, je ne te vois aucune amie.

Tu ne fais pas partie d'une bande.

--Je ne savais pas que tu lisais ça.

--Quoi?

--Les romans d'amour.

--Ça m'arrive, reconnut-il, avec un sourire gêné...(33)

[--You are odd, Kouty. It's like in the romance novels that my sister devours... You are beautiful and mysterious. You are alone and I never see you with any girlfriends.

You aren't part of a group.

--I didn't know that you read those.

--What?

--Romance novels.

--It happens, he acknowledged with an embarrassed look on his face...]

Whereas romance is the privileged literary domain of the feminine in search of an idealized domestic bliss, a coherent heterosexual narrative of masculine power and female nurturing, Eddy already fails by being/reading in the wrong genre. Whereas he should read "tough guy" crime fiction, in an unmanly and vaguely incestuous lack of self-determination, he reads his sister's romance novels instead. The young Malian frees herself from his insistent and reifying gaze



(why is she not part of a group, a doxa?), indeed refuses to hear him at all in his role as agent of speech: she never acknowledges his queries. Instead, she extracts the confession of his generic inadequacy, reducing the Frenchman to an essentially passive role in the story.

The effects of the genre-gender bending shift become evident a few pages later. Shortly after the aristocratic youth has fallen for her beauty, she frees herself through the complex generic epistemological maneuver we have just witnessed. This in turn authorizes her metamorphosis from static beauty into a furious and invisible—yet vocal—force, an amplified and deadly representation of her exchange with Eddy. Here, each aspect of the fragmented feminine becomes instrumental, a feature of her agency.

Elle cacha son véhicule dans les fourrés, enfila des gands et une cagoule rouge. Elle retira également de son sac un couteau de cuisine et le pistolet qu'elle avait acheté dix jours auparavant....Kouty enfonça le canon de l'arme dans la bouche grande ouverte du Targui, cette même bouche qui avait ordonné la mise à mort de tout les siens...Le coup fit exploser la tête de l'homme et projeta son corps sur la banquette.(48-50)

[She hid her vehicle in the bushes, put on her gloves and ski mask. She also took out of her bag a kitchen knife and a gun that she had purchased ten days earlier... She shoved the guns barrel into the open mouth of the Targui, that same mouth which had order the execution of her family... The shot blew up the man's head and projected his body back into the seat.]

The protagonist is no longer a desirable body, but pure and murderous activity. The text accordingly no longer dwells on a classical and entirely static beauty, but rather on the functional quality of her clothes (“gands”, “cagoule”)[gloves, ski mask] and motion (“cacha,” “enfila,” “retira,” “enfonça”)[hid, put on, took out, shoved]; her body has disappeared altogether behind

its performance. The generic affiliations of the novel crumble, crossing the boundaries between romance and crime novels while simultaneously eroding the generic expectations of each category. Against Sayers' formulaic dictate, Eddy remains a tacit love interest throughout, though he and Kouty never consummate the relationship.<sup>xvii</sup> At the same time, as an increasingly feminized character, he no longer satisfies the demands of the romance novel, either. The male leads of romance novels don't read them, nor are they passive spectators of feminine agency. Thus, Eddy internally disrupts the caractereological expectations of both genres. Within the detective context, he is not the archetypal (male) crime-fighter; and he is a generically unacceptable love interest. Within the context of the romance novel his reading choices and performance of gender are flawed. Finally, the male lead's ultimate exclusion from the novel and the decidedly bizarre, not to say grotesque way in which he is nominally brought back in only exacerbate his disruptive effect. Eddy first leaves Kouty in Côte d'Ivoire where she commits the last murders—act which, in a sense, he knowingly abets. He is reintroduced when Kouty, sitting next to Fadhel, whose family she has just destroyed, and whom she has just framed for his best friend's murder, phones him in France. The words, "Eddy, c'est moi" end the novel. Kouty calls the male romantic lead while sitting next to the man she has just shot and the man whom she has framed. This absurd conclusion mocks both crime and romance genres by eliding them into each other. Rather than neatly resolve the various problems posed by the novel's generic bifurcated affiliations, Diallo ultimately ridicules the artifices that authorize closure in either genre, and the highly stylized clichés by which it might be achieved all the while retaining the problematically hybridized form at which she has arrived.

