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Editor's note

This issue proudly features the winning essay of the inaugural SFPS Essay Prize, Leonie Gschwendtberger's "Beyond "the Human": The Refusal to Show the "Other" in Trinh T. Minh-ha's Film *Reassemblage* (1982)' and the runner up, Matthew T. Trumbo-Tual's 'Plagiarism and Colonial Preemption in Michel Jajolet de la Courbe's *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe fait en Afrique* and Père Labat's *Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale*'. Both essays testify to the high-quality, exciting and timely work early-career academics are producing in the field and we are proud to be able to showcase it here. I would like to take the opportunity to thank the jury and, in particular, Maeve McCusker and David Murphy who acted as writing mentors. Please see below the Call for Contributions for the 2025 round of the SFPS Essay Prize and please share widely: https://sfps.org.uk/sfps-essay-prize
This issue also features the last set of book reviews edited by Jemima Hodgkinson. I would like to thank Jemima for her stellar and meticulous work. Without her, the *Bulletin* might have not survived the pandemic. At the same time, I am grateful to Paola Sanghes Ghetti, who has taken over the role and it has already been a pleasure working with her.
Bonne lecture,

SARAH ARENS
UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

SFPS Essay Prize 2025

The Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies (SFPS) invites PhD students and early-career academics (= anyone without a tenure-track position) to submit a contribution for the annual SFPS Essay Prize. The author of the winning essay will receive a prize of £100. The winning essay and the runner-up will be published in the autumn 2025 issue of the Society's biannual journal, the *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies* (*BFPS*). Submissions must respond to the theme 'The End(s) of Empire' and be limited to 5,000 words (+/- 10%) in French or English and must conform to MHRA referencing style. We encourage participants of the SFPS 2024 annual conference to turn their contributions into articles, however, this is not a requirement. The winner and the runner-up will be chosen by a jury composed of members of the Society's Executive Committee and the Bulletin's Editorial Advisory Board. The authors of the two selected essays will work with a mentor (a member of the jury) to produce a second draft before the publication deadline. Please submit your essay and/or any questions to *BFPS* editor Sarah Arens: s.arens@liverpool.ac.uk by 18 April 2025 5pm (GMT). Please do not hesitate to contact her if you have any questions.

Prix annuel du meilleur article de la SFPS

La Société d'études postcoloniales francophones (SFPS) basée au Royaume-Uni invite les doctorant·es et les universitaires en début de carrière (= toute personne n'occupant pas un poste permanent/'tenure-track') à soumettre leur essai pour le prix annuel du meilleur article de la SFPS. L'auteur·ice de l'essai gagnant recevra un prix de £100. L'essai gagnant et le second seront publiés dans le numéro d'automne 2025 de la revue semestrielle de la Société, le *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies* (BFPS). Les soumissions doivent répondre au thème « La (les) fin(s) de l'empire » et se limiter à 5 000 mots (+/- 10%) en français ou en anglais, et doivent se conformer au style de référencement MHRA. Loin d'être une obligation, nous encourageons les participants à la conférence annuelle de la SFPS 2024 à transformer leurs contributions en articles. L'essai gagnant et le second seront choisis par un jury composé de membres du comité exécutif de la Société et du comité consultatif éditorial du Bulletin. Les auteur·ices des deux essais sélectionnés travailleront avec un mentor (un membre du jury) pour produire une nouvelle version avant la date limite de publication. Veuillez soumettre votre essai à la rédactrice en chef du BFPS, Sarah Arens : s.arens@liverpool.ac.uk avant le 18 avril 2025 17h (GMT). N'hésitez pas à la contacter si vous avez des questions.

2024 SFPS Article Prize Winning Essay

Beyond 'the Human': The Refusal to Show the 'Other' in Trinh T. Minh-ha's Film *Reassemblage* (1982)

Abstract: This article examines the use of visual and acoustic obscuration techniques – such as black screens, silences, blurred images, and sudden jump cuts – in feminist and postcolonial filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha's experimental documentary *Reassemblage* (1982). I interpret these techniques as the film's active refusal to render its Senegalese documentary subjects fully knowable and claim that this refusal challenges not only an objectifying 'ethnographic' gaze but also a subtler form of othering: the seemingly inclusive impulse to 'humanize' the 'Other'. In contrast to existing scholarship on Trinh's work, the article explores the problematic aspects of this humanitarian incentive in documentary filmmaking and demonstrates how *Reassemblage* resists this impulse with significant aesthetic and ethical effects.

Keywords: Experimental documentary, anti-humanism, opacity, recessive resistance, Trinh T. Minh-ha

> […] the face and name are not ours to know, and affirming this cognitive limit is a way of affirming the humanity that has escaped […] visual control […].[1]

Trinh T. Minh-ha's film practice offers important new ways of thinking about questions of power between those who observe and those who are observed, filmmakers and filmed subjects, and Self and 'Other' in documentary and ethnographic film contexts. In this article, I closely analyse her film *Reassemblage* (1982), an experimental documentary, which focuses on women's lives in several communities in rural Senegal whilst critically reflecting on the legacy of French colonialism and ethnographic filmmaking. Whilst many of the existing critical analyses of *Reassemblage* focus on the ways in which the film either presents an empowering notion of 'Third World' female subjectivities (Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Domitilla Olivieri, Marina Fuser) or obversely engages in postmodernist 'play' and thus fails to give an insight into Senegalese women's lives (Hamid Naficy, Christopher Pinney), I argue that, overall, *Reassemblage* strategically resists such humanist expectations.[2] It does so by blocking a knowability of the subjects, using various forms of obscuration such as black screens, silences, low definition, blurred images, fragmentation and sudden jump cuts to mark its refusal to render the subjects visible and audible. I have defined this filmic practice as 'recessive resistance' (*recedere*: to withdraw, move backwards) because it is constituted by a sense that images, sounds, and meaning recede from the spectator into a pre-

[1] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 95.
[2] See Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, 'Safi Faye and Trinh T. Minh-ha: Experiments in Ethnography', in *Women and Experimental Filmmaking*, ed. by Jean Petrolle and Virginia Wright Wexman (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005), pp. 179–192; Domitilla Olivieri, *Haunted by Reality: Toward a Feminist Study of Documentary Film: Indexicality, Vision and the Artifice* (Utrecht: All Print, 2021); Marina Fuser, 'Nomadism in the Cinema of Trinh T. Minh-ha', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Sussex, 2019); Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Christopher Pinney, 'Other Explanations of Itself', in *Lectures in South Asian Anthropology at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies University of London* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 145–156.

defined state.[3] I argue that this disconnect is not an end-in-itself, but ultimately encourages a sense of care for the women and children shown, which resonates with Judith Butler's claim that the very resistance towards giving a face and name to those who are suffering and/or marginalized is a way of 'affirming the humanity that has escaped […] visual control'.[4] My main questions are: how exactly does *Reassemblage* resist a 'humanizing' gaze? How does it manage to invite a sense of connection to the people portrayed rather than assert total opacity and incomprehensibility, which would further silence the filmic subjects? I propose that recessive resistance intervenes in the field of ethnographic filmmaking by inviting a critical reflection on the ways in which women have been 'othered' not only by way of a persistent colonial ethos but also through ostensibly inclusive attempts at 'humanisation' – a humanitarian impulse in documentary contexts, which draws on humanist tropes such as subjectivity, vitality, and 'voice' to prove the filmic subjects' belonging to the community of humanity. *Reassemblage* ultimately rejects the documentary 'task' of proving the film subjects' humanity and rendering them recognisable as subjects rather than objects of gaze and language. It gestures towards a space of humanity beyond the attributes of 'the human', challenging a benevolent, charitable gaze, and refusing to include the 'Other' in the community of humanity while inviting alternative forms of connection to the subjects portrayed. By re-framing *Reassemblage* in this way, the article thus sheds new light on the ways in which the film negotiates questions of in- and exclusion in the context of ethnographic filmmaking.

This re-framing of Trinh's work can be situated within an emerging field of scholarship critical of a humanitarian ethic. A key scholar in this field is Pooja Rangan who argues that documentaries not only respond to and promise to intervene in the construction of disenfranchised humanity, but also serve to reproduce it. She claims that much documentary work affirms certain humanist tropes such as vitality, subjectivity, feral innocence, and having a 'voice' (which must be rendered audible to the spectator) to demonstrate the subjects' humanity. She defines this process of humanitarian intervention and 'giving a voice to the voiceless' as problematic because it homogenizes difference, excludes vocality beyond referential meaning, and exploits the labour of documentary subjects whilst asserting their position as 'other'.[5] A 'humanizing' gaze – a way of looking at documentary subjects, which seeks to assert their value in line with limiting markers of 'humanity' such as subjectivity and having a voice – constitutes a subtle form of othering imbued with the history of Western enlightenment values and (post)colonial regimes of looking and power. A humanizing incentive may be ostensibly progressive and the outward objectification and sexualisation of female subjects as prevalent in traditional ethnography may be challenged. However, the 'Other' remains in the position of being looked at, scrutinized, and having to prove their value (their rationality, subjectivity, and vitality) in order to be invited into the community of 'humanity'. Thus, a colonial power dynamic remains firmly in place. A critique of a humanizing gaze has been neglected in analyses of Trinh's work, which have argued that her films affirm women's marginalized subjectivities in resisting an 'ethnographic' gaze. E. Ann Kaplan has defined an 'ethnographic' gaze as an 'objectifying gaze, one that refuses mutual gazing, mutual subject-to-subject recognition. It refuses what I am calling a "looking relation."'[6] I suggest that Trinh also frequently refuses a 'looking relation' as I will

[3] Leonie Gschwendtberger, '"That which protects the Diverse": The Recessive Resistance of Trinh T. Minh-ha's Documentary Practice' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Bristol, 2024).
[4] Butler, p. 95.
[5] See Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[6] E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 79.

illustrate in the following close analysis of *Reassemblage*. However, this form of refusal is fundamentally different to the refusal Kaplan refers to here in the sense that Trinh's practice ultimately invites a sense of connection to the subjects portrayed. In contrast to Foster, Olivieri and Fuser, who suggest that the film emphasizes Senegalese women's subjectivities, particularly by showing subjects who dare to 'look back' at the camera and thus resist the subject-object dynamic of traditional ethnography, I argue that the prevailing significance of Trinh's work is its anti-humanist dimension and specifically 'recessive' trajectory. It lies in the film's refusal to 'look back' by way of its various audio-visual techniques of obscuration, which markedly challenge the documentary's 'task' to inform about others' lives and suffering.

Reassemblage resists constructing stable subject-to-subject looking relations by frequently denying a clear look at the 'Other', thus creating an overall sense that the film refuses to 'look back' at the spectator. While faces do become visible and women and children can be seen looking directly at the camera, Trinh repeats various techniques of obscuration so consistently throughout the film that they become meaningful in their denial to provide access to the people portrayed. The film consists of fast-paced sequences of everyday life in various communities in rural Senegal, showing people (predominantly women and children) working, eating, nursing, and playing. Black screens and erratic jump cuts cause people to suddenly disappear, challenging a closer investigation of their faces and bodies. They interrupt the spectator's scrutinizing look, creating moments of suspension in the film text, which undermine the process of recognition. The people portrayed appear elusive, fragmented and impossible to 'grasp'. Similarly, sporadic extreme close-ups as well as wide shots create a sense of inaccessibility of the subjects. For example, Figure 1 (p. 7) shows a slightly blurred extreme close-up of a child's face in a sandstorm. Both the blurriness and the sand veil the face and make it difficult to see the child's features. The child's gaze is also cast down and as they look up, they direct their eyes away from the camera into the distance. This sense of inaccessibility is also created via generally opaque images such as the one shown in Figure 2 (p. 7) of a person walking away from a tree in the distance, filmed through a dusty windowpane. The heightened opacity renders the person's movements distant and indistinct, denying any sense of interiority. Trinh has pointed out that she is 'not interested at all in […] an individual's story', claiming that she 'never work[s] that way.'[7] In both the close-up and the wide shot, the refusal to tell an individual's story and to focus on interiority nonetheless invites a sense of emotional proximity to the subjects. The challenging of humanist tropes, such as the clearly visible face and the comprehensible voice (by way of, for example, subtitling), allows for an emotional 'leaning in' towards the subjects in retreat – a sense of care and respect for the vastness and complexity of their reality, which is marked as indefinable and permanently out of reach. 'Humanity' is here apprehended as that which cannot be appropriated and delineated. In frequently marking a refusal to create a subject-to-subject looking relation, the film states that the women and children portrayed do not need to provide an insight into their subjectivity and demonstrate that they are 'humans just like us' in order to become recognisable.

