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Cooking Confrontations *à la Francophonie*

Sophie Boka

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I compare two francophone novels, Calixthe Beyala's *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* and Maryse Condé's *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots: récit*, to explore how, in engaging one another, they offer a cookbook for self-empowerment to francophone societies still struggling with the internalized cultural norms of their former colonizer. Such lingering norms are impossible to satisfy, especially for the novels' black female protagonists who, inherently, can never become the colonizer's ideal of beauty (white, thin, attractive by western convention). Thus, these characters are cast away into a cultural in-between: although literally visible within their countries, they are denied full visibility and, by extension, full subjectivity. Yet, I argue that by channeling additional senses, such as taste and smell, the characters manage to push back against oppressive colonial ideals. By placing these texts into conversation, it becomes clear how, varying in form and generation, each character utilizes their relationships with food and body as a means to assert an otherwise unseen presence in their countries. With the help of these tools, the women begin to challenge the dominant zeitgeist, nourishing the bellies of history, and, in doing so, too, realize into society the power of their own stories.

"If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive."—Audre Lorde¹

When placed in conversation, Calixthe Beyala's *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'Africaine* (2000) and Maryse Condé's *Victoire: les saveurs et les mots* (2006) offer recipes for self-empowered identity formation to francophone women of color grappling with the oppressive, internalized cultural norms of France, their former colonizer. The protagonists' internalization of these norms manifests through illustration of their power struggles with food and their bodies. My curiosity in these particular power struggles came about through my own rather vexed experiences with them, being quite sensitive to body narratives, forever struggling with my own. Influenced by dominant norms' subjugation of bodies, I became curious as to how these norms change depending on cultural context. I grew up immersed in the French culture of my

1 Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007).

father, hyper-conscious of the exclusive nature of the historically cemented ideals that influenced my development. Thus, I first approached my readings through the lens of the colonizer, interested in understanding how, by way of colonization, French culture has impacted the food and body image of women of *Francophonie*—the greater francophone world—specifically those whose roots trace back to the former colonies.² Yet, upon engaging with Beyala’s and Condé’s texts, immersing myself within the narratives of their female protagonists, I shifted my study to a protagonist-centered pursuit: how these women use food and their bodies to combat the exclusivity of colonizing French norms and, in so doing, reclaim subjectivity within colonized spaces. Now, I must note, I believe these cultural norms are impossible for anyone to satisfy, especially the Black women protagonists of the texts’ colonized spaces, who, due to the color of their skin, can never totally satisfy the colonizer’s ideal of beauty. (White and thin are considered attractive by Western convention.) Consequently, the protagonists are captive in a sort of cultural in-betweenness due to lingering French ideals: although literally visible within their countries, they are denied full visibility and, therefore, full subjectivity.³ However, varying in form and generation, the radical protagonists of both texts utilize their relationships with food and body as a means to assert an otherwise unseen presence in their countries. With the help of their own bodies, these women begin to challenge the dominant zeitgeist, nourish the bellies of history, and, in doing so, reclaim power to create their own narratives and constitute their own unique identities.

Though general Western cultural ideals enforced upon the female body are widely understood, regional nuance of French Western norms can be illustrated with a few symbolic examples. In 2010, UNESCO added the gastronomic meal of the French to their list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (“Gastronomic meal of the French,” 2010). This valorization demonstrates the preservationist pride that France takes in the tradition of their cuisine, a pride that can be traced back to the 19th-century text *La physiologie du goût*, effective scripture for French food culture (Brillat-Savarin, 1825). Although centuries have passed since the penning of this foundational book, and despite the undeniable event of globalization, these national preservationist tendencies persist. As noted by Alexander Stille, reporting on racism in contemporary France, “During the 2012 [presidential] elections, after Marine Le Pen [a far right candidate,] began asserting that it would be soon impossible to buy anything other than halal meat in France, Nicolas Sarkozy, [the president at the time], down in the polls, announced that ‘the subject of halal meat was the most important in the minds of French voters’ ” (Stille, 2012). The underlying issue here is France’s xenophobic stance on immigration, specifically North African immigration and immigration from their former colonies. This demonstrates the utter metonymic power of food in France, such that a confrontation with non-traditional cui-

2 See “The Justice Minister and the Banana: How Racist Is France?” for reflection on Christiane Taubira, deputy from French Guinea, first black candidate to a French presidential election in 2002, and, from 2012-2016, the Minister of Justice of France, against her perpetual confrontation with racial discrimination in France (Stille, 2013).

3 See *Un-ruly*’s 2014 article “what the baoulé taught me about beauty” in which the publication’s founder, Antonia Opiah retraces history to illustrate an example of non-Eurocentric ideals of beauty: Black beauty.

sine has the ability to signify the entirety of their struggle with xenophobia, allowing food to stand as synecdoche for the nation.

Xenophobic impulses, manifest through food culture, emerge quite abhorrently in France's narrow cultural ideals, specifically ideals of the female body. In order to outline this claim, I will note that France has made it illegal to collect data on the breakdown of ethnicity and race within the Republic, a ruling, according to Law professor David Oppenheimer, with "roots in the revolution of 1789" and "the most recent French Constitution, adopted in 1958[, which] carries forward this principle, banning all distinctions based on racial identity" (2008). Yet estimates show there are 3 to 5 million Black people living in France, making up about 5 percent of France's population (Kimmelman, 2008). France's republican value of *égalité*, or 'equality,' which is the stated defense for not collecting such data, thus makes France officially color-blind;⁴ for, by extension and by law, France totally invalidates difference and 'other-than-White' subjectivity. This notion of a supposed equality (or, an absence of difference), however, only masks the veritable exclusive nature of French societal ideals and their omnipresent supremacy. Within this context, the question of French ideals for the female body is a manifest demonstration of the relationship between France's notion of equality and its xenophobic impulses, epitomized in the figure of Marianne, national symbol of the French Republic. Marianne, the goddess of liberty, became France's national symbol shortly after the 1789 revolution. From then on, Marianne's image as a young White woman has represented the ideals of the nation, harbinger of the country's principal values. The portrayal of this woman has therefore carried much cultural significance, representing France in female form. Always young and always White, the symbol's correlation and influence on beauty norms in the country became obvious when, in the 1960s, the nation selected living French women to represent the country's national symbol: Brigitte Bardot, Mireille Mathieu, Catherine Deneuve, Laetitia Costa.⁵ Each of these women held a celebrity status as a sex symbol of her time.⁶ With the bestowed title of Marianne, these women came to symbolize both ideal woman and ideal country, unifying the two ideals and embodying the ideal French woman. And it is true that these Mariannes are demonstrative of French beauty: each is White, feminine, unfeasibly frail yet buxom—in other words, attractive by Western convention and, moreover, anatomically unachievable and/or unnatural. Yet these ideals are nonetheless elevated, despite the minority of French women who can embody them. In turn, through France's cultural and political reins,

4 See Lemn Sissay's 1999 poem "Colour Blind" for poetic depiction of this phenomenon.

5 Conversing with Julie Burchill's *Girls on Film*, bell hooks highlights Burchill's comment on race and gender construction of "woman" in media images: "What does it say about racial purity that the best blondes have all been brunettes (Harlow, Monroe, Bardot)? I think it says that we are not as white as we think." bell hooks responds to Burchill's comment: "Burchill easily could have said, 'we are not as white as we want to be,' for clearly the obsession to have white women film stars be ultra-white was a cinematic practice that sought to maintain a distance, a separation between that image and the black female Other; it was a way to perpetuate white supremacy" (hooks, 1996).

