

“Don’t Let Yourself Be Made Game Of’: Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le Devoir De Violence* and the Game of Genre

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Strategy is the cornerstone of the game of chess. If you can envision future moves and sidestep your opponents’ strategy, you can outsmart them; however, if you tire of the game, you also have the option to knock the board over and rewrite the rules. Yambo Ouologuem knocks over the board with his *Le devoir de violence* (*Bound to Violence*), a 1968 text that topples narratives of history, colonialism, and African nationalism. One of his significant moves topples genre; by undermining methods that other African writers employed to write in reaction to Négritude and decolonization movements, Ouologuem disorients genre and uses that disorientation to create a new artistic product that questions everything but proposes to solve nothing. At a time when artistic creation was almost constantly imbued with ideological and political significance, Ouologuem’s text delighted some and angered many. His writing rewrote the rules of the post-colonial literary game that used combinations of the European novel and African epic in order to palliate a European audience at the end of the French colonial era, thereby exposing the artificiality of this game.

Ouologuem, a Malian writer born in 1940, was educated in both Bamako and Paris. He published *Le devoir de violence* in 1968, and the novel emerged to almost universal accolade; it received the 1968 Prix Renaudot in France. However, this unmitigated appreciation did not last. After charges of plagiarism arose—passages were supposedly lifted almost word for word from Graham Greene’s work, for example—the work’s reputation became tarnished.¹ Further, some African critics objected to the content of the work; its violence and bleak outlook were

¹ For an extended discussion of plagiarism in Ouologuem’s novel, see Roland Francois Lack’s “‘La Littérature de Martial’: Plagiarism as Figure in Sade, Lautrémont, Ouologuem, and Sony Labou Tansi.” Lack discusses relationships between texts that are created through plagiarism, and especially how such relationships are “appropriate figure[s] . . . of intertextual relations that are characterized by violence” (681). Lack’s article charts the creative moment of plagiarism as situating texts in relation to one another in a very productive way; he claims that plagiarism adds to a literary work in a counterintuitive way, as I claim that manipulation of genre and denigration of the oral tradition adds to Ouologuem’s work. Ouologuem does not do what one expects him to do; instead, he breaks down assumptions and uses the resulting shock to increase the significance of his work.

supposedly exaggerated and could be used too easily to support an anti-African agenda.

Whether positive or negative, reaction to this book is invariably strong. The violent and/or pornographic scenes in its content, the disjointedness of the chronology, and the play with a variety of genres jar the reader and bring down existing conceptions of Africa and African writing. This work is particularly interesting to genre scholarship because of the ways in which it reverses or nullifies certain ideas of generic interaction. The point at which generic usage breaks down allows for ideological problems to come more easily to light.

Purportedly a history of the Nakem Empire, a fictional kingdom in West Africa, *Le devoir de violence* raises questions about the value and “authenticity” of history, literature, and Négritude. The first section of the text entitled “The Legend of the Saifs” recounts, in a way reminiscent of the *griot* tradition, precolonial African history and also Arabic and European encounters with this African civilization. Ouologuem writes of the pinnacle of African rulership, Saif Isaac al-Heit, and then the succession of degenerate leaders who followed him. The second section, “Ecstasy and Agony,” recounts the specific “history” of French relations with Saif ben Isaac al-Heit, a figure whose corrupt and deceitful nature is in counterpoint to that of his namesake and the African people. Originally resistant to French domination, Saif eventually has to accede and his son, Madoubou, is sent to France where he becomes an object displayed on the altar of French colonialism. The third and largest section of Ouologuem’s work is “The Night of the Giants.” This middle section generally emphasizes European contact with Africa, from the slave trade to initial colonial rule to European scholarship on Africa that claims specific, sublime meaning for every artifact. The narration eventually takes up the story of Raymond-Spartacus Kassoumi. As a person who takes advantage of his colonial education in order to find a tentative place in French society, working there, fighting on France’s side during WWII and marrying a French woman, Kassoumi becomes a representative of the colonially-educated populace who took elected positions in Africa’s post-independence governments. Saif ben Isaac al-Heit’s manipulative hand holds a tightfisted control over everything: he participates in the slave-trade, he sends the children of lower-class people to school so that the children of the more powerful will not be tainted by colonial influence, and in the end, realizing the power of the colonially educated, he rigs Kassoumi’s election, ensuring that he will continue to maintain control in the reorganized future. Delving into episodes of violence, murder and sex, this work does not evoke an idyllic pre-colonial Africa—as Négritude sought to showcase—but instead presents a bloody land of betrayal and false hopes. The last section, “Dawn,” is a chess game between Saif and Bishop Henry, each acknowledging the influence of the other in contemporary African society.²