Another visual technique Trinh draws on to disrupt the process of recognition is to use the frame as a marked limit of what can be known: oftentimes, women's faces are obscured by the edge of the frame, as depicted in Figure 3 (p. 7), or they suddenly move out of the frame as the gaze of the lens attempts to 'capture' them. There is a sense of playfulness in this escape of visuality in the way the camera chases the subjects, and they continue to elude its control, which resonates

[7] Lucie Kim-Chi Mercier, 'Forgetting Vietnam: Interview with Trinh T. Minh-ha', *Radical Philosophy,* 2.3 (2018), pp. 78–89 (p. 78).

with the defiant, amused looks many of the children give the camera. This playfulness comes very close to the humanist trope of feral innocence and liveness, which Rangan criticizes in her analysis of the film *Born into Brothels* (dir. by Zana Briski, Ross Kauffman, US, 2004), which focuses on a photography project by children of sex workers in Kalkutta's red-light district. Rangan claims that the representation of the children in *Born into Brothels* is problematic in the sense that it draws on universal ideas of childhood innocence and playfulness and thereby obscures the children's real-life work, effort and agency involved in not only their photography but also their contribution to making the film.[8] In *Reassemblage,* the sense of playfulness can be seen as a positive effect of the film's performance of refusal: it results not in a lack of representation altogether but somewhat paradoxically generates connection and proximity to the women and children portrayed. In this sense, the technique described – using the frame both through cinematography and editing as a tool to challenge visuality – can be interpreted as an act of 'recessive resistance'. Rather than emphasising 'the body's *presence* with profound resonance and forcefulness, […] using its power to mark the vitality of female subjects […],' the film continually re-asserts meaningful absences: bodies escape the frame and thus any attempts at containment.[9]

A fundamental aspect of recessive resistance is its engagement with this 'fullness' of absence, meaning the productive potential of negativity. The notion of negativity is central in feminist and queer theory, which has valued gaps in meaning, silence, madness, irrationality, and notions of the disgusting, rejected, and abject.[10] Like in these contexts, the re-appropriation of negativity in Trinh's work, which I define as a central aspect of her practice of 'recessive resistance', has its basis in a stance of refusal. There might even be an element of aggression in this refusal to function according to the prescribed order, leading to an embrace of unintelligibility and the attempt to confuse the spectator. This desirable order includes the expectation that marginalized people must make those with dominant identities feel at ease and unthreatened by way of proving their humanity to them. At times, showing one's face, smiling and 'being nice' to those in positions of power becomes a survival strategy, for example, in various contexts of (racist, gender-based, domestic, police) violence. In other moments, it may be a more subtle internalized response to microaggressions. Subverting this order in the context of ethnographic filmmaking – where subjects of filmmaking are expected to perform their humanity – is a paramount function of negativity as part of the practice of recessive resistance. As Trinh says, '[a]n image is powerful not necessarily because of anything specific it offers the viewer, but because of everything it apparently also takes away from the viewer.'[11] This means that the potential for meaning to be produced by withholding (visual and acoustic) information is dependent on the spectator's expectations of and prior experience with dominant forms of representation, meaning the very tropes through which a belonging to the community of humanity is often enacted. Negativity in the sense of a challenging of intelligibility, a 'taking away' from the viewer, becomes meaningful when the spectator expects such a claim of belonging to be made and instead experiences an image which recedes from view and blocks an understanding.

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[8] Rangan, p. 28.

[9] Foster, p. 191 (my emphasis).

[10] In the context of French feminist theory, the idea of feminine negativity has functioned as a reappropriation of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic view of women as occupying a state of non-being and signifying a lack or negative sign. Feminist theorists like Xavière Gauthier with her concept of 'femellitude', and Hélène Cixous with the notion of 'feminine writing', have reappropriated this idea in defining women's artistic practice. In the context of Euro-American queer theory, see Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, Leo Bersani, and Lauren Berlant who have outlined a queer critique of positivity, productivity, and a capitalist logic of becoming.

[11] Trinh, *Cinema Interval* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. xi.

The last shot of the film, illustrated in Figure 4 (p. 8), shows a woman's face with the frame again obscuring part of her face. Her gaze is directed away from the camera. The moment she looks directly into the camera and gives a vibrant smile, the film cuts to black, again playfully eluding the spectator's gaze by denying access to the woman's eyes and subjectivity (the eyes being 'windows to the soul'). It is not the body's presence, which produces 'resonance and forcefulness' in *Reassemblage,* but its absence, its disappearance from view. While the film here and in other moments of 'looking back' comes very close to affirming humanist tropes, the frequent, marked interruption of these moment of 'humanity' affirms its recessive approach.

Figure 1. Extreme close-up of a child's face.

Figure 2. Opaque wide shot of a tree and person.

Figure 3. Close-up of a woman's head, her face obscured by the edge of the frame.

Figure 4. Close-up of a woman smiling with half of her face obscured by the edge of the frame.

On an acoustic level, close-ups of women who speak without sound demonstrate a refusal to 'give voice,' and to 'speak up,' challenging the demand for (culturally authentic) testimony and an insight into the women's personal lives. One may criticise this technique for denying the women a chance to enter language and express themselves. Like the act of 'looking back,' the movement from silence into language can be an act of emancipation and resistance towards oppression: 'a feminist commitment to breaking silences.'[12] Having the women speak about their lives could constitute a way of 'talking back' at the spectator and their potentially hegemonial, patriarchal gaze. However, while the movement from silence into language can be emancipatory, it also necessarily implicates a reduction of the vastness and complexity of reality and experience. In the demand for comprehensible language, the complexity of sound becomes compromised; it becomes equated with meaning. Adriana Cavarero develops a counterhistory to the prevalence of language as meaning, 'one in which the embodied voice triumphs over the immaterial semantic.'[13] She recharges the rhythmic and sonorous materiality of the voice with importance, defining it – as pointed out in a review of the book – as a '"reciprocal invocation", […] a musical exchange […] in which individuals mutually invoke one another.'[14] For Cavarero this is a 'wordless language' of demand and response reminiscent of the 'lala-melody'-exchange between mother and infant.[15]

While *Reassemblage* strongly marks the musical qualities of voices, accents, and languages, as I will explore below, its silences resist a 'reciprocal invocation' of speaking/sounding subjects by frequently refusing a connection to the spectator. Throughout the film, we are left to 'see' silence,

[12] bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Routledge, 2014), p. x.

[13] Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression,* trans. by Paul A. Kottman (Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 127.

[14] Sarah K. Burgess and Stuart J. Murray, 'For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression (review)', *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 39.2 (2006), pp. 166–169 (p. 167).

[15] Cavarero, p. 128.

watching the women's moving lips without being granted access to the sound of their voices and the meaning of their words. Being able to 'see' the women's silence in *Reassemblage*, rather than to just 'hear' it, allows us to visually apprehend the film's blocking of intelligibility and its refusal to 'give a voice' to its subjects. As these sequences are slightly longer than the fast-paced majority of the film, the spectator is also invited to perceive a sense of calm and respite in the silence where discursive signification is momentarily allowed to cease. The film thereby encourages the spectator to appreciate the subjects' elusiveness positively as a gesture towards their unlimited potentiality and indefinability rather than simply denying relationality by resisting understanding. It marks a stance of radical 'acoustic' freedom entirely beyond the constraints of audibility, vocal conventions (such as subtitling, the editing, re-ordering and 'cleaning up' of the speech act, and the dominance of an authoritative voice-over) that reduce the diversity of vocality to intelligibility and thereby potentially perpetuate discriminatory listening habits. The 'Other' can only be 'heard' and become audible as 'human' when their vocal complexity is reduced. By way of the repeated use of these vocal conventions the ability to perceive and 'listen to' vocal complexities is lost. Instead, these conventions teach the spectator to listen 'like a documentary' for information and meaning that prove the 'humanity' of the 'Other'. By going beyond vocality entirely and giving this silence a distinct visual dimension, the film here most clearly marks its radical resistance towards allowing access to the women's speech, refusing to limit their complexity and to equate language with meaning whilst undermining a sense of 'reciprocal invocation' that would mark 'them' as humans like 'us'.

In addition to producing complete silences, however, *Reassemblage* does affirm the complexity of various vocalities, thus not doing away entirely with 'voice' or prioritising silence over vocality. Trinh's own voice, quiet, accented (speaking in English), and interrupted by silences, remains elusive throughout the film, constituting one sonic layer of the collagist soundtrack amongst many rather than an authoritative guide. Like the women's and children's voices, speaking in various Senegalese languages, which the film does not identify for the unfamiliar audience, Trinh's own voice is sporadically looped, and parts of her sentences repeated. This highlights the material and musical qualities of the voice, its timbre and tonality, challenging a construction of the voice as reduced to its informative function. Trinh does give some explanatory context through the voice-over about the effects of French colonialism in Senegal and the traces of this history visible in the paternalistic actions of ethnographers, Western doctors, tourists who hand out cheap candy to children and Peace Corps volunteers who 'teach women how to grow vegetables.'[16] The voice-over plays an important part in communicating these traces of a history of French colonial occupation, alluding to the unequal power dynamics which developed as a result of it. However, the voice-over takes on multiple other functions too. Sporadically, the voice speaks in the first-person singular; sometimes it can be gauged that Trinh is referring to herself as the filmmaker in these moments, for example, when she tells an anecdote about wearing a hat in the searing sun and being scrutinized by the other women with amusement. At other times Trinh's voice-over seems to be speaking from the perspective of the women or children, for example when she states that in the presence of a recording camera, 'washing my face and combing my hair become a very special act'. Again, one could object that such a use of the voice-over has a psychologizing and thereby humanizing function – giving a voice/interiority to the otherwise silent subjects – but the shifting between the informative and introspective functions of the voice disrupts any single purpose and increases the focus on the materiality of the voice. In both her use of silences and in

[16] Olivieri, p. 132.

marking the materiality and embodied nature of voices, *Reassemblage* thus de-prioritizes verbal vocality that informs and instead affirms a refusal to render the 'Other' comprehensible. It expresses a desire 'not to say' and not to explain as a way of challenging conventions of ethnographic filmmaking as well as tropes of humanisation. The strategic withholding and obscuring of audio-visual information may evoke the desire 'to see clearly', but it also allows for a potentially more profound proximity to the subjects, affirming their humanity in the marked denial of clear images, personal testimony, and an authoritative voice-over.

Trinh's use of silences and black screens in *Reassemblage* is, however, not only a strategy to highlight a refusal to appropriate Otherness and an encouragement to critically question representational tropes that either objectify or attempt to paternalistically humanize non-Western subjects. Her use of these intervals in the film text also encourages a synesthetic spectatorial experience, which contributes to an expression of a non-dualistic understanding of reality. They allow for an immersive aesthetic experience of 'awakening the hearing eye and the speaking ear' and an engagement with the dialectic between presence and absence, and form and non-form, which has profound spiritual significance.[17] As intervals of black screens and silences take turns, they influence one another. Dark screens encourage the viewer to pay attention to sounds, such as voices, drumming, natural sounds, crickets chirping, babies cooing and gurgling. Silences highlight the rhythmicality of the images themselves, not only in the way they are arranged/edited, but in what they portray: the rhythms of everyday life such as working, weaving, eating, washing, walking, feeding, dancing, speaking, looking at one another, and dying. Sequences of dying and dead animals throughout the film, as well as repeated images of bush fires provide, semantically, a rhythmic counterpart to sequences of people eating, working, and generally *living*. In the echo, or the trace, of rhythm on the acoustic level, images take on their own unique visual rhythms and vice-versa. Thus, the sporadic absences of sound and image become significant in their expression of rhythm. This technique draws attention to the arranged nature of the film and its materiality, but also encourages a reflection on the inherently non-dualistic relationship between form and non-form, sound and silence, the visible and the invisible, and life and death, each of which is full of the traces of its counterpart. In this way, Trinh's methods of recessive resistance highlight the strong spiritual dimension of *Reassemblage,* bringing to the fore the film's exploration of the interrelationship between visibility and invisibility, form and non-form, and absence and presence. Trinh's insistence on the political significance of spiritually-informed work has continued to be a vital aspect of her œuvre and she has recently noted the importance of 'a film and art practice in which *form is fully lived so as to feel the vitality of the formless*. Such a practice resists consumption in its most intimate needs and remains difficult for analysts, critics, curators, publishers, and other consumers to work with.'[18] Trinh here refers to the necessity to work with the vacuity at the heart of all apparent form/the forms at the heart of all non-form (silences, pauses etc.) in order to constantly expand and thereby fully 'live' the potentialities of the visible. The highlighting of absences allows for a reflection on the inherent emptiness of all form, where 'taking shape is not a moment of arrival, and the question is not that of bringing something vague into visibility. Rather, the coming into shape is always a way to address the fact that there is no [stable and constant]

[17] Karin G. Oen, 'Trinh T. Minh-ha: Awakening the Hearing Eye and the Speaking Ear', *Plural*, (2021) https://pluralartmag.com/2021/02/21/trinh-t-minh-ha-awakening-the-hearing-eye-and-the-speaking-ear [accessed February 2021].

[18] Trinh, 'Notes on Feminisms: Trinh T. Minh-ha: The Walk of Multiplicity', *Feminist Art Coalition,* 4 (2019), pp. 1–7 (p. 1).

shape.'[19] This space of the not-yet-defined/the formless is freeing and vital in the sense that the filmmaker herself and her subjects remain limitless in their potential complexity.

Some of Trinh's critics have claimed that she has not been successful in avoiding the othering of 'Third World' women, suggesting that her films perpetuated the Self-Other divide they set out to deconstruct.[20] Upon its release in 1982, *Reassemblage* was criticized by academics and filmmakers for failing to give an insight into rural Senegalese women's lives due to its 'postmodernist' aesthetic, accusing Trinh of an aestheticization of rural Senegal, of providing a horizontal, superficial representation of culture, and of overstepping the insider-outsider-divide. The latter refers to the fact that Trinh made a film in Senegal as an 'outsider', a Vietnamese woman. Hamid Naficy points out that after a screening of *Reassemblage* and *Naked Spaces – Living is Round* (1985) in '1986, at the Fortieth Edinburgh International Film Festival's conference on Third Cinema, [Trinh] was taken to task by African-American and black British filmmakers for homogenizing and aestheticizing Africans, for elitist theorization, and for crossing the insider-outsider divide (an Asian making films about Africa).'[21] Naficy acknowledges the necessity for diasporic filmmakers to refuse to adhere to such boundaries, as they may reflect an essentialist understanding of cultures as well as, indirectly, the view that white people can make films about themselves *and* others whilst people of colour must limit themselves to representing themselves. However, he points out that 'such crossing of boundaries […] can also lead to superficial engagement with other cultures and societies' and that 'vertical, historical engagement is a necessary antidote to the horizontal, surface traveling promoted by postmodernism.'[22] In other words, rather than engaging in formalist 'play', in Naficy's view, a film needs to draw on some conventional forms of representation in order to give an insight into people's 'actual' lives, their historical circumstances and socio-political concerns. He echoes a critique of postmodernism, associating the term 'postmodernism' with a general lack of direct information about the cultures represented and an absence of individual stories. He argues that this leads to an overall sense of inaccessibility of the women portrayed while the overstepping of the insider-outsider-divide further deprives the film of cultural authenticity. According to these views, Trinh thereby fails to present an alternative to the objectification and the Self-Other divide she sets out to challenge.