6 See Vanessa Willoughby's article "When French Beauty Means White Beauty" from *Media Diversified* for further discussion of French beauty ideals (Willoughby, 2015).

such female ideals were also firmly transplanted within their colonies and amongst the wave of immigrants that followed. This interaction clearly depicted in Beyala's *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'Africaine*, through its protagonist Aissatou, a young franco-phone immigrant from Cameroon living in Paris. Aissatou describes the hegemonic body narrative she has submitted to in the French city:

I'm not sure when I became white. I now smear my skin with...cosmetics made for whites. That isn't the end of it, though. Because to be white you've got to be thin. I've tortured my body to make it as small as possible. So now, I don't have any breasts and my thighs are flat geometries—all because the mirror of the world requires that I make my body pleasing to white men. A beautiful woman is flat as a pancake, thin as a rake or a slice of Melba toast. (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2016, p. 7)

For her, to be White means to be socially acceptable. Here, Aissatou describes torturing her body to fit into Parisian standards, specifically to be attractive to White men, symbols of the patriarchy that created these exclusive, oppressive ideals. These ideals are then recreated by society, the mirror of the world. Aissatou negotiates within society that she, in order to best fit in, must go through a process of erasure, making herself small and fragile, consumable, bland as toast.

Such erasure—or rather, what the French call *égalité*, according to the aforementioned outlawing of demographic statistics—illustrates how questions of diasporic identity formation exist in suspension within the cultural language of French systemic power, a system which renders certain groups undefinable in themselves (for they are only culturally definable as what is *not* French), and therefore marked as “other.” Although discussing France's particular breed, the tension of diasporic identity formation is not uncommon, specifically within the cultural hold of previously colonizing powers. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall grapples with similar questions of diasporic identity articulating a framework with which to ground suspended notions of self (1995). Hall debunks the Western definition of identity as a fixed entity, instead suggesting identity as fluid, dependent upon context, a shift in understanding which confronts the colonizer's “self vs. other” or “us vs. them” binaries enabled by fixed definitions of identity. Hall also rejects the West's dichotomizing of myth and reality, which enables the creativity essential to the production of the stories we tell about ourselves (1995). This creativity is key for it is what ultimately guides reclamation of authorial control over one's own narrative. When identity is no longer determined by those in power (a reality that has historically been scaffolded by binaries), it can then begin to define itself creatively for and by itself rather than in opposition to an “other.” Identity can no longer be relegated to a simple “us vs. them,” thereby defying subjugation by those in power. Moreover, it is, in fact, this fluid, creative quality of identity formation that ultimately provides the fodder for self-liberation. In his essay, Hall also abandons the concept of cultural essence, the claim that people of a place can be reduced to a specific set of characteristics, a mode often used to discuss identity in Western discourse. Focusing on the people of the Caribbean, a group dislocated by colonization both

literally and figuratively, Hall demonstrates that diasporic peoples cannot be reduced to a single essence.⁷ For Caribbean people, there is no return to origins, to roots. The Africa of their ancestors has not been stagnant in time, waiting for their return. It moved on. For people of the greater African diaspora, including the protagonists, this is the case. Hall's processes demonstrate how these texts' protagonists use their relationships with food and their bodies as tangible catalysts for the reclamation of their subjectivity, to "renegotiate" their identities and to reallocate the position of definer to the defined.⁸ The first process of Hall's guide to identity formation is retention, which can be enacted through the reproduction of ancestral traditions. These re-enactments, he argues, are what enable one to cope through the trauma of dislocation, a trauma which, as we have noted, has been inflicted upon diasporas from the former colonies (Hall, 1995). The second process is assimilation, the mirror-like relationship to another, a move arguably asymptotic in function (Hall, 1995). I want to highlight how Hall's third process, renegotiating identification, offers one's past not as a keeper of one's 'true' identity but rather as a means, as resource for its creation, thereby temporally placing identity within the present moment. bell hooks, too, views this act of "looking and looking back" as a means, as "a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it to know the present and invent the future" (hooks, 1996, p. 104). By placing identity in the present, Hall thus renders it fluid, contextual, not something to be found or told. Identity, as defined according to Hall's renegotiation process, is visible in the journeys of our three protagonists', and is thus alive, a constantly updated narrative in conversation with the world around it.

INTERROGATION OF THE HEART

Stuart Hall's earlier work "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation" asserts that cultural identities "undergo constant transformation" throughout history as they are "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power" (Hall, 1989, p. 70). Feminist author Calixthe Beyala plunges her readers into such contemporary "play" of diasporic identity formation in her novel *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'Africaine*, tracing protagonist Aissatou's journey to reclaim authorial control of her identity through her relationship with food and body. Having migrated from Cameroon, a country riddled with various colonial influences—Portuguese, German, British, and, of course, French—to Paris, the heart of the Republic, Aissatou epitomizes a subjectivity in tense suspension between the plethora of neocolonial influences that both form and, on account of her body's otherness, reject her selfhood. Cameroon gained its "independence" from France in 1960 and, about a decade later, France released its final colonial territories. However, each severance occurred only in a single kind of way. For, as mentioned earlier, this release of power did not correlate with a

7 I will continue to use the term "diasporic peoples" throughout for such reasons as laid out by Maria Helena Lima: "The concept of an African diaspora is powerful in that it allows us to speak of continuities and connections within the African world experience, without compromising the uniqueness and historical specificity of each cultures under its rubric" (2018).

8 See Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*: "Definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (1987).

shift in cultural attitude—the cultural norms of the former colonizer lingering. With xenophobia still deeply woven within the fabric of France’s culture, Aissatou, if not only on account of her Blackness, an unshedable marker of her relative otherness, is cast into an in-between space, her self fractured by the societal rejection of her body. This fracturing materializes early on in the novel, when, hurrying onto an underground metro, Aissatou’s inner world escapes her bustling environment, transporting her from her body’s surroundings to a more open space: “*Je suis quelque part dans la cambrousse africaine... Je ne m’engouffre pas dans le métro où des gens se bousculent, mais dans une jungle noire*” yet when “*J’émerge rue des Couronnes et je suis bien obligée de revenir à la réalité*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 49).¹⁰ To the beginning of this passage, translator David Cohen has added a sentence: “This girl, me, is in Paris and not in Paris. I bi-locate down Equator way” (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2016, p. 33).¹¹ Aissatou’s fracturing of self from body is apparent here in her initial identification of herself as “this girl,” grammatically indicating an exogenous relation to self through her use of the pronoun “this” suggesting something observably close yet outside. The use of the subject “girl” reads as if by observation made by another outside of herself, as if the identity does not belong to her. The immediate parenthetical “me” bolsters this claim, as if suddenly remembering to acknowledge that this observable girl is Aissatou herself, an identity over which she has ownership. Despite Aissatou’s literal presence in France, her demarcation and subsequent fracture render her figuratively absent, unembodied, and her existence, on account of her physical deviation from norm, relegated into a transient in-between.