² For an extended discussion of the chess motif in Ouologuem’s work, see “Chess and

Ouologuem plays with genre in the text; he combines the novel—with all of its colonial implications in the French-African context—and the epic—with its Négritude implications. Instead of combining these genres to demonstrate some kind of airy, fictional harmony, Ouologuem shows how the combination of the two genres in fact undermines both.³ Epic enters this work through both allusion and generic form. Thomas Hale describes the references within the text to the epics of both Askia Mohammed and Sonni Ali Ber, whom he claims Ouologuem uses as the models for good and bad African rulers. Hale writes that Ouologuem's "portrait of Saif Isaac al-Heit leaves little doubt that he is following the medieval written sources regarding Askia Mohammed. Aside from the change in name, there is a relatively small difference between the itineraries of the real and the fictional rule" (144). He then discusses in detail the ways in which Askia Mohammed's reign, as recounted in epic form by various griots, corresponds to the way the character of Saif Isaac al-Heit was written, ranging from characteristics found equally in both rulers to the way in which their successors are portrayed.

Other textual mentions of epic highlight how politicians employ the epics that exist, such as Sundiata, Askia Mohammed, and so on, to further their own aims. Politicians allude to epics in order to link themselves to the heroic tradition and legitimize their power. Historically and at the time of *Le devoir de violence*'s publication, Sékou Touré linked himself to Samory Touré, and Modibo Kéita linked himself to Sundiata Kéita. This reliance upon the epic tradition translated into real-world legitimacy both within Ouologuem's text and the political world at the end of French colonialism in Africa.

Le devoir de violence draws on the past, but does so very differently from other authors. Instead of accepting the stories of the past unqualifiedly, Ouologuem constantly raises questions concerning their authenticity. The reader is always made aware that this past cannot be verified. This strategy, instead of making the oral sources the basis for the text's history, situates that spoken history purely in the realm of fiction. The way in which national history is treated undermines any historical value it may have had, which is qualitatively different from how other African authors were using the past at the moment of African

Sex in *Le devoir de violence*" by Robert Philipson, published in *Callaloo* Winter 1989.

³ Epic and novel are not the only genres that Ouologuem mutates and exploits for ideological purposes. Abioseh M. Porter's article "Beyond Self-Deprecation and Racism: Versions of African History in *Bound to Violence* and *Two Thousand Seasons*," published in the September 1989 *Journal of Black Studies*, demonstrates the extent to which Ouologuem has appropriated the historical novel. Porter writes, "*Bound to Violence* is a work that is deliberately cloaked in the garbs of an historical novel in order to alert sensitive readers to the themes of class collusion and exploitation in pre-colonial Africa" (10). Yet, despite the fact that Ouologuem avails himself of some of the expectations associated with the historical novel genre, Porter claims that Ouologuem does not thoroughly conform to the strictures of that genre and only uses those expectations so that he can subvert them, much as I claim Ouologuem does with the epic and novel genres.

independence. While Camara Laye drew reverently upon the Sundiata epic in his *L'enfant noir* and *Le maître de la parole* and Amadou Hampâté Ba made worshipful use of the oral tradition in his memoir *Amkoullel ou l'enfant peul*—to cite two relevant examples out of many—Ouologuem treated the past daringly. He does not allow himself or the audience to trust the ways in which the past has been presented because that past has been filtered through either African-idealizing lenses or French colonial lenses, thereby ensuring that the past is too ideologically charged to hold any authenticity.