The benevolent critiques of Trinh's film *Reassemblage* by Foster, Olivieri, and Fuser argue, instead, as I do, that the film successfully intervenes in the field of ethnographic filmmaking by challenging what Olivieri describes as the 'hegemony of vision,' meaning a '"normative gaze" that defines, devalorizes or objectifies the Other.'[23] In contrast to Naficy, they suggest that the film manages to invite a connection to and care for the women portrayed and avoids total opacity. However, in analyzing how the film achieves this, these critiques take recourse to humanist ideals such as 'looking back,' vitality (liveness), presence, and female subjectivity. They suggest that the film gives agency and humanity to the women presented. In this way, their analyses (at least in part) situate Trinh's practice on the same trajectory of intentionality as the one Naficy and others are referring to, claiming that she does in fact manage to reveal the portrayed women's status as subjects rather than objects of the gaze. In contrast to these analyses, the force of Trinh's

[19] Trinh, *The Digital Film Event* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 132.
[20] See Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Christopher Pinney, 'Other Explanations of Itself', in *Lectures in South Asian Anthropology at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies University of London* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 145–156.
[21] Naficy, p. 72.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Olivieri, p. 53.

intervention in the fields of ethnographic audio-visuality, feminist film, and documentary lies precisely in her refusal to prove the women's 'humanity' as subjects that can be perceived as having psychological depth and agency. She ultimately refuses to 'give voice' and to provide an insight into the women's lives without, however, reinstating a subject-object duality. In other words, the force of her radical intervention in a construction of Otherness lies in the anti-humanitarian dimension of her work, which becomes apparent via my concept of recessive resistance.

Seen through the lens of recessive resistance, as I have shown, we can apprehend an alternative movement of intentionality in the filmmaking process than the one both Naficy and the more benevolent critics of Trinh's work are appealing to in their reception of her practice. Rather than 'reaching out' to the spectator by attempting to construct new and different representations of 'Third World' women, even indirectly, through reflexive techniques, the film 'withdraws' from the spectator and refuses to render the 'Other' recognisable and audible. The demands for a more 'vertical, historical engagement with other cultures and societies' or a subject-to-subject looking relation imply that in order to recognize another as 'human,' we must see proof of their complexity as historical beings, their cultural authenticity, and psychological depth revealed through their gazes. *Reassemblage* is radical in that it rejects even this latent form of paternalism. The film's frequent receding away from the spectator produces a momentary suspension of meaning rather than a re-signification of identity, intervening in the pseudo-scientific gaze of anthropology without taking recourse to humanist ideals of coming into visibility and raising one's voice/being given a voice. Her practice of refusal gestures (without ever arriving there) towards a place beyond 'the human', a 'regenerative place of rest,' as Trinh herself calls it in her analysis of Roland Barthes' spiritualist understanding of suspension.[24] Trinh cites Barthes who wrote that the '[…] force of *suspension* can never be overstated: it is a […] stoppage which congeals all recognized values […].'[25] In other words, a suspension of meaning is not necessarily a lack, but forceful in its ability to draw attention to the functioning of discourse and how it perpetuates 'truths'. In the case of *Reassemblage,* this desire for a pause in discourse has its foundation in a deep, affective sense of refusal to perpetuate authoritative, paternalistic and totalising notions of 'Third World' identities. The film's aim is not simply to present Senegalese women anew or differently to the voyeuristic, objectifying portrayals dominant in the field of visual anthropology at that time. It is not engaging in a process of resignification. Instead, Trinh's film expresses what she did not want to do and a respect for and affirmation of the humanity, which evades representation. As Bayo Akomolafe puts it,

> rejecting the human, is about losing our way, meeting the world in a way that hacks that algorithm. What does the human […] invite us to do? What does it invite us to notice? And then how do we notice differently? This is how I want to invite this post-humanist politics—hopefully, an emancipatory politics […] that goes beyond the tropes that we're used to.[26]

In resonance with Akomolafe's endeavour, Trinh's rejection of the 'human' invites us to 'notice differently': to experience the frustration that may arise due to a denied access to the other's inner world and to feel an alternative sense of care and closeness to the women and children portrayed,

[24] Trinh T. Minh-ha and S. Gray, 'The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia', *SubStance,* 36 (1982), 41–50 (p.45).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Bayo Akomolafe, 'Slowing down and surrendering human centrality', Green Dreamer (episode 317) https://www.greendreamer.com/podcast/dr-bayo-akomolafe-the-emergence-network [accessed November 2023].

which emerges precisely out of the notion that humanity cannot be captured, contained, and consumed. Moreover, her rejection of 'the human' invites us to perceive her films through synaesthesia, which in turn highlights the deeply spiritual dimension of her films and a non-dualistic notion of reality.

Recessive resistance thus offers an alternative sense of care and respect for the film's subjects than humanist tropes such as 'looking back,' 'speaking out,' 'vitality,' and 'presence', some of which Olivieri, Fuser and Foster have focused on in their otherwise deeply insightful and rigorous analyses of *Reassemblage*. Apprehending Trinh's use of refusal as a strategic method or mode of resistance to intervene in the production of a humanizing gaze allows for a different interpretation of her early practice than the one Naficy and others present. Her practice has its basis in a deeply affective sense of refusal – a direct, embodied experience rather than a purely intellectual endeavour – which finds its creative expression in a conscious blocking of intelligibility rather than a 'reaching out' to the spectator. Her filmmaking thereby challenges the latent humanism potentially present in the desire for a more vertical, historical analysis of other cultures, demonstrating a fundamentally different mode of resistance than the one her critics appealed to upon the release of *Reassemblage*. Despite or rather precisely because of her affective employment of refusal Trinh both engenders a critical reflection on the ways in which women have been presented in documentary and ethnographic films and ultimately invites a sense of connection to the women shown. Rather than producing a sense of absolute disconnect, *Reassemblage* performs a 'living, breathing commitment to showing women's lives on film' through its very resistance towards representation itself.[27] Trinh's most significant intervention in the field of ethnographic filmmaking is thus her radical resistance towards the 'comforting lure of reducing alterity to sameness', even in its most benevolent guises.[28]

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[27] An van Dienderen, *Indirect Flow Through Passages: Trinh T. Minh-ha's Art Practice*. 2010 https://www.afterall.org/article/indirect.flow.through.passagestrinht.minh-has.art.practice1 [accessed January 2020].
[28] Erika Balsom, *Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image*, ed. by Erika Balsom, Hila Peleg (MIT Press, 2022), p. 26.

2024 SFPS Article Prize Runner-Up

Plagiarism and Colonial Preemption in Michel Jajolet de la Courbe's *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe fait en Afrique* and Père Labat's *Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale*

Abstract: An important reference for scholars working on France's colonial presence in West Africa and the slave trade since its publication in 1728, Jean-Baptiste's Labat's *Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale* includes large passages plagiarized from a manuscript by the French colonial trade official Michel Jajolet de la Courbe. This article uses a formal comparison of Labat and La Courbe's texts to show how information collected in West Africa during early French colonial ventures was made available to the European reading public. It also discusses Labat and La Courbe's involvement in the slave trade and situates this incident within systems of resource accumulation and knowledge production during early French colonialism to argue that Labat's plagiarism was part of a ubiquitous culture of textual fraud in eighteenth-century Europe, and an extension of the colonial logic of preemption – of seizing and commercializing resources with little regard to notions of legitimacy or justice.

Keywords: Plagiarism, colonialism, France, ancien régime, Labat, La Courbe, slavery

For more than 175 years after its publication in 1728, Père Jean-Baptiste Labat's *Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale* was essential reading for anyone interested in French colonialism in West Africa under the *ancien régime*. In his survey of references to Africa in French literature, Roger Mercier goes so far as to claim that, although there were a few texts on Africa that circulated in France before *Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, '[c']est au dominicain Jean-Baptiste Labat (1663–1738) qu'il était réservé d'attirer définitivement l'attention du public français sur l'Afrique Noire'.[29] In particular, Mercier notes, Labat was the main source of information on Africa used by the *philosophes*, the eighteenth-century intellectuals associated with the Enlightenment in France, and especially Montesquieu.[30] According to Christopher Miller, Labat's works, which also include volumes on the Caribbean, French Guyana, and Eastern Africa, are cited forty-two times in Diderot's landmark *Encyclopédie* and were one of a few core references French philosophers of the Enlightenment relied on when they discussed slavery.[31]

Much of *Nouvelle relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, however, was plagiarized from a manuscript written by Michel Jajolet de la Courbe, a French merchant who was sent by la Compagnie Royale du Sénégal et Coste d'Afrique to inspect and take command of its outposts in the region in 1685. La Courbe prepared his text as a report for his superiors and never intended it for publication, but Labat found the manuscript and slipped large passages from it, barely altered, into his own book.

There are two main reasons that Labat's plagiarism of La Courbe's manuscript is significant. First, despite its obvious limitations, there are not many other European written or archival sources available for scholars working on early French colonialism in West Africa.

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[29] Roger Mercier, *L'Afrique noire dans la littérature française: les premières images (XVIIe – XVIIIe siècles)* (Publications de la Section de langues et littératures, 1962), p. 53.

[30] Ibid., p. 68.

[31] Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 64, 68, and 399n58.

Montesquieu cited Labat without knowing about the priest's plagiarism, and contemporary scholars continue to cite him knowing full well he is notorious for misusing sources, because they have few alternatives. In what follows, I will introduce the context in which La Courbe produced his manuscript and Labat plagiarized it. Then, I will explain how Labat's textual sleight of hand was discovered and the problems it creates for scholars of early French colonialism, so that we can be transparent about the limitations on our knowledge of this period.

Second, analyzing Labat's misuse of La Courbe's manuscript allows us to delve into and understand systems of knowledge production in early French colonialism. La Courbe and Labat were both involved in the slave trade, and to focus on this episode as solely a case of plagiarism would shift our attention to what is a relatively minor offense compared to their role in selling and enslaving people.[32] Instead, I will show how Labat's plagiarism fits into broader patterns of abuse and waste that suffused every aspect of France's early colonial commercial ventures, including the collection and dissemination of information. The triangular trade was rife with textual manipulations and fraud, themselves part of a ubiquitous culture of textual improprieties in eighteenth-century Europe. During what Adrian Johns calls 'the piratical Enlightenment', plagiarism and unsanctioned reprintings exploded alongside the expansion of print, driving the spread of knowledge and new ideas while also generating repeated panics over the uncontrollable misappropriation, adulteration, and circulation of texts.[33] In the second part of this article, I will offer a formal comparison of Labat and La Courbe's works as an illustration of how knowledge collected by French trade officials travelled across the Atlantic and was reworked for a European public. Studying Labat's subterfuge allows us to connect colonial knowledge production to European intellectual culture by following the practices of textual abuse that shaped them.

This discussion is also relevant to contemporary debates around the allegations of plagiarism and textual improprieties that have followed works by authors from West Africa writing in French. In *Impostors: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity*, Miller points out that, '[q]uestions about authenticity, as the proper authorship and ownership of the text, have been raised about Bakary Diallo, Elissa Rhaïs, Camara Laye, Sembene Ousmane, Yambo Ouologuem, Calixthe Beyala, and numerous authors', and goes on to argue that 'the first several decades of Francophone African literature were haunted by suspicions of inauthenticity, which have carried over into the postcolonial era'.[34] Through the case of La Courbe and Labat, both white French men involved in the slave trade, we can see that there have actually been problems of plagiarism and inauthenticity going back to the first major texts on West Africa written in French during the *ancien régime*. It would go beyond the scope of this article to reevaluate all the vital discussions of authenticity and

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[32] Throughout this article, I refer to enslaved people, slavery, and the slave trade. La Courbe and Labat refer more commonly to 'captifs' or captives, and it should be noted that enslavement was not a single event in a person's life, but rather a process. In the transfer of captives from West African rulers and traders to Europeans intending to sell them into slavery, there was a transition from one system of submission to another, based on property. From that point, a chain of mostly European figures treated captive Africans with brutality to force them into enslavement, sometimes over years. I use these terms, especially enslaved person, because they are more familiar to contemporary readers, but while the individuals concerned were still in West Africa, they were at the beginning of this harrowing journey. For a discussion of the interaction of West African and European systems of slavery and the process of enslavement within the context of early French colonialism, see Christopher Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle*, pp. 42–54. The reader should also note that Labat and La Courbe use the term 'nègres' throughout their works when referring to people from West Africa. I leave this term in citations so that the reader may understand the language these authors use and the prejudiced worldview from which they write.

[33] Adrian Johns, *Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates* (The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 41–56.

[34] Christopher Miller, *Impostors: Literary Hoaxes and Cultural Authenticity* (The University of Chicago Press, 2018), pp. 51; 75.

authorship around African writers through the lens of Labat's plagiarism, but I hope to provide useful context for other scholars looking to situate these debates within a longer history of textual improprieties in literature about Africa in French. By situating Labat's plagiarism within systems of knowledge production linking colonial expansion to the European reading public, which were rife with abuse, we can reframe charges of textual misappropriation and inauthenticity in Francophone African literature. These accusations, which question the legitimacy of authors from West Africa and often belie deep-seated prejudices about who can and cannot embody literary talent, have their roots in unacknowledged concerns about the reliability of text as a medium and attendant fears about the circulation of inauthentic and inaccurate information within French and European reading cultures. Having explained the significance of this project for scholars of early French colonialism, Enlightenment book culture, and Francophone literature from West Africa, I will now introduce the historical setting in which La Courbe and Labat wrote before turning to a formal comparison of their works.