Being Black, female, and an immigrant, Aissatou embodies multiple identities that exist beyond the bounds of French cultural norms. Her multiplicity renders the conditions necessary for Aissatou to find place—to root herself within the French society that seeks to erase her difference—nearly impossible. Early on in the novel, introducing the readers to her story through confessional pondering on her place in France, she declares: “*La lumière du jour comme celle du soir créent des ombres sur le bon sens que mes parents ont eu tant de peine à m’inculquer*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 19).¹² I argue that the light of which she speaks here metaphorically stands in for France’s patriarchal culture, echoing the mantra of lead colonial power England’s infamous phrase: ‘the sun never sets on the British empire.’ Be it that light is what enables visual form, the more time spent under this patriarchal light, the more time spent immersed in this worldview, the greater are the shadows cast over her memory and, by extension, the greater the

9 If not otherwise noted, English translations will be my own. Here, read: “I am somewhere in the African countryside [...] I am not swallowed by the metro amongst the tumbling passengers, but within an ebony jungle.”

10 “My body gets out at the Rue de Coronnes where my soul has to adjust to reality” (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2014, p. 33)

11 Though I do not hold Cohen’s translation in high esteem, several of his lines communicate the social and cultural dynamics I wish to explore. Furthermore, his interpretations of Beyala’s work advance an argument similar to my own. Thus, I will make reference of them when relevant.

12 “The light of day, like evenings, casts shadows on the knowledge my parents worked hard to pass down to me.”

erasure of herself. Aissatou comments further on her erasure under this light: “*Je ne sais plus comment aider une chèvre à mettre bas ou dans quelle direction enterrer les morts afin qu’ils ressuscitent des ténèbres*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 49).¹³ Immersed within this worldview, no longer can Aissatou recall the rituals of life passed down to her by her family. This loss is echoed by her forgetting of how and in which way to bury the deceased, both figuratively and literally signifying a loss in relation to grounded connection with roots. With this dynamic in mind, I argue that, in the space of France, Aissatou cannot engage in Hall’s first process of identity formation, retention, by which he suggests one survives by engaging with tradition, for, under the light of the patriarchal culture, she lacks the space to engage in such practices. Rather, I claim that her first mode of self-survival is actually in conversation with Hall’s second process of identity formation, assimilation. Aissatou does not assimilate unknowingly. Rather, she is “*si perturbée dans [s]es repères que [s]es yeux se méprennent sur la vision du monde*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 49).¹⁴ Aissatou understands that her existence is not in a state of calm, that her worldview is “*perturbée.*” Beyala’s choice of the word *repères*, translating to *landmarks*, is suggestive of how Aissatou is aware that her navigation of the world is awry, for landmarks denote physical and familiar, protected, grounded structures, which, in France, Aissatou is both unfamiliar with and denied access to. An initial claim of Aissatou’s emphasizes this dynamic, asserting, “*J’ignore quand je suis devenue blanche : ce que je sais, c’est que mes connaissances d’antan m’ont désertée*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 19).¹⁵ Here, Aissatou acknowledges the desertion of her “*connaissances*”—understanding, appreciation, knowledge, and awareness of “*antan*” (former times/ancestry/roots)—noting how, in their desertion, comes the taking on of a new qualifier, “*blanche*,” a symbol of hegemonic cultural norms.

Assimilation, the secondary process of Stuart Hall’s concept of identity formation, becomes apparent as Aissatou struggles to survive within the French city. Her state of “*devenue blanche*” only perpetuates the instability of her identity: “*Même mes pensées sont devenues imprévisibles*” (Beyala 2014, p. 19).¹⁶ Her thinking is not grounded, determined by cultural ideals, as Cohen’s translation unveils that Aissatou’s thoughts “*bend or balloon to fit the latest clichés which decree what’s beautiful even though [she doesn’t] really agree with them*” (Beyala, trans. Cohen 2016, 12). Unable to retain tradition, Hall’s primary process of identification, Aissatou’s identity is left to the whims of decreed clichés. Since “*decree*” is defined as command by legal authority, the usage suggests French culture’s responsibility in creating these clichés. Aissatou’s disagreement with yet adherence to these clichés demonstrates her state of desperation in France; under the light of its xenophobic norms, she clings to whatever she can in an attempt to fit in, to make place, despite her liking. As referenced, the first sections of Beyala’s novel welcome readers with a placeless narration, perhaps a choice made

13 “I no longer know how to assist a goat giving birth, nor in which direction to bury the dead so that they can be resurrected from the darkness.”

14 “So disturbed in her landmarks that her eyes misunderstand their vision of the world.”

15 “I’ve ignored when I became white: what I know is that my familiarity with my past had deserted me.”

16 “Even my thoughts have become unpredictable.”

to echo the theme of dislocation between Aissatou's world of mind and body. When readers first encounter Aissatou in Paris, they observe her amidst preparation of her body for its presentation in public: "*Je ficelle mes jambes dans un pantalon noir. Ma poitrine étouffe dans un corsage rouge: je vais affronter les autres*" (Beyala 2014, p. 27).¹⁷ Here, Aissatou has selected for herself an essentially Parisian outfit, simply styled in basic colors (Berest, 2014). The aggressive language with which the act of putting on her clothing is described suggests the nature of her actions: rather than serve as form of expression, Aissatou's dress serves as a coat of armor. The word '*ficeler*' translates to tie-up, or to bind, suggesting the way she must contort her body in order to make such a presentation. Her breasts are stuffed into her top, too, suggesting a sort of binding, a hiding of her body, her flesh, the source of her othering in the outside world. Cohen adds to his translation, when describing the placement of her red top: "I just manage to fit" (Beyala, trans. Cohen 2016, p. 17). The literal stuffing of herself into these articles of clothing figuratively indicates how she forces herself to fit into a French image, how she both literally and figuratively suppresses herself in order to do so. The power of these garments is echoed when Aissatou, having hit rock bottom, exits her apartment and enters into the public realm:

J'enfile un jeans et quitte l'appartement. Je marche comme une survivante, les yeux éteints, les mains serrées au fond de mon blouson noir. Mes cheveux défrisés, que je n'ai pas eu le temps de plaquer, se dressent sur mon crâne en épis. Les stigmates de mon passé sont à mes pieds. (Beyala, 2014, p. 48)¹⁸

Once again, she chooses an essentially Parisian outfit as armor, a black jacket and a pair of jeans. The verb '*enfiler*,' translating in English to "to slip," suggests the mechanical action she takes to cover her body in this garb. In the outfit, she marches as a *survivante* through the heart of the Republic. Aissatou is a survivor of the environment that perpetually seeks to jettison her. At this point in the novel, the "stigmas of [Aissatou's] past are at [her] feet," signifying what is unchangeable for Aissatou: the stigma associated with her Blackness, her otherness. In this line, the stigmas she struggles with are associated with her feet, the part of her body that is physically closest to French ground. They are thereby associated with her roots and with the French terrain on which she traverses. Although demonstrating rejection, the stigmas' location also signifies something without constraint: her forward motion. What French culture has used as resource to create these stigmas are inherent parts of her narrative—things she cannot shake. They are what connect her to her mother, her story, her effaced past. This idea of unbridled movement is buttressed by the freedom of her literal roots, her hair, which is notably "*défrisés*," unharnessed by Western convention. Thus, this line, exhibiting the movement of her body forward, suggests a shift in her thinking to fu-

17 "I bind my legs within a pair of black jeans. My breasts are stuffed in a red top: I will confront the others."

18 "I slip on some jeans and leave the apartment. I march like a survivor, eyes blinded, hands in front of my black jacket. My hair relaxed, that I haven't had the time to flatten, falls on my head in pieces. Stigmas of my past are at my feet."

ture movement: no longer will she let the stigmas at her feet shackle her motion; she will move onward.