Additionally, any understanding of documented history is impossible in Ouologuem's text. Apart from legend and oral traditions, the concept of history is shaken through the text's manipulation of versions of history. For example, in Ouologuem's conception of colonial history, the French were not able to move into African territory because of their greater military force, but only because different factions were squabbling amongst themselves and left themselves open to attack. In another example, female genital mutilation begins because of a historical link to Saïf ben Isaac al-Heit, who enjoyed seeing someone in pain. Further, Saïf himself invents African history, fabricating a tradition and repeating it to a European anthropologist, Fritz Schrobenius (a thinly veiled parody of the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius), who writes down Saïf's words and transmits them back to Europe as "authentic" and "true." Ouologuem creates alternative "historical" genealogies for African traditions and customs, thereby creating a sense of instability in larger meta-narratives that had earlier explained those practices.

In the West African literary tradition, the epic is linked to the oral tradition because of Négritude's assessment of this tradition as the most important conduit of the genre. In this text, Ouologuem draws upon tradition and references griots and legend. However, he makes sure that the narrative is unstable when he mentions these conduits. He offers different accounts of the stories, sometimes entirely inane ones, so that the reader can never entirely trust the information passed down through these means. The political and ideological connections Négritude sought to reference when it tied the oral tradition to the epic genre and the ability to reach back to a non-hybrid African tradition are nullified. When the oral tradition is shown to be unsound, the project of Négritude is undermined as well.

To exemplify this shaking of faith in the practice of reaching back into Africa's past for present-day resonances and demonstrate metaphorically the change in the treatment of epic, Ouologuem offers a passage concerning Europeans' search for African artifacts. After "Shrobenius" has come to Africa and undertaken the task of formulating philosophy about it, there is a rush to find African relics. People pay a great deal for these pieces and the supply does not cover the demand. Ouologuem writes:

Saïf donc—et la pratique est courante de nos jours encore—fit enterrer des quinaux

de masques hâtivement exécutés à la ressemblance des originaux, les engloutissant dans des mares, marais, étangs, marécages, lacs, limons—quitte à les exhumer quelque temps après, les vendant aux curieux et profanes à prix d'or. Ils étaient, ces masques, vieux de trois ans, chargés, disait-on, du poids de quatre siècles de civilisation. Et l'on arguait, devant la crédulité de l'acheteur, les injures du temps, les vers mauvais qui avaient rongé ces chefs-d'oeuvre en péril depuis un temps ô combien immémorial, témoin: le mauvais état préfabriqué des statuettes. (112)

[And so Saif—and the practice is still current—had slapdash copies (of old masks) buried by the hundredweight, or sunk into ponds, lakes, marshes and mud holes, to be exhumed later on and sold at exorbitant prices to unsuspecting curio hunters. These three-year-old masks were said to be *charged with the weight of four centuries of civilization*. To the credulous customer the seller pointed out the ravages of time, the malignant worms that had gnawed at these masterpieces imperiled since time immemorial, witness their prefabricated poor condition. (96)]

Taking an idea of what is old, remaking that object in the present, and then presenting it as old unqualifiedly is precisely what Ouologuem does with the legend of Askia Mohammed, with the idea of the epic as it is passed down through the oral tradition. To clarify, Ouologuem himself takes on the task of exposing the fabrication of African history and legend transmitted through the oral tradition. He exposes to his audience the extent to which they have become “credulous customers” and consumers of “slapdash copies” of African history that have somehow become imbued with the “weight of four centuries.” Epic within this work is involved not in authenticity but rather in fabrication and manipulation. If these legends and epics can be secretly manipulated in their very production, they are also more overtly used to manipulate in their interpretation.

Concluding his text, Ouologuem writes, “on ne peut s’empêcher de songer que Saïf, pleuré trois millions de fois, renaît sans cesse à l’Histoire, sous les cendres chaudes de plus de trente Républiques africaines. . .” (207) [“one cannot help remembering that Saïf, mourned three million times, is forever reborn to history beneath the hot ashes of more than thirty African republics” (181-2).] Throughout the text, he has maintained that the legacy of the Saifs, even of Saif Isaac al-Heit who is touted as the pinnacle of African rulership, is bloody violence and political and social chaos. Is Africa condemned to Saif ben Isaac al-Heit’s legacy? Since Africa is forever creating anew the Saifs, this story would have to be manipulated in order to make it worth recreating, a fact that demonstrates how the legends can and have been rewritten. It is the epic tradition that allows for “history” to be remade and presented as old and therefore authentic.