As part of its ongoing efforts to secure new trade routes in the context of intense commercial and military rivalries with other European powers, France took the island of Gorée from the Dutch in 1677. Using this base off the coast of what is now the city of Dakar, a series of royally chartered French companies then attempted to control, systematize, and exploit trade in gum, ivory, and hides, as well as people sold into slavery, out of the region, but with very limited success. These early colonial ventures were risky, and the companies were poorly organized, regularly leaving their outposts in Senegal without resources or anything to trade. Many of them failed in quick succession.[35] La Courbe tells us that he was dispatched to West Africa in 1685 because of persistent problems of disorganization, poor communication, and even rebellion in the Senegalese trading posts. His mission was to inspect and report back on the company's personnel and interests, which necessarily entailed keeping a meticulous record of his trip. The report he prepared after he returned, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe fait en Afrique*, finalized in 1688, is one of the earliest and most extensive travel narratives documenting the French colonial presence in West Africa under the *ancien régime*. It is also notable as the first text to use the word 'creole' applied to a language, a variant of Portuguese La Courbe encountered on a trip south of Gorée into the Kingdom of Barra.[36] However, La Courbe's text was prepared as a report to his superiors and not published. Never intended for broad circulation, the manuscript and its author remained forgotten for over 200 years.

Père Labat opens his *Nouvelle relation* admitting, 'J'ay vu l'Afrique mais je n'y ay jamais mis le pied', because he had sailed down the coast of Africa but never landed on the continent.[37] However, he had lived in Martinique, where he owned enslaved people, and travelled throughout the Caribbean extensively. After returning to Europe, he made a name for himself as a writer specializing in travel accounts, first using his own experiences and then later by drawing on testimonies by others. He claimed, for example, that *Nouvelle relation*, was primarily based on the

[35] Étienne-Félix Berlioux, *André Brue ou l'origine de la colonie française du Sénégal* (Librairie de Guillaumin et Compagnie, 1874), p. 2. 'Les autres colonies françaises ont fait la même expérience malheureuse, mais nulle part cette expérience n'a été aussi frappante qu'au Sénégal, car nulle part les Compagnies n'ont été aussi nombreuses et plus rapidement ruinées.' Logistical difficulties also contributed to the failure of Dutch trade efforts in the region prior to the French takeover. For an account of their struggles, see Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (The University of Chicago Press, 2019), p. 253.
[36] Michel Jajolet de la Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe fait à la coste d'Afrique en 1685* (Libraires de la Société de l'Histoire des Colonies françaises, 1913), p. 192. 'Il y a parmy eux de certains nègres et mulastres qui se disent Portugais, parce qu'ils sont issus de quelques Portugais qui y ont habité autrefois ; ces gens la, outre la langue'.
[37] Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, 5 vols (Guillaume Cavelier, 1728), II, p. i.

testimony of André Brue, who directed the operations of several French companies in West Africa beginning in 1697. However, as we now know, Labat used La Courbe's manuscript as he prepared *Nouvelle relation* and copied large passages from it into his work, attributing in the process La Courbe's experiences and observations to Brue.

Some aspects of Labat's appropriation of La Courbe's text remain a mystery. It is not evident how or where Labat came across La Courbe's manuscript. Furthermore, Prosper Cultru, a French historian of colonialism and the scholar who discovered this act of plagiarism, was unable to determine why exactly Labat attributed La Courbe's experiences and observations to Brue. Given that Labat established his own credibility by explaining that he drew on other's first-hand accounts of their experiences in West Africa, why did he not simply cite La Courbe as one of these sources? Labat mentions La Courbe in passing in *Nouvelle relation* several times, but only to criticize him and never to acknowledge the passages and observations taken from his manuscript. For example, Labat attacks La Courbe's competence as director of the commercial outposts in West Africa, arguing that he left his employer's affairs in a disastrous state.[38] According to Cultru, La Courbe struggled financially at the end of his career and undertook legal action against the successors of the company that hired him.[39] Perhaps Labat was influenced by company officials who were critical of La Courbe, or perhaps, as Cultru hypothesizes, the relative quality of La Courbe's writing compared to Brue's lackluster prose led Labat to rely more heavily on his manuscript.[40] The impact of this dissimulation, however, is clear: it helped establish the reputation of Brue, and confused the historical record of France's early forays into West Africa for generations.[41] This created a complex situation: Labat distorted and took credit for La Courbe's work, but it was also only through the priest that the reading public was able to access the information in the manuscript, which the trade official and his superiors had no intention of publishing.

By the time he began preparing *Nouvelle relation*, Labat had written a successful series of volumes on the Caribbean. He was an established author and his book on West Africa was well received and remained a central reference work until Cultru rediscovered part of La Courbe's manuscript in a box from a Dominican convent (Couvent des Jacobins de la rue Saint-Honoré) with a version of Labat's text and one of André Brue's journals while doing archival research at the Bibliothèque nationale. Cultru published La Courbe's manuscript in 1913 and, in his introduction to that work, extensively documented Labat's plagiarism.[42] Since Cultru's revelation, research on these texts (which is limited) has fallen into two broad categories. One group of scholars has focused on setting the record straight. They have identified the passages in Labat's

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[38] Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, I, p. 37. Labat also gestures to La Courbe's journals (which are potentially separate texts from his report) to contest his description of a bird, III, p. 177. This passage is discussed briefly by P.E.H. Hair, 'The Falls of Félou: A Bibliographical Exploration', *History in Africa*, 11 (1984), pp. 113–130 (p. 123).

[39] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, pp. LVII–LVIII.

[40] Ibid., p. VIII.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Prosper Cultru's account of his discovery can be found in the introduction of his edition of La Courbe's manuscript (La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. IV), in which he also discusses the significance of Labat's book for scholars working on West Africa in France. The most significant texts to rely on Labat's *Nouvelle relation* are reviewed in Étienne Berlioux's book, *André Brue ou l'origine de la colonie française du Sénégal*. They include Abbé Prévost's *Histoire générale des voyages* (1745) and Charles Athanase Walckenaer's *Collection des relations de voyages par terre et par mer, en différentes parties de l'Afrique, depuis 1400 jusqu'à nos jours* (1842), both multi-volume anthologies containing accounts of numerous European expeditions, as well as Jean-Baptiste-Léonard's *Voyage au Sénégal* (1802). Even Berlioux, who was aware that Labat 'indique rarement l'origine des matériaux qu'il emploie,' (p. 10) continued to use *Nouvelle relation* as the main source for his own book on Brue, published in 1874.

book that are plagiarized and reestablished the chronology of La Courbe and Brue's travels.[43] Some of La Courbe's manuscripts have been entirely lost as well, so Labat's book has been used to fill in the gaps in his report.[44] This work has helped resolve inaccuracies in Labat's *Nouvelle relation* and clarified confusions regarding the historical record of France's early colonial presence in West Africa.

A second group of scholars have continued to draw on Labat's work as a source of information about early French colonialism in West Africa, acknowledging the unreliability of the text to differing degrees. For example, in *The French Atlantic*, Christopher Miller introduces Labat as 'a notorious, slave-trading, swashbuckling "pirate priest" of the Dominican order who was also a prolific (and plagiarizing) writer of travel accounts' and explains that Labat (in his work on the Caribbean) played a central role in propagating the false claim that it was Louis XIII who first authorized the slave trade, repeated by Montesquieu and many others.[45] Miller goes on, however, to cite Labat as a source on such matters as the types of people sold into slavery in Africa or the use of cowries in the slave trade.[46] This illustrates the dilemma posed by Labat's plagiarism and the importance of this topic for anyone interested in early French colonialism: if we rely on French sources and follow their narratives, centering the succession of French directors and companies gradually expanding their zone of influence deeper and deeper into West Africa, we are forced to grapple with Labat's texts, carefully evaluating them to separate wild fabrications from distorted half-truths from potentially solid observations that may yet crumble upon closer investigation.

Another approach, adopted by Mamadou Diouf in *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle: Pouvoir ceddo et conquête colonial* and Toby Green in *Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution*, is to shift perspectives from the Atlantic and the history of European outposts inland and center West African societies during this period. These scholars use oral histories and Islamic scholarship in dialogue with European sources to describe the economic and political transformations of this dynamic region as its rulers and peoples adapted to the expansion of the slave trade. Both circumvent Labat: Diouf mentions him once to note a conflict between the priest's account of a political succession and oral histories of the same event, and Green refers only briefly to La Courbe and does not list Labat in his bibliography.[47]

My focus will be on how and in what form information about West Africa collected by colonial officials became available to the European reading public, but it should be noted that there were also networks of knowledge production within African societies, which Diouf and Green discuss and use in their work. Although trade officials like La Courbe undoubtedly turned to people from West Africa for information about the region, they rarely acknowledge these

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[43] Cultru did much of this work when he published La Courbe's manuscript in 1910. Jean Boulégue has closely examined the texts to establish the veracity of different accounts of the French exploration of Guinea-Bissau. Jean Boulégue, 'Contribution des sources françaises à la connaissance de l'actuelle Guinée-Bissau à la fin du XVIIème siècle', *History in Africa*, 28 (2001), pp. 43–51.

[44] Cultru hypothesizes that Labat's description of Brue's expeditions to Siratik and Garam are plagiarized from La Courbe's expedition to the Félou Falls in present-day Mali, the records of which are incomplete, La Courbe, p. VII. P.E.H. Hair carried out a rigorous reevaluation of the chronology of La Courbe and Brue's trips to determine who the first European was to visit the Félou Falls. See P.E.H. Hair, 'The Falls of Félou: A Bibliographical Exploration', *History in Africa*, 11 (1984), pp. 113–130.

[45] Miller, *The French Atlantic*, p. 18.

[46] Ibid., p. 48. 'The priest Labat says there are four types of captives who are purchased on the African coast: criminals, prisoners of war, household slaves of princes and (the largest group) those who are kidnapped (by *voleurs de nègre* expressly for the slave trade)'. For the discussion of cowry shells using Labat as a reference, see Miller, *The French Atlantic*, p. 393n14.

[47] Mamadou Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle: Pouvoir ceddo et conquête colonial* (Éditions Karthala, 1990), p. 93. Green, *A Fistful of Shells*, p. 90; 267.

sources. Labat gestured to this transfer of knowledge and praised West African traditions of preserving information from the past in a passage that is remarkable given that he was so often unreserved in his contempt for the peoples of West Africa. To illustrate how effective West African methods for passing down information were, he claimed that André Brue had to rely on African interlocutors to reestablish the names of the previous directors of the French colonial outposts in Senegal, which were not recorded in company archives in the seventeenth century.[48] Labat then proceeded to deliberately distort this chronology himself, raising the possibility that French systems of writing down and preserving even basic information about the French presence in Senegal failed repeatedly despite corrective feedback from West African sources. When we discuss the historiographical limitations scholars face when studying this period, we should be clear that they primarily concern the French presence in the region due to problems within French sources, and thanks to the research of scholars like Diouf and Green, we have a considerable body of sources to refer to concerning West African societies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without passing through compromised works like Labat's *Nouvelle relation*.

What I would like to consider next, however, is not this question of historical accuracy, but rather the differing styles of La Courbe and Labat's texts and what this episode reveals about how knowledge was produced and disseminated in France's early colonial enterprises. La Courbe and Labat were both involved in the slave trade. In his report, La Courbe regularly related how many enslaved people he had acquired in his dealings with different rulers in West Africa. He then returned to Europe via Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) on a slave ship and provided a detailed account of the measures necessary to keep enslaved people from rebelling on such a journey.[49] Labat was a slaveowner in Martinique and an ardent defender of the practice of slavery – he is better known today for his descriptions and defence of slavery in the Caribbean than his work on West Africa.[50] When Cultru discovered Labat's plagiarism, he approached it as a single case, an isolated incident to be investigated and corrected, which is how it has been treated in scholarship since. However, focusing on the ethics of Labat's textual sleight of hand without connecting it to these authors' involvement in the triangular trade reduces it to a case of individual villainy and obscures the larger, systemic dynamics at work in this episode. I instead argue that Labat's plagiarism is an extension of the cynical colonial logic of preemption and appropriation articulated in both texts. This logic governed the accumulation of resources and the production of knowledge within the French and European competition for commercial, intellectual, and colonial dominance during the early period of colonialism under the *ancien régime*.

These broader processes that governed the collection and transmission of knowledge become more apparent when we consider not just the provenance and relative degree of accuracy of individual passages, but also the form and style of the works. Labat inserted large excerpts of La Courbe's writing into his text. In doing so, he also recontextualized the merchant-explorer's observations and experiences within a different genre. Whereas La Courbe wrote a first-person narrative presented largely in chronological order, Labat prepared a multi-volume quasi-encyclopedic series with information presented by theme and a table of contents that allows the reader to quickly scan the topics included in the work to find information on, for example the gum trade, and read only that. Labat reframed the information included in La Courbe's text to make a

[48] Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, II, p. 151. This passage is also discussed by Cultru in La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. XXIX and Berlioux, *André Brue*, p. 11.

[49] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. 273

[50] For an in-depth discussion of Labat's defense of slavery, see Suzanne Toczyski, 'Navigating the Sea of Alterity: Jean-Baptiste Labat's *Nouveau voyage aux îles*', *Papers on French Seventeenth Century Literature*, 67 (2007), pp. 485–509.

different kind of truth claim based on breadth rather than experience or accuracy.