Yet before Aissatou claims this shift in narrative, before she engages with Hall's third process of renegotiation, Aissatou must refine her choices of cultural consumption through the act of refusal as a means of authorial control. For, not only does Aissatou attempt to assimilate through what she puts on her body but also what she chooses to put into it. Early in the novel, alone in her room, "*C'est l'heure du souper. J'ouvre un sachet de véritable soupe chinoise aux nouilles et aux légumes*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 38).¹⁹ Aissatou's meal is something small, prepackaged, and instant, suggesting that it lacks nutritional value, feeding Aissatou's body very little. Furthermore, this soup is "*véritable soupe chinoise*," but can the true cuisine of a nation be so artificially packaged by another culture? Instead, this meal is a comment again on the metonymic interplay between power and cuisine in France: the supposedly authentic version of this other-than-French food is artificial, lacking substance. And this is how Aissatou chooses to nourish herself. To contain her soup, she "*choisis un bol bleu, serti de fleurs de lotus, parce qu'il fait << femme d'intérieur >>. Je mélange... mon repas est prêt*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 38).²⁰ Often, "*femme d'intérieur*" translates to "housewife," though it might be better interpreted literally: "inner woman." Read this way, Aissatou's choice of this bowl suggests the superficiality of her consumption. The external carrier of her bowl reads "inner woman," yet the inside is artificial and lacks substance. The lack of intention she places in her nourishment, taking only some hot water, a few stirs, indicates the true disconnect and superficiality that Aissatou actually nourishes her "inner woman." To consume her meal, "*Je suis assise, apathique, devant le film du soir. Mais yeux sont posés sur l'écran, sans envie. Je n'arrive pas, malgré la beauté du film à inventer de nouvelles terres où m'évader : la solitude ôte l'appétit*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 38-9).²¹ Not only does Aissatou consume nutritionless food, but this mealtime also features her consumption of French culture through the screen. As she sips her soup, her eyes consume the images on the screen, which, although beautiful, will not allow her to escape herself, her body. Though assimilation is asymptotic, Aissatou's desire to escape, to hide herself in a space does show is her underlying desire for place of belonging, one she has yet to find in the city. This desire is hinted at through the final line, "*la solitude ôte l'appétit*," indicating that if no longer in this state of solitude, if accompanied by some relationship, her hunger will grow.

Aissatou's patterns of consumption begin to shift after a provocative experience at a restaurant where White French male customers harass her. They verbally affront Aissatou, denigrating her, invading her space despite her expressed disinterest in them. Tired of their antics, she leaves the restaurant:

19 "It's dinner time. I open a bag of authentic Chinese soup with noodles and vegetables."

20 "Choose a blue bowl, decorated with lotus flowers, because it says, '*femme d'intérieur*.' I mix [...] my meal is ready."

21 "I sit, apathetic, in front of my evening movie. But my eyes are on the screen, without envy. I cannot, despite the beauty of the film to invent new lands, escape myself: solitude strips the appetite."

I pay the bill in the midst of all this couldn't care less. I don't exist any more [sic] not even for the man with crummy teeth. I might as well have melted into the wall. I go outside and muddle into the street. It's bright, noisy, all consuming and it consumes me. (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2014, p. 13)

Here, the protagonist confronts the effacing behavior that French society acts upon her, acknowledging that, within the power system of this space, she does not exist, not even for the man with the crummy teeth. His crummy teeth betray his weak roots, as he is not of the upper echelon of this power system whose teeth would be cared for or fixed, thereby suggesting that Aissatou is nonexistent not only to the powerful, but to all who subscribe to this system of power. Although some may argue that this scene can be read in the particular, that it signifies nothing more than one encounter with one group of deprecating men, Aissatou's next action appears to say otherwise; for even when she exits the interaction at the restaurant—the place of consumption where, instead of food, the men attempt to verbally consume her—and enters into the outside space of the public, she remains under the “bright” light of the “all consuming” French patriarchy, which, as she claims, too, “consumes [her].” However frightening, this stark realization is met with yet another when she ultimately concludes: “*Il ne m'appartient pas de décomplexer l'homme blanc*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 21).²² To this line, Cohen's English translation adds the nonrestrictive clause, “his phallic insecurity” (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2016, p. 13). Where the text reads “*décomplexer l'homme blanc*” (“to fix the white man's complexes”), I extend the subject of “*l'homme blanc*” to Parisian and Western society at large, for the present societal structure of France, Europe, and the Western world has been historically patriarchal in form. When Aissatou claims that her destiny is other than White man's, she includes all of White society. By extension, it is through understanding her destiny as something “other than” that Aissatou begins to dismantle the prescriptive power of the oppressive White culture that both limits and invalidates the multiplicity of her selfhood: she is both Parisian and Black. It is, too, important to note the language with which the translator has chosen to make this claim: the language of “complexes” and “phallic insecurity” (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2014, p. 13). Rendering White power as mere complexes and insecurities is Aissatou's acknowledgment to expose the supposedly superior power of White society as nothing other than humanly fallible. I especially find this reading apparent in the translator's phrasing “phallic insecurity” here, in discussion of the relationship between the self and body in society. By associating White societal power with body insecurity, particularly that of a sensitive area, the text indicates how the Parisian power structure, too, has feelings of insecurity toward their own body (both political and corporal), revealing the societal superiority of France's cultural ideals as but a controlling front, a mask used to hide their own fallibility, insecurity—their humanity.

Offering an alternative to such posturing, Beyala sprinkles *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'Africaine* with Aissatou's recollections of her mother's cooking, how her mother

22 “It is not my responsibility to tease out the White man's complexes.”

would cultivate dishes to find resolve for quotidian trials. When burdened by romantic feelings, Aissatou recalls her mother's instruction: "*Mange du veau, ma fille, aurait dit maman. Sa chair tendre permet de retourner à l'enfance insouciance*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 46).²³ Aissatou's awareness of her mother's instruction haunts her at the beginning of the novel, though its message falls upon deaf ears, as Aissatou, self-fractured by society, cannot yet seem to access the resources of "expressive culture" needed to pursue her mother's culinary guidance (Hall, 1995, p. 7). As Aissatou finishes her "authentic" Chinese soup, she claims, "*Finalelement, j'aurais dû faire comme maman : cuisiner un attieké aux crevettes*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 39).²⁴ Her concession demonstrates both the rift and connection between herself and her mother, "the subterranean link" to her roots (Hall, 1995, p. 7). Beyala bookends each chapter in the novel with Aissatou's mother's recipe for a dish she has recalled, offering a roadmap that Aissatou can and does eventually follow to navigate the trials she faces. Through reproducing her mother's recipes, she utilizes the resources of her past to, in Hall's formulation, both retain and renegotiate her life à l'Africaine.²⁵ These recipes offer memories from which Aissatou can draw resource and nourishment, physical and otherwise. Feminist writer and thinker Virginia Woolf writes in her foundational essay *A Room of One's Own*, "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf, 1929/2005, p. 4). Here, Woolf's use of "money" is a stand-in for social currency, and "room" is a space where one can "write fiction" or develop one's own narrative. Now, in a literal reading of this line as applied to Aissatou's situation, one could argue that Aissatou in fact has a room of her own, for she lives in her own small apartment in Paris. However, Woolf's "room" does not need necessarily refer to a physical space as much as a psychic one. Furthermore, even if possessing a literal room, Aissatou lacks the "money" or social currency that Woolf deems a necessity. Cultural norms still deny her subjectivity, finding ways to leech into her literal space; their power "all consuming [,] and [they] consum[e] [her]" (Beyala, trans. Cohen 2016, p.). Poet Fred D'Aguiar writes of a similar phenomenon in his poem "Home," describing his Black British speaker's observations: "At my front door, why doesn't the lock/ recognize me and budge, As I fight it" (D'Aguiar, 1995, p. 103). As with D'Aguiar's speaker, it is not until Aissatou finds a space wherein she can recreate her mother's recipes and, in Hall's words, engage with "an umbilical connection with the African homeland and culture," that she begins to substantially reconnect with herself (1995, p. 7).