Turning to the novel genre, it becomes apparent that Ouologuem toys with it as well. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, elaborates upon three key features of the novel: maximized contact with the present, heteroglossia, and a particularized time. Ouologuem is, if anything, overly conscious to create a particularized time for this novel. Early on, he supplies dates for his history of the Saif when he mentions the general

year in which events occurred. Further on, *Ouologuem* becomes more specific about when events take place. Eventually, an insistence upon one date becomes apparent. Many major events take place on July 14th, the symbolic date of French independence. Bakhtin requires particularization of time because it anchors a text to a specific context and opens hermeneutical possibilities. *Ouologuem*'s particularization of time situates the text within a certain time frame and the events add temporal specificity as well as irony. First, "*14 juillet de l'an 1902—Saïf, promu chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, vit ses fils invités, dès qu'ils en auraient l'âge, à poursuivre, aux frais du gouvernement français, leurs études à Paris*" (79) ["on July 14, 1902, Saïf was made a chevalier of the Legion of Honor and his sons were invited to pursue their studies in Paris when the time came, as the guests of the French government" (65).] Saïf's children are furnished with a way to become more inculcated in French colonialism through the conduit of education on the day of French independence. Later, Shrobenius, his wife and daughter "*transcrivit les dires d'informateurs mandés par Saïf*" (102) ["tak[e] down the words of informants sent by Saïf"] on July 14, 1910 (86-7). These "scholars" begin amassing the data on which they will base their own myths of Africa on the date of French independence. Later, the French colonial governor is assassinated by two of Saïf's henchmen on a July 14 (134). Layering ideologies and particularities of time injects irony and makes the date equally important with the events in terms of making meaning, a Bakhtinian quality of the novel.

Ouologuem also reaches heteroglossia ironically. Plagiarism or "borrowing," the intertextuality *Ouologuem* is accused of, creates a world in which certain passages, words and phrases have very specific meaning outside of this specific text. Plagiarism may actually satisfy the Bakhtinian requirement for heteroglossia. Relating *Le devoir de violence* to the work of other authors puts *Ouologuem*'s text in contact with a larger body of literature. Despite the obvious ethical questions of citation, this interrelation of texts points to a dialogue.⁴ Bakhtinian heteroglossia adds nuance to a text via the relationship between language and time, a work that the relationship with other texts performs for *Ouologuem*. Though this requirement is satisfied, it has been done in an extremely uneasy manner because of the means involved.

Importantly, according to Georg Lukács in his *The Theory of the Novel*, irony is a critical facet of the novel. It is a tool that can portray the disruption of the totality of the world of the epic. The novel reflects a world in which totality has vanished; the art of this genre is the pretense that the world is still intact. Lukács writes "the irony of the novel is the self-correction of the world's fragility" (75). In *Ouologuem*'s work, irony

⁴ Donald Wehrs complicates *Ouologuem*'s use of Bakhtinian dialogism in his "Colonialism, Polyvocality, and Islam in *L'aventure ambiguë* and *Le devoir de violence*" published in the December 1992 MLN. See his article for an extended analysis of multivocalism in *Ouologuem*'s work.

rewrites the epic instead of the novel. It does not seek to “self-correct” “fragility” but rather to explode the bases of such categories as “tradition,” “truth,” and “authenticity” in the realm of Africanist discourse. As the epic genre is altered through its treatment in this text, the novel is also revised. I assert that the content of the work, which highlights how narratives of history are invented, how discourses on Africa have been entirely fictionalized, how “truths” are rewritten and fragmented in order to best suit the desires of the one referencing them, are mirrored in the choice of genre. The work uses epics and legends as the bases for its earlier narratives but continually calls them into question. The work uses the novel form but breaks it down repeatedly so that the reader never feels entirely comfortable throughout the reading of the text. I claim that genre, specifically the breaking down or warping of generic rules, serves Ouologuem’s purpose of shaking faith in Africa’s past and present. Why would Ouologuem seek to shake faith in Africa’s history? First, there is a clear critique of Négritude in this text. Eileen Julien writes in *African Novels and the Question of Orality*, “[Yambo] Ouologuem’s *Le devoir de violence* articulates its anti-epic in a griot’s style and effectively slanders Négritude’s romantic vision of precolonial Africa” (42). The oral tradition is not accepted in this work; Négritude promoted research into oral traditions as a valid source of African history. Thus, fundamentally, this book and Négritude are at odds. One of the major goals of Négritude was an affirmation of African values. This goal is turned on its head by this work. The “African values” presented here are bloodthirsty and violent. The tenets of Négritude are shaken at their very foundation through the content of this narrative in *Le devoir de violence*. Wole Soyinka writes in his *Myth, Literature and the African World* about ideas of Négritude and how they relate to Ouologuem’s work:

Le devoir de violence . . . marks a studied repudiation of historic blinkers. It re-writes the chapter of Arab-Islamic colonisation of Black Africa, but moves beyond history and fiction to raise questions of the very structure of racial heritage. Accepted history is held against an exhumed reality . . . (100)

What are the implications of this need to review the version of racial heritage for Négritude? If extant sources of history cannot be trusted, how can racial heritage be found? Significantly, Ouologuem offers a strikingly disparate view of African history, but uses the same sources that were previously used. In my reading of this text, the version of African history proffered by Ouologuem does not need to be accepted as truth any more than does the Négritude version; however, they both have to be recognized as *versions* and not as “true.” This shift is precisely the way that Ouologuem’s text influences “racial heritage.” The *construction* of the idea of heritage is highlighted.

The myths in the work emerge both from European misconceptions—as illustrated by “Shrobenius’s” myths—and from Négritude’s misconceptions, such as those offered by epics of Askia Mohammed. Instead of offering any positive new idea of African history, or new

African myth, Ouologuem tears down those extant. Négritude must be viewed with the same critical eye as the earlier, racist theories. Ouologuem makes this point through both the content of his work, which portrays hopelessness, deceit and nonsensical violence, and also through the form, which highlights fragmentation and can never quite be classified into any one particular genre.

In this work, the French Empire and its proponents are depicted as bumbling and ignorant. They happen to stumble upon a good opportunity to colonize, when the people of Africa are fighting among themselves, and simply take advantage of the situation, as Ouologuem's narrator explains (37-8). Ouologuem takes French colonial forces out of the equation in the development of Africa. He further promotes this idea by showing how the French administration is often duped by the Saif regime. Ouologuem's text suggests the French colonists never had the control they believed that they had, as demonstrated by the fact that Saif and his agents continually fooled them. However, the implication is that the Saif dynasty must have cooperated with, or at least allowed to happen, such events as the slave trade, the furnishing of soldiers for European wars, economic exploitation, and so on.

Importantly, it is not the French Empire that is most prominent in this work. Instead, the Nakem Empire is key. It and its leaders, the Saifs, are more violent, underhanded, manipulating, enduring than the French. Thomas Hale suggests that the Nakem fits in with the Songhay Empire and attempts to situate the seat of influence in the Tillabery region of Western Niger (139-142). Hale also connects the Nakem and the actual Kanem Empire, which was located around Lake Chad (139). This empire reached its high point in the thirteenth century and was led by leaders who used the honorific title "Saif" (Zeltner 41). However, despite this possible historical basis, there is an attempt to keep the historical referent in question. Place names and linguistic references ensure that there is no way to ascertain without conjecture where the Nakem Empire is supposed to exist. The vagueness of historical fact contributes to the fragmentation of myths by rendering it impossible to link the work to anything concrete. Not only can Saif not be linked definitively to any historical figure, but his empire, his land, his language, nothing can be definitively linked. All connections are tenuous; anything can be made up in order to illustrate a point. By means of this hazy historical referent, Ouologuem creates the same confusion as epics have when faced with "history." The historical evidence and the "legends" themselves need to be re-evaluated. Otherwise, they should be seen as just part of a fiction. This idea then fragments history in the African context by exploding "known" examples now understood as historical fact.

Nothing is clear in Ouologuem's work. The extent to which history, the oral tradition, the narrator or the story within the pages of the text can be trusted is never explicit. The uncertainty in the work is exacerbated by the uncertainty of genre and the non-reliance on chronological order of events. If genre and time rules are mixed together, it becomes difficult to

obtain an overall picture of anything in the work. Uncertainty of genre enacts on a formal level the ideological goal of the work, which is to destabilize what is supposedly “known.”