To complete his mission, La Courbe needed to be direct, descriptive, and relatively objective: his task was to collect information on the company's presence in West Africa, including or even especially on matters that were not going well and therefore could be improved to increase the company's profits (or at least reduce its losses). Cultru praised the quality of La Courbe's descriptions, chaining nearly synonymous observations together to insist on this aspect of La Courbe's style, writing, 'il savait regarder: ses descriptions de la nature et des hommes, sans être d'un grand art, sont d'un coloris franc et juste. Sur toute chose, il est sincère et peint seulement ce qu'il voit. Il est exact autant que véridique'.[51] La Courbe's writing is strikingly clear and frank – it creates an impression of accuracy and reliability. His manuscript is the product of what Kenneth J. Banks describes as a system of 'information patronage' in French colonialism under the *ancien régime*. Communication around the Atlantic was so slow and haphazard that the ability to identify, record, and transmit observations relevant to commercial success was a crucial skill directly tied to promotions in colonial enterprises, leading to the formation of a 'colonial information elite' whose function was to generate knowledge that would be shipped across the ocean through chains of agents linked by bonds of family, friendship, and mutual interest.[52] La Courbe was asked to sail to Senegal in part because he was related to one of the company's main stakeholders.[53] The precision and apparent reliability of La Courbe's writing were a product of his professional situation as he relied upon his superiors for continued support and advancement and was also in competition with other agents of the company whose own interests ran counter to his and whose accounts might call his into doubt.

To complete his mission, La Courbe catalogued what he saw and learned, but to cast La Courbe's manuscript as a primary source would not be entirely accurate. Like many European travel narratives, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe fait en Afrique* regularly relies on second-hand information from informants to provide explanations of local crops, customs, and proverbs. Describing nineteenth-century caravans led by German, Belgian, and English explorers travelling into central Africa to map and claim territory, Johannes Fabian explains that large retinues of men were recruited or impressed from local populations as soldiers, porters, interpreters, and advisers. They contributed their experience and knowledge as well as their physical strength to the European travelers, who often stayed in the center of the column, letting their African surrogates venture further out to scout and gather resources. Women and children played a particularly important role in gathering information, because men were expected to stay near the caravan unless on a mission, whereas women and children did not have a particular function to fulfill and could join and leave and rejoin the column more freely. As a result, it was often women and children who spent the most time interacting with populations on the path of the caravan and who then brought what they learned back to an interpreter or adviser who passed it on to the European expedition leaders who wrote down what they considered significant.[54] La Courbe no doubt used a similar network of local affiliates to bring information to him about the areas he travelled through, but these contributors are not acknowledged in his work, with one notable exception: he does mention his reliance on interpreters.

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[51] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. IX.
[52] Kenneth J. Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea: Communications and the State in the French Atlantic, 1713–1763)* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002), pp.188–192.
[53] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. 2.
[54] Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (University of California Press, 2000), pp. 128–150.

In an article on plagiarism in early European texts on Africa, Robin Law discusses the challenges colonial officials, explorers, and travelers encountered communicating across language and cultural barriers. She explains that, while the misuse of sources was a regular feature of European texts on Africa,

> in addition to problems of plagiarism, there are those of misunderstanding. The very process of borrowing material tended to generate errors, as unfamiliar names were miscopied and obscurities in narratives or descriptions misinterpreted. […] The possibility of miscomprehension arose, moreover, not only for the armchair compiler in Europe, but also for the first-hand field researcher in Africa. Europeans might misunderstand what they were told, and indeed Africans might misunderstand what they were being asked.[55]

La Courbe had to overcome similar language barriers. When he interacted with the people living in the regions he explored, he typically did so through an interpreter, with linguistic chains that at times verge on the absurd: he wrote, for example, that in one encounter with a dignitary, 'il me dit, en maure, qui estoit expliqué par Chamchy, en nègre, a mon maitre langue, qui me le redisoit en françois, qu'il estoit venu pour faire connoissance avec moy et me donner la main'.[56] Unfamiliar with the region, its peoples, and the languages they used, La Courbe necessarily struggled to communicate effectively and the proto-ethnographic descriptions he offered include errors, omissions, and elisions. From this perspective, the reframing operated by Labat's plagiarism merely adds another layer to the process of compiling and recontextualizing information initiated by La Courbe. Like Labat's anthology, *Premier voyage* is a composite document stitched together from unacknowledged sources, with all the exclusions, exaggerations, and distortions entailed in such a broad undertaking as providing a report on a large region with limited time, resources, and background knowledge. As the passage in which he humorously relates his experience working through multiple interpreters indicates, however, he recognized his limitations and occasionally gestured to them in his narrative, which helps generate an impression of self-awareness, sincerity, and reliability.

By contrast, Labat's *Nouvelle relation* presents itself as a comprehensive work containing an exhaustive account of West Africa. The author's goal was not to provide a faithful description of a region he never visited. Instead, his objective was to collect as much information as possible on West Africa and present it in a way that would be most useful and engaging to his French audience. In addition to a table of contents, Labat included illustrations, which make the text more enticing for readers who flip through it, stopping to look at an image and then reading the entry associated with it. He also inserted long documents, like treaties and price tables, that give the text a sense of exhaustiveness and authority: it seems as though Labat consulted and compiled all the information available in France at the time pertaining to West Africa to create one massive, five-volume reference work. The result is a cumbersome, stylistically heterogenous book.

Even prior to the exposé of Labat's plagiarism, scholars had been aware of major problems with his book. Félix Berlioux, in his work on André Brue published in 1874, observed that Labat's

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[55] Robin Law, 'Problems of Plagiarism, Harmonization, and Misunderstanding in Contemporary European Sources: Early (pre-1680s) sources for the "Slave Coast" of West Africa', in *European Sources for Sub-Saharan Africa Before 1900: Use and Abuse*, ed. by Beatrix Heintze and Adam Jones, special issue of *Paideuma: Mitteilung zur Kulturkunde*, 33 (1987), pp. 337–358 (p. 355).
[56] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. 156.

text appears to have been hastily prepared and regularly misuses sources.[57] It was evident, even then, that large tonal shifts in *Nouvelle relation* indicated the priest had been stitching passages from different works together without acknowledging their authors. Where there are gaps in his source materials or where he anticipated that the public would be particularly curious about a topic, Labat also added his own commentary. For example, there is a passage on the origins of different skin tones in which he hypothesized that Adam was made from earth, which was reddish, and that his descendants became lighter and lighter in skin tone from then on as the color faded intergenerationally. However, he writes, he cannot account for how Black people got their darker skin, because the colour could only fade from one generation to the next.[58] Clearly Labat's commentary, peppered throughout the five volumes of *Nouvelle relation*, introduces wildly inaccurate information and transparently prejudiced explanations that led Berlioux, already in 1874, to remark, 'Il aurait dû être plus sévère parfois, et contrôler plus attentivement les passages ou les idées qu'il empruntait à ses mémoires'.[59]

At times, Labat's interventions also clearly misinterpret or distort La Courbe's observations. For example, La Courbe related how, while he was on a ship, the crew captured a shark, writing,

> on l'attrapa avec un hameçon gros; comme le poulce, attaché au bout d'une chaisne on y mit un gros morceau de lard qu'on laissa nager entre deux eaux; sitost que le requien l'apperceut, il vint pour l'avaler goulûment, ce qu'il ne peut faire qu'en se tournant sur le dos, parce qu'il a la gueule toutte en dessous.[60]

La Courbe describes here how he saw a shark flip on its belly to eat food on the surface of the water in one instance, but Labat misinterprets the passage as a general claim that sharks can *only* eat by turning upside down, leading to a humorously unhelpful rebuttal that they in fact eat sideways, with their mouths perpendicular to the seafloor.[61] Throughout *Nouvelle relation*, Labat includes similar passages that enter into speculative commentary and bizarre explanations in anticipation of European readers' questions about the peoples, flora, and fauna of distant lands.

By contrast, La Courbe offered very little commentary or analysis that was not directly related to his mission. For example, he visited a monastery where the monks were organizing to oppose the slave trade. They gave him a pamphlet, written in Latin, and asked him to circulate it in France. He recounted this interaction, including the broad lines of the monks' argument (that the methods used to capture and enslave people were unjust), without offering his thoughts for or against slavery.[62] That La Courbe, who was involved in the slave trade and working for a company organizing it, did not rebut the monks' argument is a noteworthy omission that leaves a surprising amount of doubt as to what he actually thought about his own activities. At the very least, he was aware of early critiques of the slave trade and did not suppress them in his report, creating an opening in the text for the reader to question La Courbe's ethics while providing no defence of his actions.

Finally, whereas La Courbe focused on describing the rulers and peoples he encountered

[57] Berlioux, *André Brue*, pp. 10–11.
[58] Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, II, p. 257
[59] Berlioux, *André Brue*, p. 10.
[60] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. 10.
[61] Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, II, p. 349.
[62] Ibid., p. 212.

in West Africa, Labat flattered his audience's sense of superiority. La Courbe offered very precise, meticulous accounts of his visits with West African kings that would anticipate Orientalist Delacroix paintings with their sumptuous and detailed descriptions of rulers' customs, dress, and physical appearance.[63] These passages are not without prejudice and exoticism, but he reserved his harshest criticism for the indolence and moral degeneration of the Europeans residing in Senegal.[64] On the other hand, Labat consistently dismissed the peoples of West Africa as cruel, dishonest, and disorganized. He has, for example, an entire subsection entitled, 'Paresse des Negres' followed by another, 'Les Negres volent avec les pieds comme avec les mains'.[65] The transparent racism of these passages is particularly alarming when we remember that the *philosophes* turned to Labat's works for information on the slave trade. Miller observed that, '[w]hen Labat looked at Africans, it was as a potential buyer and consumer more than anything else' and cautioned that '[i]nformation from sources like these [the works of Labat] underpins all the pronouncements about the non-European world made by Rousseau, Voltaire, and other philosophes'.[66] To the extent that these prominent intellectuals opposed slavery, for example Montesquieu's partial critique of slavery in *De L'esprit des Lois*, their opinions were based on accounts of it offered by people like Labat who were implicated in the slave trade, which may explain some of the hesitations, inconsistencies, and prejudice in their treatment of the topic.[67]

The question of plagiarism and textual ethics aside, there is a degradation in the quality of information from La Courbe's text to Labat's. The priest deliberately obscured the historical record in attributing La Courbe's experiences to Brue. However, even in passages that do not deal directly with the explorer's exploits, where Labat described the people and animals of West Africa, the descriptions and commentary he presented are less accurate, less reliable, and more likely to be distorted by the author's prejudices and ignorance. Of course, we need to be careful not to mistakenly conclude that this means that La Courbe is a reliable source for information on France's early colonial presence in the region, simply because he is a *more* reliable one. From the informants and experiences that La Courbe drew on to the report he finalized after his trip to the composite document created by Labat with all its supplements and additives, there is a significant loss of information at each step.

This loss of information mirrors the overall waste generated by the colonial project. In his efforts to identify areas where la Compagnie Royale du Sénégal could increase its profits, La Courbe recorded many examples of inefficiency. Throughout La Courbe's memoir, the emphasis is on resource accumulation. Everywhere he went, he described how many fish he caught, how many hides, ostrich feathers, and ivory tusks he collected, and how many enslaved people he received. He hunted and fished, and he engaged in gift exchanges and transactions with local rulers. The counterpart to the company's resource accumulation is a staggering amount of waste, which La Courbe chronicled in detail. To collect ivory, herds of elephants are massacred, because, La Courbe reminded his reader, 'Les dents d'elephans ou yvoire ne tombent pas de la mâchoire comme quelques uns croyent, mais il le faut tuer pour les avoir, et chaque éléphant n'en a que deux

[63] Ibid., pp. 71–76.
[64] Ibid., p. 38. 'Vous ne scauriez croire la peine que j'eus pour les [the company's employees] réduire a leur devoir; ils disoient qu'on les vouloit faire vivre comme des religieux, que la clôture que j'avois fait faire leur bouchoit l'air. D'autres disoient que leur manger n'estoit pas proprement préparé; mais ce qui me parut plus extraordinaire, c'est qu'ils estoient si accoutumés a l'oisiveté que, leur ayant fait faire de l'etoupe, ils s'en plaignoient, disant que ce n'estoit pas la coutume, et qu'on leur faisoit faire des travaux extraordinaires.'
[65] Ibid., pp. 168–170.
[66] Miller, *The French Atlantic*, p. 68.
[67] For a discussion of the sources of early French abolitionist discourse, see ibid., pp. 62–70.

grosses'.[68] Similarly, he explained that to collect ostrich feathers and hides (of oxen but also tigers, lions, and other large mammals), the animals must be killed.[69] In his dealings with different local leaders, La Courbe received exotic wildlife as gifts, which often ended in tragedy for the animals. In one instance, he received two crocodiles, but, he explained, 'Comme je ne scavois qu'en faire, je les fis tuer, écorcher et remplir leurs peaux de paille'.[70] In this passage, and the others like it in which he relates having animals killed, he is both flippant and frustrated as he quickly relates the impact of conducting colonial trade on wildlife.