This final refusal to accept formulaic fiction while amply borrowing from its repertoire makes the effectiveness of the novel. Eddy is attractive, apparently heterosexual, rich, white,

aristocratic, faithful, and most importantly, in love. As such he appears to fit the needs of romance. He is also a detective who he doubles Kouty's active pursuit of her victims by shadowing her throughout the novel in a desperate attempt to decode her activities. As we have now seen, his inability to actually capture the young woman in her active role, to "perform," undermines orthodox gender and generic roles. The Frenchman instead becomes the object rather than the agent of the narrative. Where Kouty, in a sense, (re)writes the story, gives voice to those with no voice (to paraphrase Césaire), Eddy has his socially attributed voice taken away. His desire to capture her as static beauty because she is a fluid subjective agency; and failing to recognize this difference is, as all of her Targi victims, most of whom she seduces, soon discover, deadly. As with the other men in the novel, his attempts to produce her physically through his desiring gaze, to "penetrate her;" fail because she is insistently mobile, an active killer. By underscoring this tension, the essentially static nature of the formulaic feminine, Eddy helps us to better grasp the underlying agendas of both crime and romance as distinct forms. Both formulas invest the male with social valence and agency, giving masculinity an active role in the production of meaningful narrative and making it the nexus of social and economic advancement and/or success. The feminine in these formulas remains the sign of male achievement, or the vicarious or passive reflection of male accomplishment. As we have seen, the crime novel tends to exclude the feminine entirely, to exploit it as the symbol of weakness (and therefore failure), or deploy it as a decorative asset placed alongside the other acquisitions of male capital accumulation.

The romance novel in turn is "characterized by a nostalgic vision of the past, a relentlessly idealizing tone, and an emphasis on the female sphere, from a female protagonist to a view of the world organized around love."(Fuchs, 125) Despite an apparent shift in tone and/or

emphasis, from a male dominated sphere of public “sleuthing” to the private feminine affective sphere, the essential gendered assumptions of a bourgeois liberal heterosexuality goes unchallenged in both formula.<sup>xviii</sup> *Kouty, mémoire de sang* exploits the fact that romance and crime fictions have these underlying commonalities. The novel thus extends its critical work beyond the ironic appropriation of the crime genre as a gendered challenge to the violent muting of the black body and a challenge to the African male authors of the genre in which the feminine is either excluded or objectified.

The protagonist’s body enables each critical gesture of the novel, the one in which both genres—or genre as such—are finally both exploited and ultimately discarded and where the act of torture and the silent body it produces are exposed as the products of a toxic epistemological enterprise in which the literary plays a constitutive role. Kouty’s physical existence and her subsequent disentanglement from its textual reification authorize the various critical currents of the novel. Kouty speaks to the historical interpellation of the female body in the crime and romance traditions as she becomes, in essence, a switching table, a semantic shifter in which both genres pass into and out of each other as do the various—and hardly exclusive—critical strands that I have detached from the text. Many of the most apparently melodramatic or romantic moments happen through the heteroglossic potentiality produced by the protagonist’s body and written onto the world.

In conclusion Kouty’s vocalized body liberates itself from the formulaic shackles imposed on it by masculine authority and the popular genres that continue to perpetuate them despite their apparent emancipation from the “high literary.” What begins as the silent tortured body, passively observed and yet ultimately acted upon by the horror of the scene she witnesses becomes an active and vocal subjective instrument. She constantly speaks to those men whose

socially ascribed agency she has dismantled, writing herself onto their stunned silence. She fights back against the torturous silence imposed on her parents through a violent bodily scripting of her own. She is also the body Eddy desires to no avail, the one that reduces him to a reader of romance fiction. Finally, hers is the body through which the generic code-switch from romance to crime and back again finally takes place, a shift that returns generic considerations to the literary enterprise. This is a narrative that does not hide its popular affiliations. Nor does it necessarily or exclusively ironize the generic tropes and typologies from which it borrows so heavily. Rather, it elaborately sketches the complex textual programming that forms and justifies racial and gender assignments, and in particular how popular genres and their orthodoxies perform policing tasks along subjective borders. In all of these ways, *Kouty, mémoire de sang* represents an important moment in the canon of African fiction as whole, an exciting new voice, and it adds a constitutive link to the growing number of crime novels (and romance novels) written by African authors.