Genre works upon a community. Ultimately, it seems that the communities that should be created through genre and orality cannot be trusted and therefore splinter. The multiplicity of voices in this text fragments narrativity that in the end leads to a splintered hermeneutic. Enacting on a formal level the content’s “lesson,” genre in *Le devoir de violence* tears ideas down, but, as with the work’s content, offers no way to rebuild.

The intermingling of epic and novel creates a schizophrenic hermeneutic that has difficulty being resolved. Wole Soyinka writes about this text in *Myth, Literature and the African World* that “Ouologuem has been accused of an alienation technique: the opposite seems truer—such a level of inventive degradation suggests that Ouologuem is practicing some form of literary magic for the purpose of self-inoculation” (19). Thus, Ouologuem tries to guard against being infected with any of the discourses that he tries to show to be invalid. Critically, Soyinka does not mean that Ouologuem’s readers should not identify with anything, but rather that they should be aware of what they choose to align themselves with and how it is simply a version, a spin put on “truth.”

I claim, however, that the result of Ouologuem’s alienation is different. I assert that the reader becomes the agent of reconstructing meaning, the re-assembler of discourse. What ultimately emerges is a personal hermeneutic, not one that can be created by paying attention to various forms of discourse and genre. Instead of the meaning of the text being left in pieces, in order to make meaning the reader needs to take up the fragments (since Ouologuem certainly will not do it for him or her) and piece together meaning.

At one point in the text, Ouologuem’s narrator discusses the situation of Boureimi, a sorcerer, who seems to have gone mad. In elaborating upon this character, Ouologuem writes, Boureimi “n’avait d’oreilles que pour « sa vérité »: à savoir que “*Saif était une crapule incendiaire, un trafiquant d’esclaves, faux chef, faux Nègre et faux Juif, l’assassin de Chevalier, et le meutreier de combine d’autres!*” (96) “[Boureimi] had ears only for “his truth,” to wit, that “Saif is an incendiary blackguard, a slave trader, a false chief, a false Black, and a false Jew, who had murdered Chevalier and oh, how many more! . . .” (81).] Following these statements, Boureimi states, “*J’ai le droit de devenir four qui m’en empêche? Je n’ai ni père ni mère ni dieu ni diable. Contre Saif, je choisis la folie, d’autres appellent ça être quelqu’un de special, d’original et si mon originalité à moi c’est ma folie hein?*” (97) [“I’ve a right to go mad, who’s going to stop me? I have neither father nor mother nor God nor Devil. Against Saif I choose madness, others call it a way of being interesting, original, but what if my personal originality is madness?” (82).] This character creates an interesting dilemma for the reader. It seems that all of Boureimi’s claims, according to the narrative, are

truthful. We “know” that Saif did murder Chevalier and others and that he is treacherous, as Boureimi asserts. However, all of the people around him and even he himself profess Boureimi’s madness. The only way to make meaning in the face of Saif, or what seems to be, by association, the meta-textual discourses that he allows to continue because of his deceptions, is madness, a “personal” madness. Always destabilizing, Ouologuem, through his depiction of Boureimi, does not assert any authenticity for his own versions of discourse. The only effect of his text seems to be a personalized madness, a personal interpretation that is free from how external discourses would make meaning.

A danger of exposing versions of African history at the moment of national independence is that metanarratives of the colonial machine may be replaced with similarly deceptive metanarratives of a newly independent nation that needs to assert itself in the wake of decolonization. Even a new national literature may reproduce the skewed binary discourse disseminated by the colonial machine that it argues against since it could reflect the metanarratives under which it was produced.

How can the binary, dialectical discourse that circulated under empire be avoided? Frantz Fanon offers a choice in his text *The Wretched of the Earth*: violence. From the first line of his text, Fanon discusses the binary that creates the opposition of “men” and “natives” (1). In Fanon’s understanding, this opposition is not a pure Hegelian dialectic since the power balance between the two halves is uneven. In the Hegelian “master/slave” dialectic, ultimately the master-half needs the slave-half to create its subjectivity. To Fanon’s view, the man/native dialectic functions to “dehumanize the native” (42). The colonizing force, when faced with its Enlightenment ideals of humanism, equality and freedom, can only carry out the acts it does in a colonized area by believing that it is not inflicting these acts on men, but on animals. Therefore the colonial forces create a metanarrative that robs the native of his subject status.