Of course, once the animals had been killed, the ivory, hides, and feathers needed to be stored and shipped. The logistics of colonial trade were complex, its actors often incompetent, and the climate harsh. The Company's agents were prepared to acquire goods, but the communication networks and shipping routes necessary to move them to a buyer in a timely fashion were not yet adequate. As a result, stockpiled goods were regularly damaged or destroyed by storms, rats, and worms before they could reach their destination.[71]

La Courbe also recorded the impact the Company's activities had on humans. White workers languished with little to do, were 'debauched' by local women, and became rebellious.[72] Many died from illness or in skirmishes. 'Laptots', or free African workers recruited to help in the Company's efforts, were pushed to physical extremes, regularly risking death or injury in the course of their work.[73] In harrowing passages, La Courbe observed on multiple occasions that some enslaved people starved themselves or commited suicide to avoid captivity.[74] In Saint-Domingue, he even explained that, '[d]es gens dignes de foy m'ont asseuré qu'ils ont vu en allant a la chasse des cavernes touttes remplies d'os de morts qu'on y avait amassé, après quelques grands carnages de ces pauvres Indiens. Il y en a qui croyent que ces gens fuyant la cruauté des Espagnols s'estoient retirés dans ces cavernes ou ils moururent de faim'.[75] In this passage, the terms 'carnages' and 'cruaté' as well as the inclusion of 'pauvres' in 'ces pauvres Indiens' indicate that La Courbe was not insensitive to the human cost of colonialism, albeit particularly when discussing victims of the rival Spanish.

All in all, La Courbe's account of early European colonialism is not flattering. Companies were going bankrupt in large part because they were overwhelmed by the logistical complexity of the colonial enterprise and the general moral breakdown that occurred in their own personnel involved in organizing trade based on human and ecological catastrophe, all of which is not lost on La Courbe during his investigation. What is less clear is the extent to which this slave trader and colonial official might have become more broadly disillusioned with the systems of trade and exploitation he was charged with studying and improving. His tone in passages describing the loss of human and animal life associated with colonialism and his steady, sometimes outraged, frustration with his French counterparts, might be an indication that, in the process of fulfilling his mission to critique the Company's business operations, he became more critical of the colonial venture writ large.

Given the broader context of chaos, waste, and inefficiency that characterized the Royal companies' faltering attempts to control trade out of West Africa, it is not surprising that La

[68] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. 194.
[69] Ibid., p. 172.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., p. LIII; 56.
[72] Ibid., p. 28; 66.
[73] Ibid, p. 18.
[74] Ibid., p, 258; 273.
[75] Ibid., p. 283.

Courbe's book was lost in the company's archives and its literary and historical value went unnoticed. *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe fait en Afrique* is itself a resource: all the information La Courbe collects is intended to advance the company's interests and improve its operations. Thus, like so many of the resources accumulated in this period of early colonialism, in the process of preparing and distributing it, much of what La Courbe had collected was lost, wasted, or destroyed.

When Labat found La Courbe's manuscript, he recognized there was unrealized commercial potential in it. The text was engaging, immersive, and, above all else, it included copious descriptions of a region that people in France knew very little about. To borrow a term Miller uses in a discussion of authenticity in literature by and about minorities, La Courbe's manuscript had 'exotic capital', even if he was a Frenchman, because so few people from Europe had travelled to Africa.[76] As such, it had the potential to interest a broader public than just the directors of la Compagnie Royale du Sénégal. Hence, Labat took the more memorable passages, processed them with information collected from other documents, and added in his own commentary to create a new product that the public would purchase.

Labat owed his success more to commercial savviness and intellectual ruthlessness than to his talents as a writer. This runs counter to Tzvetan Todorov's account of the role of style and literary talent in the dissemination of discoveries during the early period of European exploration and colonialism. In *The Morals of History*, Todorov considers why America was named after Amerigo Vespucci in the early sixteenth century: Columbus had set foot in the Americas before Vespucci, but Vespucci had written letters more clearly and eloquently relating his experience.[77] As a result, Vespucci was more strongly associated with the new continent and when the scholars of Saint-Dié went to name it, they used his name. Todorov writes, '[i]t is not the intellectual discovery that the naming of the new continent celebrates; it is – whether its namers knew it or not – literary excellence. Amerigo owes his glory to the forty or so pages that make up the two letters published during his lifetime'.[78] Like Columbus, La Courbe did not initially receive recognition for his 'discoveries', because he failed to communicate his contributions to his contemporaries. Cultru hypothesizes that La Courbe may have been the first European to visit the falls of Félou, the furthest point navigable by boat on the Senegal River, but Labat took this passage and modified it slightly to fill out his account of two trips by Brue, to Siratik and Garam.[79] If La Courbe made this journey, his records of it have not been found, so it remains unclear who the first European to see this significant geographic landmark was. However, for the most part, the purpose of La Courbe's trip was not geographical exploration: he followed the West African coastline using recognized landmarks and visiting established bases. This was a dangerous trip, and venturing well beyond the limits of the European outposts and some friendly neighbouring kingdoms was out of the question.

La Courbe did, however, make intellectual discoveries in the sense that he was one of the first French people to offer sustained descriptions of West African peoples and Europeans' trade with them – he collected and wrote down a great deal of information that was new to the French

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[76] Miller, *Impostors*, p. 43. 'Exoticism sells, and exoticism requires (the illusion of) authenticity. People want to know about foreign lands (including West Virginia and East Lost Angeles) and the peculiar habits of those who live there. Without that exotic capital and its foundations in identity and difference, the whole thing [i.e. the commodification of stories by minorities] collapses.'

[77] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Morals of History*, trans. by Alyson Waters (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pp. 100–109.

[78] Ibid., p. 102.

[79] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. VII. See also Hair, 'The Falls of Félou: A Bibliographical Exploration', pp. 113–130.

public. Like Columbus, he did not fully realize the importance of his experiences and other people took credit for the knowledge he brought back to Europe. However, the issue of literary excellence is reversed from Todorov's account of the naming of America: Vespucci was honoured for his literary excellence, but La Courbe's text is unquestionably more polished, careful, and immersive than Labat's. The contribution of Labat was to realize this document was more than just a piece of corporate research: it was a potential commodity that, with some modification, the public would buy and read. Labat's success, then, was a commercial coup, not a literary achievement.

Labat's intellectual theft was far from an isolated crime within an otherwise orderly and just context. In the last part of this article, I would like to return to Adrian Johns's observation that, during what he calls the 'piratical Enlightenment', cases of plagiarism and other literary misdeeds exploded alongside the expansion of print to argue that the fate of *Premier voyage* is indicative of a larger culture of preemption and misappropriation in eighteenth-century Europe.[80] Given the general disorder and overwhelming complexity of the Company's attempts to monopolize trade out of West Africa, the provenance of each resource and the morality of how it was acquired was of secondary importance to La Courbe, if it was considered at all. He recorded a parable that quickly illustrates the corrosive cynicism of this period of colonial expansion. A local dignitary told La Courbe that at the beginning of time, there were three brothers: one white, one North African (he used the word *maure*), and one Black. Their father knew he was going to die, so he put all his possessions on a table to get ready to divide them up and then went to sleep. Overnight, the white brother who was 'le plus vigilant' came and took all the most precious things, like gold and jewels, and left. The North African brother got up, saw what the white brother had done, and took the most valuable remaining possessions, horses, camels, and livestock. The Black brother got up and, seeing that the only things left were cotton, millet, and tobacco, swore he would catch up to his brothers and take back whatever he could.[81] This parable, which La Courbe reproduced without rebuttal or criticism, is remarkable both for how it conveys Europeans' self-awareness concerning their colonial enterprises and for its twisted portrayal of racial hierarchy, including the white brother being presented as both the smartest and the most immoral of the three. However, most importantly, it succinctly conveys the moral atmosphere in which French merchants and explorers operated in their initial forays into West Africa. The Portuguese, Dutch, and French attacked and seized each other's forts, trading posts, and ships along the western coast of Africa, using force to assert their interests in their struggle to control the region's trade. All assumed and employed strategies of preemption, racing to be the first to stake a claim to different territories but also striking their rivals' assets while they were unprepared. Notions of fairness and legitimacy had little relevance within the competitive race for supremacy in imperial trade. As in the parable, there was a cynical logic of preemption resting on an assumption of an inverse relationship between intelligence and morality.

Fittingly, Labat plagiarized the parable related by La Courbe, almost verbatim, without attribution.[82] In a context in which theft, extortion, and violence were normalized routine, when we consider that both La Courbe and Labat were involved in the slave trade, Labat's plagiarism is merely an extension of this cynical colonial logic of preemption and appropriation. He found La Courbe's text and repurposed it to suit his own ends as part of a broader effort to stake his claim and monopolize intellectual authority on all matters pertaining to West Africa like a French

[80] Johns, *Piracy*, pp. 48–51.
[81] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, p. 72.
[82] Labat, *Nouvelle Relation de l'Afrique occidentale*, II, p. 269.

expeditionary force occupying a Dutch fort.

According to Johns, the term 'piracy' was circulating through popular accounts of life in the Caribbean as people in Europe were debating the explosion of textual improprieties associated with the proliferation of printing presses.[83] First in England, then France, and then more broadly in Europe, piracy was used to refer to acts of plagiarism and unauthorized reproduction of texts.[84] There is, however, more to this association between the Caribbean and plagiarism than the metaphorical extension of the term 'pirate'. The triangular trade was rife with fraud as merchants and smugglers (the boundary was porous) systematically altered, forged, and manipulated documents in their attempts to avoid taxes, customs duties, and mercantilist restrictions on trade between colonies of different nations.[85] La Courbe and Labat must have been familiar with, if they did not participate in, these practices. Furthermore, Banks explains that, amongst the 'information elite', competition to control narratives was intense and rivalries bitter. At a time when news that Louis XIV had died in September 1715 only reached Cayenne (French Guyana) in January 1716, when it was delivered by a smuggler's ship from Boston, it is easy to see how textual subterfuge could have significant professional, commercial, and political consequences that could take months or years to rectify.[86] Indeed, La Courbe complained bitterly of slow correspondence from his superiors and was concerned his rivals in the Company were spreading misinformation about his activities, for instance that he was stealing wares from the Company.[87] The entire narrative, including the impression of objectivity and even-handedness it produces, could be construed as an attempt to counter their allegations against him.

Textual abuse took different forms in Europe but was also driven by competition over profits and influence. Unauthorized reprinting became ubiquitous in the eighteenth century, such that 'plagiarism was an attribute of territory': a text printed in the Netherlands might be legal there but illegal in France due to differing laws motivated by each nation's cultural politics.[88] What Benedict Anderson calls 'print capitalism' in his description of the emergence of national identities might better be called 'print mercantilism', at least in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as each nation aggressively protected its own intellectual production and printing presses from foreign competition, while attempting to undermine those of their rivals.[89] Even Labat's mutli-volume series, *Nouveau Voyage aux Îles de l'Amérique*, fell victim to this trend and was circulated through 'trois éditions pirates parues en Hollande', 'suprême consécration pour un auteur au xviiie siècle', according to Marc Chatillon.[90]

Unauthorized reprintings often included dubious alterations presented as improvements as presses sought to pitch their editions as the most current version, leading to 'a culture of the upgrade'.[91] Labat transformed La Courbe's manuscript more radically, without acknowledging his source material at all, but it is an extension of the same logic of 'improving' a text by adding to it. In short, Labat's plagiarism of La Courbe's manuscript may have had more lasting consequences than a falsified customs document or a doctored reprint of a popular text because it confused

[83] Johns, *Piracy*, pp. 43–46.
[84] Ibid., pp. 23–24.
[85] Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea*, pp. 178–179.
[86] Ibid., p. 172.
[87] La Courbe, *Premier voyage du Sieur La Courbe*, pp. 187–189.
[88] Johns, *Piracy*, p. 51.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Marcel Chatillon, 'Le Père Labat à travers ses manuscrits', *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe*, 40-41-42 (1979), pp. 13–178 (p. 13).
[91] Johns, *Piracy*, p. 49.

historians for more than 175 years, but it was part of a broad culture of textual fraud and misappropriation in eighteenth-century Europe driven by competition for information patronage, scholarly reputation, and national dominance.

European intellectual property law evolved in response to problems of plagiarism and reprinting, managing and assuaging anxieties about acts of intellectual dishonesty. The recent uproar over artificial intelligence's unsanctioned use of databases shows, however, that fears about textual misappropriation and the circulation of unreliable information remain central to our text-based culture. The accusations of inauthenticity and intellectual dishonesty swirling around twentieth-century Francophone African writers position African literature as particularly suspect and derivative, riddled with unworthy apprentices taking shortcuts by plagiarizing Western masters. However, as the case of Labat and La Courbe shows, the charges leveled against Francophone African authors are not so much an exceptional trend that has emerged in the area of contact between Europe and Africa as an extension of an ongoing panic about authenticity and textual abuses at the heart of European print culture since the Enlightenment. In discussions of the intellectual scandals in Francophone literature, this panic is projected outward and expressed not as a concern about the vulnerabilities inherent in print culture, but rather as skepticism about the integrity of African authors and the authenticity of their works. We should reverse this displacement of anxieties onto individual African authors: it is at the frontier of print culture, where it encounters new technologies and interfaces with emerging literary traditions, that concerns about intellectual property resurface, but it is the foundation of print culture that they call into question. The lure of profit, the difficulty of verifying sources and credentials, and the ease with which texts circulate perpetuate the conditions for a culture of dishonesty and generalized paranoia about the unreliability of information, but the discourse of accountability is used selectively to question the ability of African authors to use this medium responsibly. As an illustration of this imbalance, consider that, although it is quite disturbing that Labat's plagiarism went undiscovered for nearly 200 years, and despite the importance of his work for his contemporaries and generations of scholars since, there is far less commentary on this case than on those of, for example, Bakary Diallo or Yambo Ouologuem.

By way of conclusion, I will add one final observation: the loss of La Courbe's text and Labat's distortion of so much of the information contained within it are indicative of a broader inefficiency within networks of knowledge production that may have hindred early French colonialism. The goods that made it to their destination and the enslaved people who reached the Americas enriched the colonial companies and increased demand for ivory, hides, feathers, and more enslaved people, leading to the perpetuation and intensification of the Atlantic trade and the human and ecological catastrophes upon which it depended. Similarly, information that made it back to Europe and was circulated there could help merchants and future colonial administrators extend their control over larger territories and populations, leading not to the correction of injustices but rather to greater efficiency in their execution.