23 "Eat some veal, my girl, mother would have said. Its tender flesh will transport you to your childhood, carefree."

24 "In the end, I should have done as my mother would have done: cooked an attieké with shrimp."

25 See *Ms. Afropolitan's* article "Tradition matters for female farmers, and female farmers matter for everything" for discussion on the foundational role of women not only working with the production of meals but, too, in agriculture (Salami, 2016). In the article, she also critiques the roles of foreign influences on Nigeria's agricultural system. I also suggest referencing *Ms. Afropolitan's* article "When Africans connect food, nature and our deepest selves" for reflection on the symbolic nourishment of food preserved within various African culture (Salami, 2017).

Under the oppressive light of French culture, Aissatou's "room" takes the form of a romantic relationship with her neighbor, Mr. Bolobolo. Like Aissatou, Mr. Bolobolo is Black in Paris, the son of Malian immigrants. The shared elements of their identities offer multitudes to Aissatou, for in him she can finally see reflected societally rejected parts of herself. Encountering Mr. Bolobolo for the first time in the stairwell of her apartment, "*Je m'immobilise soudain dans des gestes désordonnés parce que vient, en sens contraire, un Nègre. Je prends le temps de l'examiner. Il a la taille d'un homme dont aucun soleil ne peut mesurer l'ombre*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 27).²⁶ The immobilization Aissatou experiences upon this encounter coupled with the stand-alone nature of the noun "*un Nègre*" indicates how his presence disrupts Aissatou's routine. His non-Whiteness enables her to "*prends le temps de l'examiner*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 27). bell hooks contextualizes the significance of this comment in her essay "The Oppositional Gaze," stating simply, "there is power in looking" (hooks, 1996, p. 95). She goes on to assert that "spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see" (hooks, 1996, p. 95). For Aissatou, Bolobolo offers this space wherein she can claim the agency to look: both to look in a state of togetherness and to look to interrogate the Other (that is, French culture). Aissatou's gaze allows her to look mutually, breaking her out of the in-between state that she has for so long occupied in the French city and into the present moment, into connection with another. This presence enabled by her connection with Bolobolo opens up a space within which she can interrogate the French culture that has heretofore fractured her identity, as depicted in Aissatou's claim that "*Il a la taille d'un homme dont aucun soleil ne peut mesurer l'ombre.*" Reading the sun as a symbol of French patriarchal power, the space shared by these two is impenetrable by such oppressive light. Aissatou looks further, admiring "*des touffes de cheveux crépus s'amoncellent sur son crâne comme un paysage aimé, mais depuis longtemps disparu*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 27).²⁷ Aissatou's visual consumption of Bolobolo's hair prompts her to use the analogy of a faraway land, long disappeared. Arguably, the observation of his natural hair demonstrates a sudden connection with her own roots, as she is the one who creates this analogy, therefore implying a remembrance of her own faraway land, thus providing Aissatou access to her disengaged memory. Her interrogation of the Other through this act of looking is crafted through the connective pool of resources that their interaction provides, similar to Hall's retention and renegotiation. This engagement with their past and within their present context allows Aissatou to do the work of reclaiming her subjectivity in France. Not only does Bolobolo allow her access to her memory, but he also allows her connection to her body. Rather than see something divergent from norm, her desire for him enables her to see beauty in his Blackness. She comments on his skin: "*Minuit doit pâlir de jalousie à la vue de sa peau noire et douce. Je vois qu'elle est douce rien qu'à la regarder*" (Beyala, 2014, p. 27).²⁸

26 "I suddenly stop, awkwardly, for in the opposite direction, comes a Negro. I take the time to examine him. He is the size of a man whose shadow cannot be measured by the sun."

27 "Tufts of frizzy hair piled on his skull like a beloved landscape, long gone."

28 "Midnight must turn pale with envy at the sight of his soft black skin. I can see that he is sweet just by watching him."

Connecting with her desire for him, too, allows Aissatou to connect with her own body. As they look together,

lorsque nos yeux se croisent, cela me prend d'abord par les membres. Mon corps est saisi d'une liesse indicible tandis que mon cerveau se dilue en torpeur. Tout devient vert, bleu, jaune, et j'ai l'impression que toutes les voies sont désormais libres... Nous deux, toi et moi, et le temps devant nous. (Beyala, 2014, p. 27-8)²⁹

The desire, the physical feeling that she has for him rushes through her veins, seizing her. Unlike the “*immeuble gris*” of the city that she sees through the window on her return to her room, with Bolobolo, everything becomes colorful, and “*toutes les voies sont désormais libres*”—she is offered a space, a freedom, a path. “*Nous deux*,” she finds a space to exist within, a space to see color, to connect—a feeling not yet expressed within the Parisian heartland. After leaving Mr. Bolobolo and returning to her room, she is reminded of her mother: “*Elle aurait poussé des trémolos et des couinements: ‘Un homme qui vous faire ressentir de telles émotions, avait-elle coutume de dire, mérite le paradis!’ . . . ‘Y a-t-il assez de sel et de poivre?’*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 30-1).³⁰ The presence of Bolobolo, this looking relationship, thus enables the space within which Aissatou can begin to retreat from the solitude of her plighted in-between and into togetherness through connection with another, with her body, and, too, with the memory of her roots and of her mother, which the latter is significant for it provides her with a creative outlet that she can use to both maintain and create herself within the room of this newfound relationship: cooking.

What, exactly, is the nature of this space, this ‘room’? Some may argue that Aissatou’s reconnection with self, since discovered in relationship with a man, demonstrates an anti-feminist submission. Others might argue that her creation of a self-narrative through this relationship is not actually for her, but for a man, and thereby another manifestation of her submission to French patriarchal norms. Yet I refute these arguments for Bolobolo is neither White, nor does he identify as a Frenchman. Although born and raised in France, he does not occupy the same position in society as those with social currency, for he is not White. Additionally, description of the pair’s interactions largely pertains to Aissatou’s experience of the relationship, her feelings, her body, and her desires—not Bolobolo’s. Finally, it is worth noting that the memory of Aissatou’s mother, which Aissatou holds in an advisory regard, and Beyala’s conclusion to the chapter, does not encourage Aissatou to submit herself to Bolobolo. Rather, her mother’s memory encourages Aissatou to celebrate her emotions, to be with him in paradise, a heavenly place that *she* helps to create with him rather than one found in him. The initial shift in her relationship to French cultural power is catalyzed through

29 “When our eyes meet, it first hits me in my limbs. My body is seized by an indescribable attraction while my brain dilutes into torpor. Everything becomes green, blue, yellow, and I feel that all paths are now free [...] Us two, you and me, and the time before us.”