Even after decolonization, Fanon suggests, this binary continues. The powerful African intellectual elite established a connection to the bourgeoisie of the colonizing nation and retain the binary. However, this discourse is not retained only among those cooperating with colonial powers. Fanon writes:

Thus we see that the primary Manicheism which governed colonial society is preserved intact during the period of decolonization; that is to say the settler never ceases to be the enemy, the opponent, the foe that must be overthrown. (50-51)

Even those most deeply invested in ensuring the success of decolonization are trapped in this dialectic.

Fanon claims that the only way to escape this dehumanizing binary is with violence. Ironically, the violence that is used against the colonizing force is included within itself. Violence is the “natural state” of colonialism (61). The “native” learns his violence from the colonizer, and at the most opportune moment is able to harness and utilize it to regain his

subjectivity. Violence is the only means by which the native can become human again. The colonial machine's discourse requires violence to shatter it.

The nation becomes for Fanon an almost idealized locus of communal violence against a common enemy. He suggests:

The practice of violence binds [the colonized people] together as a whole, since each individual forms a violent link in the great chain . . . in reaction to the settler's violence in the beginning . . . the future nation is already indivisible. (93)

The nation is born from violence. An act of violence is one that can both unite a nation and liberate it.

According to Fanon, literature has been misdirected. He claims that African literature prior to 1963, when he wrote, was directed to the West and homogenizes itself as a "Negro literature" (212). Avoiding this fate, the "native writer" begins, as he realizes the extent to which he is caught in colonialist discourse, to seek an audience among "his own people" (240). This moment of changing the audience to whom a work is directed is the birth of national literature (240). This new literature addresses themes of national importance and becomes a literature of combat (240). National literature is another form of violence, either a call for fighting or a locus of battle.

Yambo Ouologuem in *Le devoir de violence* attacks the metanarratives of African historiography, orality, genre and language usage. He takes on several colonialist metanarratives and disrupts them all. I claim that he performs in his text the violence that Fanon calls for on the level of genre and ideology. Certainly the binaries of colonialism and Négritude need to be scrutinized and Ouologuem provides a text that does so in a way that dislodges their stability. There is no real resolution in this text in terms of providing a way for a new discourse to emerge; however, the ideological goal of this text seems to be to destroy the veiled universality of these binaries. By attacking the methods of employing orality, history, and so on, Ouologuem does violence to European and African discourse on "the native," to borrow Fanon's term. Even though no new discourse emerges from the ashes of Ouologuem's violence, at least the prevailing colonial discourse is uncovered and exposed. One way Ouologuem carries out his violence is his manipulation of genre. The ideologies that were used by Camara Laye and other West African writers were that the epic appealed to tradition (as in Négritude) while the novel was attached to colonialism (and Europe). Ouologuem does not accept these ideological categories of genre. He attacks the integrity of both genres and does not allow any stable category of genre to emerge. When it seems that he appeals to the epic as tradition, he undermines that by discussing, through the Shrobenius illustration for example, how easy it is for traditions invented in the present to be submitted as steeped in ancient culture. In *Le devoir de violence* there is no clear-cut category of tradition. Everything presented as traditional needs to be re-examined and not unconsciously accepted as "authentic." Similarly, when Ouologuem

seems to appeal to the novel as European, it is also undermined. For example, the idea of colonial forces bringing anything on their own into Africa is complicated by the case of Saif's cooperation in the colonial mission. Nothing came into the colonies that had not already been tacitly approved by the Saif. Therefore the trappings of the French *mission civilisatrice* were sanctioned by the African elites. It is not possible that the novel could be seen as entirely foreign since the singularity of the West's exports is muddled with African cooperation. Ouologuem does not allow any possibility of a clean reading of the categories of genre. The degenerate way he treats the epic and the novel works against any way that these two genres have been presented previously. Ouologuem's text enacts Fanon's demand for violence; attacking genre is one of his ways of destabilizing the colonial machine's production of Africanist discourse. Ouologuem's text seems to have been created to break apart from standard textual ideas of making meaning. Hermeneutics are ignored because his project is not found in rendering his text accessible. Instead, the audience needs to do work on its own to understand what happens. The audience needs to sort through different versions of ideology, literary strategies and surprises in the content. Ouologuem enables this individual meaning because of his insistence that one cannot trust what ideology hands down. Ouologuem tries to shake out all ideological remnants, whether those of the colonial forces or of Négritude. His work demonstrates Thomas Beebee's idea from *The Ideology of Genre* that where the cracks in genre can be found, ideology can also be found most easily. He takes where ideology peeks through genre and shakes it loose, so that his text can take its meaning on its own terms. While unsettling various kinds of ideology, Ouologuem illustrates its presence and ultimate ineffectiveness. His disordering of ideology does not render his work without it. Instead, the various ideologies are displayed as basically false and *versions* of discourse with different viewpoints and biases.