In an essay on French scholarship on Africa during the *ancien régime*, Benjamin Steiner explains that royally chartered companies shared information with the absolutist state, and that authors like Labat drew on these sources to create their own histories of Africa to be shared with the public. However, networks of knowledge production and dissemination were not seamless in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, according to Steiner: companies, the state, and

researchers still operated with some autonomy.[92] Merchants had a vested interest in protecting their own information networks and evading official scrutiny, which necessarily challenged the absolutist state and limited the expansion of French colonialism.[93] Authors like Labat were more interested in promoting their own reputations than aiding the mercantile and political interests of companies and states through diligent and conscientious intellectual labour. By the nineteenth century, the integration of these systems of collecting and sharing knowledge was far more advanced, with the result that 'during this period, for the first time, it was also scholarship [*Wissenschaft*] that contributed to the European powers' domination of Africa'.[94] By treating the continent as a single unit, Steiner overstates the extent to which European nations achieved hegemony over Africa and erases areas that remained independent, rebelled, or continued to resist colonial occupation. For example, organized resistance to annexation by the French in Kajoor, a kingdom in what is now Senegal, continued late into the nineteenth century, leading Diouf to conclude that in 1870, 'l'espace colonial se réduisait aux 'banlieues' de Dakar et de Gorée'.[95] However, the balance of power certainly shifted from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the French presence in West Africa was limited to small trade outposts, to the nineteenth century when France was able to intervene militarily and politically over large expanses of territory. Louis Faidherbe, who executed this transformation as Governor of Senegal, reorganized significant sectors of the West African colonial economy, and also wrote numerous works on West African languages and cultures, embodied the increasing alignment of French scholarship on West Africa with the interests of the French state and French commerce.

While the loss of La Courbe's manuscript undoubtedly confused historians and while we now have a better understanding of the initial period of French colonialism, the purpose of his report was to help improve the extraction of resources and enslavement of people in West Africa. In his book on André Brue, Berlioux assesses the state of France's colonial empire in the nineteenth century and regrets that the British, although they started out in a weaker position, surpassed the French because, 'ils ont mieux que nous profité de l'expérience'.[96] The inefficiency of communication networks and of disseminating information, plagued by technical problems, administrative confusion, and neglect as much as by plagiarism and misuse of source materials, disrupted feedback processes, prevented learning, and impeded the smooth operation of the colonial project under the *ancien régime*. Had La Courbe's text reached a broader audience, it might have informed the public about the cruelty and inefficiency of early colonial capitalism, but it would also have helped colonial administrators and merchants learn how to better operate trading outposts in West Africa and around the world. With Labat's annexation of *Premier voyage du Sieur de la Courbe en Afrique*, much of the most useful – and thus dangerous – information in the text, for example on edible plants or on how to interact with local rulers to promote collaboration or on how to prevent rebellions of enslaved people, was either left out or cut up and placed alongside

[92] Benjamin Steiner, 'Afrika im Ancien régime: Die Rolle des frühneuzeitlichen Staates bei der Herausbildung einer Wissenschaft von Afrika im Frankreich des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts', *Paideuma: Mitteilung zur Kulturkunde*, 61 (2015), pp. 165–189 (p. 183).
[93] Banks, *Chasing Empire Across the Sea*, p. 6; 176.
[94] Steiner, 'Afrika im Ancien régime', p. 183. This is my translation of: 'Auch wenn absolutistischer Staat, kapitalistisches Wirtschaftssystem und akademische Wissenschaftskultur als wichtige Säulen erkennbar sind, so hatte doch keine von ihnen entscheidende Macht über die anderen. Erst das 19. Jahrhundert ebnete den Weg zu einer imperialistischen Totalisierung des Staates, des Handels und der Wissenschaft, bei der alle Bereiche ineinander übergingen und sich wechselseitig stärkten. Und erst in dieser Zeit wurde Afrika auch mit Hilfe der Wissenschaft den europäischen Mächten unterworfen'.
[95] Diouf, *Le Kajoor au XIXe siècle*, p. 248.
[96] Berlioux, *André Brue*, p. 3.

ludicrous claims, making it hard to discern between reliable and unreliable information, and thus likely blunting any impact La Courbe's text might have had in aiding France's colonial ventures.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Sounds Senses. Edited by yasser elhariry. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. viii + 299 pp. Hb £83.20. ISBN: 978-1-8008-5688-2; Pb £22.39. ISBN: 978-1-8355-3725-1; Eb £83.20. ISBN: 978-1-8008-5738-4.

Sounds Senses 'sounds' senses in search of the senses of sounds, and in particular contexts of francophone post(-)colonial studies: prioritising the aural over the visual, this collection *plays back*, *listens* to, and *riffs* on a variety of cultural material and phenomena and seeks to *chime*, *articulate*, and *gauge* audible (but largely unheard) meanings therein. If oculocentrism has been a keystone of Western academia, including francophone post(-)colonial studies, then approaches turning an ear to the sonic/aural would seem to present suitably radical opportunities for challenging the hegemony of the optical/visual.

Artfully orchestrated by yasser elhariry, and sampling established theoreticians such as Roland Barthes and Michel Chion, the tome rises to the challenge consistently. Organized into three sections – Poetry, Cinema, and Voices – of three papers each, elhariry emcees proceedings, after a highly original Prelude, and closes with Edwin Hill's appealing and original Outro on the 'teeth-sucking' phenomenon, which, we might recognize, is neither a new nor even exclusively francophone phenomenon. The sections themselves – like the Prelude and Outro – are not exclusive. For example, different notions or themes of 'voice' are encountered throughout.

The outstanding feature of this collection is the varied subject matter (most of which was completely new to me). To begin with, Raphaël Sigal listens to the poetic writings of Ghérasim Luca, reporting in a (pre-)ludic style that is experimental and suitably jarring. Broad, over-arching questions are raised by this opening case study. They concern the nature of *francophonie* itself and, of interest to translators everywhere, the means by which one might translate 'wounded words' (p.13), words that clash with what elhariry contrasts with 'the [French] history of progressive standardization, normalization, and normativity' (p. 23). It is this history – Hill will tell us, in his intriguing finale – that is so resistant to 'teeth-sucking'.

In Part 1, still under the auspices of Poetry, we are invited to listen to – and hear – the work of Moncef Ghachem (and the music of Sicily-based group *Dounia*), Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine, and a chorus of nineteeth-century poetry from Haiti. In the first two instances, I should recommend that the readers familiarise themselves with the material under discussion, for which helpful online links are provided. Thomas C. Connolly's analysis of Khaïr-Eddine's 'secret music' is particularly insightful, fruitfully using Deleuze and Guattari and contrastive visual material in the form of paintings by Francis Bacon. Nota: reference to the visual, here, is not a methodological bum note — elhariry recognises that 'critical attention to the sonic cannot entirely separate itself from an aporetic coupling with the visual' (p. 28).

Part 2 explores the obvious, and typically intrinsic, coupling of the visual and the sonic in cinema, through analysis of films by Djibril Diop Mambéty, Ousmane Sembène, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Abderrahmane Sissako, Julien Duvivier, Merzak Allouache, and Nadir Moknèche. Conceiving of an 'aural body' as well as a 'visual body', Vlad Dima argues that 'the power of the voice […] can counteract the neocolonial effect of emptiness' (p. 137). The symbolic emptiness, for the Global North, of Timbuktu is re-cast by Jill Jarvis, through attention to the 'acoustemology' of Sissako's film of the same name (2014), and filled 'with irrepressible, inexhaustible sonic excess that might guide us […] to other, better futures' (p. 158). Sensitive to the 'acoustical ecology' of *Timbuktu*, Jarvis concludes with a sobering reminder that we need to listen to the planet in order to survive. Maya Boutaghou then bundles us into a *sept-places* for the journey to Algiers and exposes the symbolism of that city through 'sounds as forms that shape the imaginary of a place' (p. 161).

In Part 3 on Voices, an assortment of texts is examined – embracing film (Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville's *Ici et ailleurs*), writing (Jean Genet's Palestinian writings, novels by Franco-Chinese writers Dai Sijie and Francois Cheng), and *bande dessinée* (Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*). Olivia C. Harrison's analysis of texts relating to Palestine leads to a timely conclusion:

'we need to analyze and critique representation in sound before we can begin to understand what it would mean to hear (*entendre*) the sounds of Palestine' (p. 206). Shuangyi Li's masterful discussion of Franco-Chinese literature offers fascinating (and quite poetic) examples of 'aural exoticism' that is beautifully 'oriented towards a dialogue, a communion, and a transcendence to come' (p. 232). Using Chion's concept of synchresis, Jennifer Solheim takes us for a 'Walk on the [Kim] Wilde Side' in *Persepolis*. Analysis is entertaining and relatable, leading to an overarching conclusion regarding the 'tradition of the performance of listening within francophone culture […]: a representation of listening that orients the narrative through musical and exilic, rather than historical, time' (p. 251).

Having toured the francophone world via the preceding chapters, Hill's outro concludes the journey by taking us back to France. Discussion of the phenomenon of '*suck-teeth*, *kiss-teeth*, *chups*, *steups*, *stchoops*, *tchwipe*', whatever the transcription of this sound with 'no linguistic function strictly speaking' (p. 257), and of calls for it to be banned in France, leads to an unsurprising conclusion: 'as it racializes and genders […] bodies, the *tchip* ban participates in the surveillance of affective tonality' (p. 280). Hill's highly original, and cleverly illustrated, analysis hints, in conclusion, at how this 'sound of rebellion […] will open up onto untold new horizons and modes of social relation in the future' (p. 281).

Amid the white noise of today's world, *Sounds Senses* tunes in to the environment (social and global), remains sensitive to the 'volume' of fascism (p. 196), and provides tools useful in measuring the aftershocks of colonialism. Specialists and undergraduate students interested in (francophone) post(-)colonial culture will find something of great interest in this tome. Like attending a good conference, it exposes us to original ideas, 'new' material, and writers, film-makers, and artists unknown to us; it may complement our own research, send us down different rabbit holes, inspire new approaches; it certainly achieves elhariry's aim of staking 'a claim for revalorizing the sonic over the progressive historical hegemony of the visual' (p. 28) and amplifies the value in doing this.

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Precarious Lives and Marginal Bodies in North Africa: Homo Expendibilis. By HERVÉ ANDERSON TCHUMKAM. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. 194 pp. Hb £81.00. ISBN: 978-1-7936-4075-8.

Hervé Anderson Tchumkam's *Precarious Lives and Marginal Bodies in North Africa: Homo Expendibilis* orchestrates an interdisciplinary study of the sociopolitical mechanisms underlying marginalisation in North Africa. Through a meticulous analysis that bridges literary criticism, political philosophy, and sociology, Tchumkam elucidates the historical and ongoing construction of precarious lives as expendable entities. In the Introduction, Tchumkam correlates three pivotal political events in francophone North Africa: the 1988 protests in Algeria, the 2003 suicide bombings in Morocco, and the 2011 self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia. He argues that these incidents, despite their distinct social and historical contexts, share a common thread of pervasive 'social disaffiliation' and state-induced insecurity that reflect the marginality of those who have been 'reduced to inaudibility and invisibility' (p. viii, x). Tchumkam proposes the figure of the *homo expendibilis* within the milieu of French colonies in North Africa as he excavates 'marginal bodies and precarious lives' portrayed as perilous, expendable, and devoid of citizenship rights in the key literary works from Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco (p. xiv, xx). Evolving from Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* and Achille Mbembe's 'necropolitics', the notion of *homo expendibilis* extends to encompass those existing in a liminal state of social death – marginalized and oppressed yet necessarily being physically eliminated –, marking their existence as both 'necessary and expendable' (p. xiv).

Chapter One, titled 'Memento Mori: The Living Dead of Colonial Algeria', explores into the experiences of the colonial peasantry in Algeria, focusing on the novels *L'incendie* (1954) by Mohammed Dib and *Les bandits de l'Atlas* (1983) by Azzédine Bounemeur. Tchumkam posits that these works depict the *fellahs* as existing in 'zones of indeterminacy between slave [...] and the *homo sacer*', for these peasants, doubly marginalized under colonial rule, embody the expendable lives central to Tchumkam's thesis (p. 12). The chapter illuminates how these figures, initially utilized by sovereign powers, are subsequently abandoned to the peripheries once their utility diminishes, thus exposing the harsh realities of colonial exploitation and the resilient resistance of the peasantry, a periphery that challenges the centre.

In Chapter Two, 'The Immigrant Body as Body of Exception', the focus shifts to North African immigrants in France, examining how their bodies are depicted as exceptions within their host society. Through an analysis of Albert Bensoussan's *Mirages à 3* (1989), Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed* (1983), and Fawzia Zouari's *Ce pays dont je meurs* (1999), the discussion extends to themes of exile, non-belonging, otherness, and solitude, exploring how immigrants navigate their precarious existence as perpetual outsiders, banished from both the interior and the exterior of society (p. 68).

In the chapter titled 'Women Body, Pathological Body', Tchumkam explores the gendered dimension of expendability through the works of Leïla Marouane, *Le châtiment des hypocrites* (2001) and *La jeune fille et la mère* (2005). He reveals how the female body is 'doubly disqualified' — first through racialisation then through sexualisation — and 'doubly excluded' from social and civil protections as a consequence of colonisation (p. 86). Tchumkam suggests that these novels portray the bodily self-determination and resistance of female characters, reflected in their 'destituent potential' alongside their inherent 'potential.' This duality serves to deactivate male dominance that has relegated women to marginality, offering a vision of woman as subjects, not merely objects (p. 104).