30 “She would have uttered tremors and squeaks: ‘A man who makes you feel that way, she used to say, deserves paradise!’ [...] ‘Is there enough salt and pepper?’

her relationship with a man, a relationship initially motivated by her drive to win him over. However, this impetus does not invalidate her agency. Aissatou even claims toward the end of the novel, after their marriage and his repeated infidelities, that “*on ne demande pas à un mari d’être un héros*” (Beyala, 2016, p. 135).³¹ To pursue Bolobolo is, after all, her own choice, an act divergent from past modes. For so long, Aissatou sacrificed herself for assimilation, stuck in an oppressive cycle. Aissatou’s choice to be in relationship with Bolobolo is an act of self-ownership and a move toward the decolonization of her mind and body.

After encountering Bolobolo for the first time, the memory of her mother prompted by this interaction encourages Aissatou to recreate her mother’s remedying recipes, an action through which she can begin to recreate her past in her present. As their relationship unfolds, she attempts to woo him through cooking traditional meals, which the two devour together, consuming their roots and reworking them into their lives in Paris. Although the intention of these meals is initially flirtatious, Aissatou soon creates these meals to satisfy herself.³² The creation of these meals offers Aissatou a means to expression, a voice that she has been otherwise unable to communicate. Later in the novel, as Bolobolo and Aissatou share an intimate moment where he rehashes heavy memories of his upbringing, becoming weighted down by his emotions, Aissatou observes, “*Monsieur Bolobolo se tait maintenant,*” silenced by the memory of his past (Beyala, 2014, p. 146).³³ Detecting the silence of her partner, hoping to relieve him from this weighted state, she asserts her voice, for “*qu’il faut qu[’elle] lui raconte une histoire stupéfiante et exquise pour l’extraire de sa douleur,*” so she asks him: “*As-tu déjà mangé du ngombo au four nappé de coulis de tomates?*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 146).³⁴ Aissatou suggests that the creation of narrative through food is what can ameliorate the present from the weight of the past, a learned behavior that she builds in the space of their relationship. Food is her choice of expression and communication. But Bolobolo initially snubs her in response: “*T’arrive-t-il de penser à autre chose qu’à la bouffe?*”³⁵ to which Aissatou “*fixe le mur,*”³⁶ then asserting, “*La nourriture est synonyme de la vie Aujourd’hui, elle constitue une unité plus homogène que la justice. Elle est peut-être l’unique source de paix et de réconciliation entre les hommes*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 146).³⁷ Here, Aissatou acknowledges the metonymic value of food, its ability to express more than itself, as explored above. Through its creation and consumption, we create and

31 “One can’t ask a husband to be a hero.”

32 *Edible Manhattan’s* featured article “The Woman Behind Belmere Catering’s Haitian Cuisine Cooks to Heal” paints a beautiful picture of chef Rose Michel and how she tends to past wounds through the creation of food à *la Haïtienne* (Pattillo, 2018).

33 “Mr. Bolobolo is silent now.”

34 “She knows that she has to tell him an amazing and exquisite story to extract from his pain” [...] “Have you ever eaten baked ngombo topped with tomato coulis?”

35 “Do you think of anything other than food?”

36 “Fixes her eyes on the wall.”

37 “Today, food is synonymous with life. It contains more unity than justice. It is perhaps the only source of peace and reconciliation between men.”

consume messages, which is finally validated by Bolobolo: “*T’as sans doute raison*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 146).³⁸

Aissatou’s relationship with Bolobolo has, from their first encounter, served as catalyst for reconnection with her own body. Through her desire for him, she begins to feel. By cooking the recipes of her mother, consuming them with him, allowing her body to love and be loved, she slowly rejects the fear of her body imposed upon her by French patriarchal culture. This rejection is best seen when Aissatou visits a sauna that she had frequented. There, she is confronted with bodies of women hoping to shed into a more ‘ideal’ form. Aissatou is, too, looking to shed something by returning to the sauna, though she no longer is looking to shed herself, but rather the same ‘ideals’ that first led her to the sauna, to shed these “extrinsic force[s]...like the serpent sheds its skin” (Hall, 1989, p. 78). The description of the sauna’s treatment of their bodies demonstrates the literal and figurative erasure that women enact in order to attempt an ideal: “*Des main épaisses ou délicates frottent avec vigueur chaque parcelle du corps...on rabote les tailles si bien qu’à la fin on ressemble à un morceau de rôti saignant*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87).³⁹ When the other women see Aissatou in this space, they question: “*Qu’est-ce qui t’arrive, Aissatou? Voilà des semaines qu’on ne t’a pas vue!*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87).⁴⁰ Her absence indicates that, during her time spent from the sauna cooking and eating and loving with Bolobolo, she no longer needed this space of female erasure. Aissatou comments further that “*Elles m’entourent et accrochent les excroissances sur mon corps. Elles pensent: << Elle doit se laisser aller parce qu’elle a des problèmes.>>*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87).⁴¹ Here, she encounters the gaze of the women, seeking to other her with their own gaze, to make her less than, in correspondence with the French ideals that they hold. When the women see that Aissatou has gained weight, “*Il y a une jouissance sur leurs visages que dément la tendresse de leurs voix*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87).⁴² These women’s attitudes reflect the oppression their bodies experience. When the definition of beauty is so slim, only few can fit into it, creating competitive impulses among women. Aissatou shirks this slim definition when, out of a newly-developed body confidence she boldly acknowledges, “*C’est vrai que mon corps a perdu de sa maigreur comme certains arbres leurs feuilles. Il a verdi avec la puissance d’un baobab à la saison des pluies : mes joues se sont arrondies et mes seins, tels de bougainvilliers, ont fleuri plus qu’un printemps*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87).⁴³ Rather than fear her departure from conventional beauty, Aissatou takes solace in her connection with nature, suggesting a more grounded relationship to her body in its natural

38 “You’re definitely right.”

39 “Thick or delicate hands rub vigorously every part of the body [...] we map our sizes so that at the end we look like a piece of rare roast.”

40 “What happened to you, Aissatou? We haven’t seen you for weeks!”

41 “They surround me, judging my body. They think, ‘She’s let herself go—she must be having problems.’”

42 “They look contented, unveiling the kindness in their voice.”

43 “It’s true that my body has lost its old figure, as some trees lose their leaves. Yet it has become green with the power of a baobab in the rainy season: my cheeks are rounded and my breasts, like bougainvillea, have bloomed for more than one spring.”

form, and to its roots, as denoted by the imagery of the baobab, an African Tree. The baobab is unique in its ability to provide abundance despite environmental scarcity—offering various parts of itself as remedy to illness, its fruits as a source of dense nourishment, its body as a shelter, water, and more. Its ability to provide, nourish, and heal lends the baobab one of its many names: “the tree of life.”⁴⁴ Aissatou mirrors this tree’s life-giving modalities through her ability to reclaim authorial control of her life’s narrative, fixing herself at the center of her own story. She mirrors the tree through her ability to provide for herself, to be her own remedy, within the culturally arid terrain of France.⁴⁵ Embodying the power of the baobab, unlike the clichés that she has once subscribed to, her beauty no longer fades in one season. Confident, no longer desiring to blend in, she prepares to leave the sauna: “*J’enfile mon caleçon rose, mon tee-shirt vert pomme et je me chapeaute avec un magnifique plumeau noir. Je suis différente des branchées parisiennes qui cachent leur manque de goût dans d’éternels vêtements noirs... l’homme déteste la différence, c’est connu*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87).⁴⁶ Through her colorful outfit, Aissatou pushes back against the erasure of assimilation, claiming her subjectivity through attractive colors, inviting eyes to see her difference. She is who controls her public persona, not the ‘tasteless’ Parisians. With this new approach, authorial pen in hand, she re-contextualizes her relationship with her difference on her own terms. bell hooks expands on this notion of self-invention, writing that in creating self, “[Black women] do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are

44 To get a brief overview of the ecological information surrounding the baobab can be found in the “*Adansonia Digitata*” entry on *PlantzAfrica* (Hankey 2004). Information on the baobab’s cultural importance is explored in Hillary Cox’s “The Tree of Life” in *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (2008). Kat Smith takes a good look at the nutritional value of the baobab in her piece “Ingredient Spotlight: Baobab, the African Superfood That Has Twice as Much Calcium as Dairy” from *One Green Planet* (2017).