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<sup>i</sup> The difference lies in the deeply conservative and static world of the classical detective yarn à la Sherlock Holmes, and the more ambiguous and unsettling universe of the hard-boiled school in the tradition of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. It is this latter permutation of the genre that has generally attracted the interest of postcolonial authors and an emerging group of critics.

<sup>ii</sup> Stephen Soitos, borrowing heavily from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. uses this expression to describe the appropriation of crime fiction by African American authors.

<sup>iii</sup> Agatha Christie (1890-1976), for example, remains the most popular author (as measured by sales) of all times, regardless of genre.

<sup>iv</sup> See, Kom, Ambroise, "Littérature africaine, l'avènement du polar," *Notre Librairie: Revue des littératures du sud*. (136). (1999) Jan-Apr, 14-25

Naudillon, Françoise: "Black Polar", *Présence Francophone: Revue Internationale de Langue et de Littérature*, (60), 2003, 98-112

Higginson, Pim. "Mayhem at the Crossroads: Francophone African Fiction and the Rise of the Crime Novel." *Yale French Studies* (108) 2005, 160-176.

<sup>v</sup> One needs simply put "racial violence" in any library's search engine to have dozens of titles emerge that will confirm this contention.

<sup>vi</sup> The post-reconstruction American South and King Leopold's Congo are two glaring, but hardly exclusive examples that occur long after Foucault's claimed paradigm shift. The Abner Louima case, and the scandal surrounding police torture in Chicago in the 70s and 80s are more recent examples. The theatrically wounded black body has repeatedly been used to police racial maintain racial apartheid.

<sup>vii</sup> As Nancy Horowitz shows in, "Criminality and Poe's Orangutan: The Question of Race in Detection," race and ethnicity has been a central preoccupations of the genre since the outset and that figuration has always been associated with corporal punishments and murder. In the case of Poe's inaugural *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the racially marked orangutan commits the spectacular crimes that Dupin, Poe's detective, finally solves. Just as significantly, this indictment chooses to ignore the initial crime in which the animal is stolen away from its native Borneo, and is therefore a victim of the colonial enterprise.

<sup>viii</sup> Again, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the victims are both women whose violated room and open safe metaphorically sexualize the torture their bodies have endured.

<sup>ix</sup> Paradoxically, her strategies become increasingly invested in her ability to perform passive femininity in order to approach and murder her victims whom she very carefully feminizes in turn. In the final scene she has disrupted a marriage and become the wife of the man she then sends to jail where he will be tortured and, she implies, raped.

<sup>x</sup> Achille Ngoye's *Sorcellerie a bout portant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998) and Mongo Beti's *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (Paris: Julliard, 1999) and *Branles-bas en noir et blanc* (Paris: Julliard, 2000) are just a few examples among many.

<sup>xi</sup> I am thinking here in particular about the numerous works that have begun to appear on the Rwandan Genocide such as Boubakar Boris Diop's *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (Paris: Stock, 2000) and Abduraman Waberi's collection, *Moisson de Crânes: textes pour le Rwanda* (Paris: Serpent à plumes, 2000), among others.

<sup>xii</sup> It should not be assumed that "minority" and women authors are the only counterhegemonic crime fiction authors. From the outset with Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, there is a radical progressive impulse that struggles to establish itself within the hard-boiled genre and this in tense conflict with the more reactionary practitioners of the form. Many critics, including Klein, share the weakness of not recognizing this history.

<sup>xiii</sup> See the section "Love Interest" in her introduction where she boldly states, "the less love in a detective story the better." (39).

<sup>xiv</sup> "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories". (1928) S.S. Van Dine,

<http://gaslight.mtroyal.ab.ca/vandine.htm>

<sup>xv</sup> "Afrique noire, littérature rose," (Signed A[lexandre] B[iyidi]—the author's real name) *Présence Africaine*, 1-2 (1955) 133-145.

<sup>xvi</sup> I am borrowing the term from Bernard Mouralis as he establishes it in *Les contreslittératures*.

<sup>xvii</sup> The narrative only tenders their coupling as an extra textual possibility.

<sup>xviii</sup> While there is not sufficient space to develop this further, a significant feature of the novel is the fact that Kouty's adoptive parents in Bamako are a lesbian couple. She also exploits Fadhel's homophobia to get her revenge.