In the concluding chapter, 'Precarious Lives: Slum Dwellers and Social Outcasts', Tchumkam discusses the representation of slum children and social outcasts in Mahi Binebine's *Le sommeil de l'esclave* (1992) and *Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen* (2010), exploring questions of freedom, precarity, humanity, and the reduction to the status of an object (p. 122). He argues that the spatial and social marginalisation portrayed in these works accentuates the pervasive inequality and neglect endured by the most vulnerable bodies of society, particularly the body of the Black enslaved person that is exploited and reduced to the use of the body (p. 134). Tchumkam celebrates how Binebine gives voice and visibility to these minorities whose speech is restored from forced invisibility and silence.

While Tchumkam's analysis in his work offers a comprehensive exploration of the literary portrayals and sociopolitical realities in North Africa, it notably omits a crucial dimension: the marginalization of the Amazigh (Berber) communities. Historically, these communities have navigated a complex and often precarious position within both colonial and postcolonial contexts. Despite their significant cultural contributions, Amazigh populations have often been relegated to a liminal status, caught between not being fully assimilated into the dominant Arab-centric national identities and not fully acknowledged for their unique cultural heritage. This oversight is particularly striking considering Tchumkam's emphasis on themes such as democracy, citizenship, and expendability. Moreover, his reference to the 1988 revolution in Algeria, which saw significant Amazigh participation from the Kabyle region, underscores this gap. Incorporating events like the Berber Spring of 1980, a pivotal moment in the struggle for cultural and linguistic rights in Algeria, could have enriched Tchumkam's discourse on marginalized and invisible identities that define the region's sociopolitical landscape.

Despite these limitations, *Precarious Lives and Marginal Bodies in North Africa: Homo Expendibilis* remains a thought-provoking and timely exploration of sociopolitical conditions in North Africa. Through an interdisciplinary methodology and literary analysis, the book successfully unveils the precarious lives and marginal bodies stripped of humanity, citizenship, and the right to exist (p. 147). By bringing forth the voices and experiences of the marginalized,

Tchumkam advocates for the integration of excluded subjects from the periphery to the heart of the society. This work is best suited for scholars specializing in North African literature, as well as those from diverse fields who aim to incorporate literary criticism into sociopolitical and postcolonial studies, thanks to Tchumkam's interdisciplinary approach. It is also an accessible read for undergraduate students interested in exploring any of the various themes discussed in the analysis within the context of North Africa.

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Representations of Marginalized Populations in French WWI Literature: Muted Voices. By KATHY COMFORT. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023. 196 pp. Hb $95.00. ISBN: 978-1-6669-1636-2.

Most academics and research students will surely have experienced the mild frustration of hunting down, then consulting a new volume that appears as though it will offer exciting insights for their current project only to discover that, in fact, it bears a tangential relationship (at best) to their topic. I assume the *BFPS* reviews editor interpreted the title of Kathy Comfort's new volume on the 'representation of marginalised populations in French WWI literature' exactly the same way I did when accepting to write this review for a postcolonial publication. However, a quick glance at the blurb on the back cover reveals that the 'marginalized populations' of the title actually refers to 'groups who have remained on the margins of the World War One narrative—women and children, French West African colonial troops, wounded veterans, and French Foreign Legionnaires'. So, there is a partial focus on what those in our field would consider to be 'marginalized populations', but this volume is, in fact, far more concerned with those who are 'marginalized' within dominant literary representations of the First World War with their focus on (predominantly white) frontline combat troops.

Comfort argues that what binds together the texts in her corpus is the recognition that 'each may be read as a trauma testimony' (p. 5). The volume examines the work of five authors: Maxence Van der Meersch's *Invasion 14* (1935), set in the occupied north of France; Colette's war reporting, which focuses on the 'domestic front'; Blaise Cendrars's *La Main Coupée*, a semi-autobiographical work about the author's time in the French Foreign Legion alongside a largely immigrant group of soldiers (1946); Roland Dorgelès's *Le Réveil des morts* (1923), a novel that depicts both civilians and veterans returning home after the war; and, the work that is probably of most interest to readers of this publication, Bakary Diallo's *Force-Bonté* (1926), a memoir by a former *tirailleur sénégalais* who recounts his experiences in the colonial army, suppressing a rebellion in Morocco before being called to France to protect the 'homeland' in 1914.

It is significant that texts such as *Force-Bonté* are now being considered (by non-postcolonial critics) alongside works by white, metropolitan French authors: it is a largely positive development that African texts are no longer solely the preserve of postcolonial scholars. This also signals the growing recognition in the aftermath of the commemorative events marking its centenary that the 1914–1918 conflict was a genuinely global affair in terms of those asked to fight in the European theatre of war. Unfortunately, Comfort's analysis of Diallo's ambiguous narrative (often dismissed as pro-French propaganda but, more recently, revisited as a veiled critique of empire) is short on new insights as it leans heavily on the critical approach adopted in the introduction to a recent English-language translation of the text, which emphasizes the ways in which his ideas are shaped by the values of Peulh (Fulani) culture.[97] Furthermore, the chapter is much shorter than the other chapters, perhaps in itself an indirect reflection of the fact that roughly half the book focuses on

[97] Bakary Diallo and Lamine Senghor, *White War, Black Soldiers: Two African Accounts of World War 1*, translated by Nancy Erber and William Peniston, edited by George Robb (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2021).

Diallo's life prior to the war, but also, I fear, indicative of the lack of a wider hinterland on colonial issues: for example, a key literary text on African participation in the war, Raymond Escholier's *Mahmadou Fofana* (1928) is not even mentioned. What is more, the chapter is punctuated by a series of basic factual errors (the designation 'tirailleurs sénégalais' refers to the place where they were founded, not the origins of the majority of those who fought in the war; Diallo freely enlisted in the army and was not a 'conscript'; and the book is a memoir not a 'novel'). However, I found myself largely persuaded by Comfort's argument that the final section of the book might be considered a trauma narrative as Diallo seeks to recover from his horrific injuries largely within a context of official French indifference. The colonial army had offered him a vision of France's 'strength' and 'kindness' (as expressed in the title), but now it is the kindness of individual French friends and acquaintances that sees him through this nightmare period in his life.

I am conscious that this review will, no doubt, appear somewhat mean-spirited up to this point but let me make it clear that, overall, Comfort is a very capable literary critic who provides intelligent close-readings of her corpus. Furthermore, her overall thesis that her corpus is marked by trauma is well supported by incisive engagement with a broad range of theoretical material. As a researcher who has been engaging with writing about the First World War for the past decade, I certainly learned a lot about French literary texts with which I was unfamiliar. However, it is unfortunate that her weakest chapter focuses on the text that is likely to be of most interest to readers of this journal. Publishers clearly need to find a range of readers capable of commenting knowledgeably on such a diverse range of texts so that mistakes or weaknesses can be identified prior to publication. It would be misguided though to interpret the example of this book as symptomatic of a wider set of issues that arise when scholars of metropolitan France turn to postcolonial material (one just needs to consider James Williams's research seemingly effortless shift from French cinema to outstanding recent studies of African cinema). So, if you have a general interest in the literary representation of the First World War, then this book is for you, but postcolonial scholars are unlikely to learn much from it.

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Écrivaines camerounaises de langue française. Edited by MARÍA CARMEN MOLINA ROMERO. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2023. 184 pp. US$48.95. ISBN: 978-2-8757-4811-9.

The roots of Cameroonian women's writing in French can be traced to the mid-twentieth century commencing with Marie-Claire Matip's novella, *Ngonda*, published in 1956 but written between 1954 and 1955 but equally important is Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury's novel, *Rencontres essentielles*, completed in 1956 but published for the first time in 1969. Since the emergence of these pioneering texts, Cameroonian women have remained a dominant force in Francophone literature with well-known authors such as Calixthe Beyala, Léonora Miano, and Djaïli Amadou Amal leading the way throughout the years.

Literary scholars primarily from France, Great Britain, the United States and Australia have also taken note of Cameroonian literature written by women by producing articles and monographs focusing on major authors as well as ones lesser known. However, in recent years, there has been a noticeable uptick in the number of scholars in Spain who are working on Sub-Saharan African Francophone women authors, like Vicente Montes Nogales at the University of Oviedo, to cite one excellent example.

This new collection from Spain, *Écrivaines camerounaises de langue française*, is the latest contribution to this conversation. This edited volume consists of essays by ten scholars, all from Spanish universities. The volume's editor, María Carmen Molina Romero, is from the Department of French Philology of the University of Grenada, as are seven other contributors. The other two Spanish institutions represented are the University of Huelva and the University of Almería.

This collection features studies on celebrated Cameroonian women writers (like Léonora Miano and Calixthe Beyala), as well as ones who are less known but nonetheless important historically (such as Lydie Dooh-Bunya and Delphine Zanga-Tsogo). More recent writers like Hemley Boum and Djaïli Amadou Amal are also included. There is a good mix of first-, second-, and third-generation Cameroonian authors covered in this book although the pioneer of Cameroonian women's writing, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, while mentioned in Romero's introduction, is not discussed in a separate chapter.

The introduction by the book's editor, Romero, provides a relatively accurate history of Cameroonian women's writing in French even if there are some errors (for example, Marie-Claire Matip's *Ngonda* is not a novel but a 58-page novella). There is no mention at all, however, of anglophone women writers who are an undeniable part of Cameroon's literary history; not acknowledging this is particularly regrettable because this detail is essential to understanding Cameroonian literary history as a whole, especially considering the ongoing conflict in the country between francophone and anglophone populations.

María Luisa Bernabé Gil's chapter, '*La brise du jour* et autres récits de Lydie Dooh-Bunya, "entre tradition et modernisme"', exposes intriguing aspects of one of the earliest examples of francophone women's novels in Cameroon even if Gil relies too heavily on the University of Western Australia's Francophone African literature website as a primary reference. Dominique Bonnet's essay, '*L'oiseau en cage* de Delphine Zanga-Tsogo: histoire d'une délivrance', also highlights a text that deserves more recognition, but Bonnet does not accurately define African feminisms and repeatedly cites older theories which have since been replaced by more recent approaches.

Eduardo Aceituno Martínez's chapter, 'Calixthe Beyala, romancière hétérodoxe', dedicates more time to summarizing Beyala's numerous works than he does analyzing them, and this is unfortunate. Furthermore, Martínez repeatedly refers to Beyala's depiction of the 'banlieue' or 'suburb' when Belleville (the neighborhood where the novel is set) straddles the 11th and 20th arrondissements of Paris and is not in the suburbs at all.

The strongest chapter though is perhaps Lina Avendaño Anguita's 'Du politique au poétique: *Afropea* et *Écrits pour la parole* de Léonora Miano', which is not only well documented but also uses Achille Mbembe's, Homi Bhabha's, and Julia Kristeva's theories quite well in its analysis of Miano's text. Miano has received academic attention, but Anguita's contribution has considerable originality. María Carmen Molina Romero's essay that follows, 'Voix éclatées, voix éclatantes dans *Crépuscule du tourment* de Léonora Miano', is also well argued and it, too, is an original take on Miano's works. Luisa Montes Villar also discusses Miano in her essay 'Décolonialisme et héritage glissantien dans *Rouge impératrice* de Léonora Miano', citing the most recent theories on multilingualism and heterolingualism in literature which adds breadth to the chapter.

Next are two articles on Hemley Boum, María Loreto Cantón Rodríguez's 'Regards féminins de l'espace-temps chez Hemley Boum: *Le clan des femmes* et *Les jours viennent et passent*' and '*Le clan des femmes* d'Hemley Boum: l'apprentissage de la vie au sein d'une concession polygame' by Virginia Iglesias Pruvost. The articles repeat the same biographic details, which the editor should have caught. Rodríguez's essay has more to offer since Pruvost includes citations from sources that are too old considering the subject matter; citing a 1981 text on polygamy fails to show how that discussion has evolved in the last forty years.

The collection closes with two essays on Djaïli Amadou Amal, Loubna Nadim Nadim's 'L'experience de la polygamie dans *Waalande, l'art de partager un mari* de la Camerounaise Djaïli Amadou Amal' and finally 'Écrire l'indicible dans *Les impatientes* de Djaïli Amadou Amal' by Fanny Martín Quatremare. Nadim Nadim should have distinguished between northern and southern Cameroon which is crucial since Amadou Amal is specifically describing her region whose practices do not always pertain to the entire country, which is where fieldwork in Cameroon would have been useful. Nadim Nadim states that writing is a 'pouvoir interdit aux femmes' in Cameroon (p. 157), however, this is true only in the extreme north of the country and this must be clarified. Cameroonian women from southern regions have been writing since the 1950s and hailed as some of the most prolific women writers in Francophone Africa. Quatremare's essay corrects some of

the errors made in Nadim Nadim's chapter and emphasizes that it is the Sahelian region in general where women writers have been traditionally silenced.

While such a collection on Cameroonian women authors of French expression is to be applauded, the volume has several flaws, with one being particularly evident — the contributors have not done fieldwork in Cameroon. Despite the fact that there have been numerous essays and books on this subject in the English language, the contributors have seemingly ignored them. Furthermore, the lists of works cited for each chapter are outdated in almost every case, except for Lina Avendaño Anguita's chapter on Miano. As there are three articles on Miano, two on Boum, and two on Amadou Amal, there should have been careful editing to avoid the repetition of the same facts in each group of essays. This being said, this volume does make some valuable contributions to a discussion about Cameroonian women's Francophone writing even if there are glaring omissions of relevant contemporary theories and an obvious unfamiliarity with the cultures involved. Consequently, this book seems somewhat unpolished. Nonetheless, it has been quite a while since Cameroonian women writers have been featured in a single collection and for this alone, the book deserves attention. There are elements in each chapter that are useful to both specialists of African Francophone women's writing and advanced undergraduate and graduate students conducting research on such literature.

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Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies

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