45 Furthermore, this tree predates humanity and the rupture of Pangaea. Its temporal and physical origins are significant, for they suggest that the tree’s figurative roots date back to a time before the artificial divisions and power that humans in power affix to origins (i.e. being African is somehow less than being European). Another relevant point is that the tree provides resources specific to women’s health and fertility, suggesting the particular breed of empowerment that Aissatou, as a woman, taps in her connection with this tree. Her connection with the baobab is more intricate when discussing its many names. The baobab is sometimes called “the upside down tree” due to the root-like appearance of its branches. This root-like expression of its branches can be found metaphorically in Aissatou’s new found comfort in the expression of her natural self, as demonstrated at the sauna. Finally, another name of note is the tree’s Latin name, *Adanson digitata*, with *digitata* meaning “fingers,” an expression of its finger-like, branches. This word emphasizes the power that Aissatou has reclaimed to manipulate, to control her life. The legacy of the first word, *Adanson*, evokes the history of colonial, and more generally Western, power riddled in the field of science, as it is the name of a French surgeon. This history is echoed in the names and graffiti engraved in many baobab trees in Africa by European settlers, literally colonizing through the mechanical act of naming the trees and scientifically defining the trees. Aissatou’s powerful embodiment and identification with this tree refutes European attempts to own it, seeing how she utilizes the symbol of the tree for means of self-empowerment in the face of Colonial subjugation (Wickens, 2008).

46 “I put on my pink underpants, my green apple T-shirt and I’m wearing a beautiful black feather duster, I’m different from the chic Parisians who hide their lack of taste in eternal black clothes [...] men hate difference, that’s a fact.”

not solely reactions” (hooks, 1996, p. 103). Furthermore, this looking, this crafting of self truly exists for themselves. It is not for men, not for the patriarchy, whom she believes would “*déteste la différence*,” a belief evidenced throughout the novel. Upon leaving the sauna, “*Je prends le chemin du retour, sous le bleu sombre du ciel [...] Place de la Bastille, j’allume des désirs carnavalesques*” (Beyala, 2014, p. 87-8).⁴⁷ Traversing the French terrain, boldly embodied in her healthy frame and bright colors, her presence alone proving bold enough to challenge the cultural norms that have once held her. The gray of the Parisian sky, too, appears to have changed form, donning instead a bright blue. The passage ends with Aissatou occupying the *Place de La Bastille*, a memorial located in the heart of the city. It is of note that the *Place* is the former site of the *Bastille* prison, helm of pre-revolutionary power for the *Ancien Régime*. During the French Revolution, amidst confrontation, the prison was physically obliterated by protestors. Since the revolution, the *Place de La Bastille* has represented a symbol of liberty and justice, of reformation and voice, often serving as a site of protests and political organization. Given the symbolic power of this space, it seems that the presence of Aissatou’s body here indicates the revolutionary destruction of her own prison: her emergence from the physical jail of bodily expectations, the prison of being othered by cultural norms in France.

INWARD EMBODIMENT

Victoire, the namesake of Maryse Condé’s *récit*,⁴⁸ *Victoire: les saveurs et les mots* and the author’s maternal grandmother, too, subverts the denial of self by colonizing norms through pursuing her own means of embodiment within her temporal and physical context. Writing in the 21st century, Condé pushes against the systemic denial of her grandmother’s subjectivity by weaving an intergenerational narrative of the lives of her mother and grandmother, a craft unavailable to her grandmother, who never learned to read or write, and therefore could not preserve her story. Without access to the French language, since Guadeloupe remains under the hand of the French Republic, Victoire lacks a tool essential to gaining access within the island’s French systems of power. Yet, Condé engages in the creative reimagining detailed by Hall’s third process of identity formation: renegotiation of one’s past within the contextual framework of one’s present (1995). Condé notes of her writing process: “It was a way of coming to terms, through my mother and grandmother, with Maryse Condé” (Doll, 2010). Hall’s debunking of the Western myth/reality dichotomy, too, flushes salient in Condé’s work, for Condé reimagines the narrative of her grandmother into words, creating space for Victoire’s memory within the Francophonie. That said, Condé emends the notion that, without access to the French language, Victoire lacked subjectivity. In fact, Victoire had concocted a rich world of her own, not through written words, but through the creative act of cooking and the intimacy of sex.

47 “I make my way back, under the dark blue sky [...] Place de la Bastille, I illuminate carnivalesque desires.”

48 Due to its grounding in nonfictional events, Condé notes in an interview, “I wanted to call it a tale, a *récit*. The publishers are the ones who changed it. Most of the story is based on actual fact, it is not solely the work of imagination. It is not a novel” (Doll, 2010).

Throughout her life, Victoire is widely rejected on account of her pale Black body's confrontation with various cultural ideals, being too White for her family, too Black for the colonizers, and too socially subordinate for her daughter. Victoire experiences such social spurning from birth. Born with "skin tinted pink," and with her birth precipitating her mother's death, it seems that within her family unit and local community, Victoire's life-taking, pale body reified colonization of Black spaces (Condé, 2010, p. 6).⁴⁹ The only White men in the colony at that time were those with power—priests, plantation owners, or soldiers. Even within her family's community, she was an outcast, relegated to a similar in-between space as Beyalá's Aissatou, and for similar reasons: her body confronted dominant cultural norms. Within her community, "Victoire was scary, with her skin too white and her eyes too light...Others were convinced she was no less than Ti-Sapoti: that so-called orphan who haunts the roadside at night" (Condé, 2010, p. 11). Despite being a child, narratives projected onto Victoire efface her on account of her difference; no one wants to identify with her, choosing to only acknowledge her presence through the lens of a curse, separating themselves from her. When a young girl, she was sent to work for her godparents, filling a role as assistant to their servant, a position usually held by a *restavek*.⁵⁰ Victoire received no welcome: "In fact, Victoire was treated like a pariah, like a slave at the Jovials. Never like a relative, not even a poor or disreputable one" (Condé, 2010, p. 19). Later on, as a mother within the community of White Creole parents and children, "she would stick out like a sore thumb from the other parents, educated and well-dressed white Creoles and mulattoes. How they would all look her up and down!" (Condé, 2010, p. 101). This White looking can be analyzed through the lens of bell hooks' claim that, "in resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating 'awareness' politicizes 'looking' relations" (hooks, 1996, p. 95). The White Creoles here assert dominance over Victoire through their looking, effectively putting her in her place. Subsequently, Victoire "knew only too well that Jeanne [raised in the White Creole community] was ashamed of her" for "she reminded [her] of an embarrassing past" (Condé, 2010, p. 182). Only with her grandmother Caldonia did she find some space of acceptance, for Caldonia had been the only figure who had attended to her. After Caldonia's death, Victoire "hardened her heart. She had loved her grandmother so much that, deprived of her warmth, she drew into herself" (Condé, 2010). She had nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to with her grandmother gone.