The creation of meaning is an individual endeavour and must be accomplished through a sorting out of different kinds of thought. Ouologuem's focus on the individual's own creation of meaning is in opposition to the goals of a colonial empire or the legacy of a colonial empire that would wish for readers to participate in an authorized interpretation of history, of empire, of literature in order to sustain its own power and control.

In his final section of *Le devoir de violence*, "Dawn," Bishop Henry claims about a film about African warfare that he has seen, "*Je ne comprends pas. Je cherche à renouer l'histoire. D'un côté je sens confusément l'intrigue, et de l'autre, la boucherie*" (199) [I don't understand. I try to piece the story together. On the one hand, I get a vague idea of the plot; on the other hand, carnage" (173).] After a brief discussion with Saif, then, as they are about to begin a game of chess, Bishop Henry says to him, "*Vous jouez. C'est-à-dire que vous jouez sans être joué*" (202) [« you play the game. But you don't let yourself be made game of" (176).] Finally, elaborating on this thought, Henry urges,

“Dites-vous . . . Je veux jouer comme s’ils ne me voyaient pas jouer, me mettant au jour sans scandale, d’accord avec moi et avec eux en apparence, usant de leur ruse sans jamais avoir l’air de la forcer ni de la détourner, démêlant ce piège embrouillé, et encore avec prudence, ne touchant à rien sans avoir su ce après quoi il tient. Hors cette prudence, mon cher, peut-on tuer l’autre . . . au jeu?” (202-3) [“Say to yourself *I want to play as if they did not see me playing*, entering into my game without ostentation, appearing to be in accord with myself and with them, making use of their guile, without ever seeming to face it head on or trying to divert it, exposing the intricate trap, but with caution, never touching anything until I have fathomed its hidden mechanism. Without such caution, my friend, can you hope to kill your adversary . . . in a game?” (177).]

Whether applied to the game of dominant discourses, the game of genre or the game of hermeneutics, Bishop Henry’s urgings should signal to the reader what has happened in this text. Ouologuem plays, through his textual maneuverings, a sometimes serious, sometimes absurd game with alternately real or artificial results. It is ultimately left to the readers, the ones with whom the game is being played, to take up their part in this making of meaning, to abide by the rules of the game, which they may not even know, in order to finish this text. Each game will be different and each interpretation may play with different rules. This strategy ultimately results in a personalized hermeneutic that breaks from the idea of creating a community of readers who respond to the rules of genre or orality, and instead focuses on the one-on-one game with the author that the reader is engaged in.

Ouologuem’s originality and revolutionary text securely place it in the canon of African literature. However, readers should not overlook the way in which he manipulates genre’s political goals as it greatly impacts how other authors—from Africa or from any continent—can and should be read. It is impossible after reading *Le devoir de violence* to have an uncritical response to Négritude. It is impossible after reading *Le devoir de violence* not to cast a skeptical eye over other African authors’ use of the oral tradition. Perhaps Ouologuem offers no strategy through which a political solution to the problems of post-colonialism could be found; however, he does offer a strategy through which other West African texts can be studied and examined. His exposure of the artificiality of political significance to the oral tradition and the epic genre does not negate the importance of those sources. On the other hand, his text and its use of orality and epic simply encourage the readers of West African literature to become aware of those manipulations and created significances so that their eyes may be opened to the ideology at work. In fact, these skills of critical reading that Ouologuem forces upon his readers affect the reading of any text. Ouologuem’s text is entertaining and confusing, and it is also a tool that teaches us to be critical readers of literature.

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