Although Victoire learned to turn inward for sense of self at an early age, away from the others who denied her presence, in rare moments she does find connection to her cultural sense of self through food. Food becomes a means of recollecting her relationship with her grandmother, Caldonia. Until her death, Caldonia offered Victoire a space of connection and belonging, substantiating her physicality through "long cuddling session that would have surprised a good many people...Then she [would

49 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* are from Richard Philcox's English translation of the text.

50 In Haiti, a child from an under-resourced family who is sent to work as a servant.

do] her hair” (Condé, 2010). Similar to Aissatou’s relationship to hair, Victoire’s action here symbolizes a sort of literal and figurative connection with her roots. Despite these loving gestures, “Victoire only found consolation once she had been given her cereal flavored with cinnamon and sweetened with wild honey” (Condé, 2010, p. 10-11). This superior form of sweet, nutritious consolation lays the groundwork for Victoire’s use of food to form connections within a society that seeks to disconnect from her. Victoire’s relationship with food crafts much of the fodder with which she engages Hall’s first process of identity formation: retention. Throughout the *récit*, as Victoire fashions dishes, she accesses intimate memories and traditions. Unable to take on dominant norms due to her social positioning, Victoire skips over Hall’s second process of assimilation, instead moving onto his third process, a renegotiation of her past. She brings her sharing food with Caldonia into the present through the act of cooking, reimagining traditional meals to share. After Caldonia, the Victoire connects in this way with her first lover, Dernier Argilus. Their relationship begins after she delivers food to his apartment, resulting in a short-lived affair that leaves her pregnant with her daughter, Jeanne. While mothering Jeanne, Victoire “remained silent as if shackled from inside. There were moments of gentleness even so. She would make Jeanne delicious little dishes and was overjoyed at her appetite” (Condé, 2010, p. 48). Victoire expresses her love for Jeanne in the only way she knows how: nourishment. Later, this expression is demonstrated with Valérie-Anne, the daughter of Victoire’s friend and employer. Like Victoire, Valérie-Anne was neglected by her family, othered due to her lack of conventional beauty: she “grow[s] up skinny and red-haired, her brother’s punching bag, ignored by mother and father alike” (Condé, 2010, p. 102). Taking on the role of Caldonia, Victoire takes Valérie-Anne under her wing, rehashing her history through this present relationship: “Victoire transferred her little treats onto Valérie-Anne. She was in dire need of them” (Condé, 2010, p. 102). A life-long relationship developed between the two, Valérie-Anne affectionately viewing Victoire as her other mother. Although Valérie-Anne’s adoration of Victoire sustains itself, Jeanne’s fades over time. Yet, when Jeanne becomes pregnant with her first child, their connection is once again fostered through the sharing of food as Victoire nourishes her daughter throughout her pregnancy:

The most extraordinary thing was that Jeanne got her appetite back, possessed once again of those cravings she hadn’t had since the age of reason. Victoire responded with devotion, feeling at last avenged for so many years of indifference...She especially strived hard to make desserts, puddings, creams, and flans, since pregnant women need excess sugar to nourish the brain. (Condé, 2010, p. 151-2)

As seen through Aissatou’s reproduction of her mother’s recipes, Victoire’s recipes, too, offer more than just nourishment: they provide remedy. Furthermore, quite literally, here, Victoire connects intergenerationally, for as she feeds her pregnant daughter sweets, she connects with the past, present, and future, through Caldonia’s recipes, her own daughter, and Jeanne’s child: “This belly that was miraculously swelling was a bond of sweetness that tied her to her daughter” (Condé, 2010, p. 151). Victoire takes

delight in recognizing that through pregnancy, her daughter practices her very own form of communication through the sharing of food with her child in utero: “The woman I carried inside of me is now carrying her own child. A little stranger has taken refuge inside of her. It’s breathing and feeding thanks to her” (Condé, 2010, p. 151).

Victoire uses food to connect with others, allowing her to engage her roots and ancestry, the narrative combining both her past and her present. The creation of food allows her to communicate, to express what she cannot through the French language. Despite her inability to employ the colonizer’s system of communication, Victoire communicates through food, claiming her own space through alternative senses. Her mastery of cooking sets Victoire apart, bringing her into visibility. In her first job as a cook, “from the very first day her destiny took shape. She proved to have an incomparable gift. She won over the Dulieu-Beaufort family with a cream of pumpkin and black crab soup” (Condé, 2010, p. 44). Victoire makes herself heard through her culinary talents. This talent, however, is not executed for the purpose of being seen by others. Victoire cooks, primarily, as self-expression. When coping with difficult emotions, she turns to cooking. For example, “she had trouble getting over her daughter’s bitterness and had difficulty understanding it. She plunged herself in her cooking while her talent reached a perfection of fantasy and inventiveness” (Condé, 2010, p. 101). Through cooking, she shapes her “destiny.” Her manipulation of her own destiny indicates the personal agency she takes when creating her meals, demonstrating the development of her voice through her dishes (Condé, 2010, p. 44). Furthermore, “far from merely cooking Creole dishes with panache, [Victoire] used her imagination to invent them” (Condé, 2010, p. 59). Her re-imaginings of traditional Creole recipes again demonstrate Victoire’s engagement with Hall’s third process of identity formation, renegotiation. Through cooking she pens, or mixes together, her own narrative, reclaiming her subjectivity from oppressive societal structures.

Despite her desire to cook as a means of self-fulfilment, Victoire’s mastery of her culinary voice reverberates through the public realm. While living with her adult daughter, Jeanne, Victoire volunteers her time cooking meals at Open Door, a local soup kitchen run by the church in Le Moule. There, Victoire makes her mark through her mastery: “Victoire metamorphosed everything. It was something like the Transfiguration... The *maléré* in their amazement, unused to such good fortune, surged and the numbers swelled more than fifty percent” (Condé, 2010, p. 154). The priest overseeing Open Door, “Fully aware of the malicious gossip rumored about her [...]...made it known that it is possible to massacre the French language and have one’s heart in the right place” (Condé, 2010, p. 124). The priest’s defense of Victoire validates and valorizes her mode of communication, destabilizing the exclusive power of French cultural norms by arguing the claim that it is possible to not be French and to still be good. For Victoire, food occupies the function of language; her recipes, as Condé discovers “among the papers my mother kept,” were “lyrically composed like a poem” (Condé, 2010, p. 70). Victoire employs food to communicate her last words. Toward the end of the novel, thwarted by the compounding combination of heartbreak and illness, Victoire’s cooking abilities immobilize. That is, until approaching the thresh-

old of death's door, when, with her little remaining energy, she organizes "The Last Supper...[,] her way of writing her last will and testament [for she] wanted this meal to remain a lasting memory on the palate and in the heart" (Condé, 2010, p. 189). Through that last meal, Victoire aims to express how "one day, she hoped, color would no longer be an evil spell [and that] Guadeloupe would no longer be tortured by questions of class" (Condé, 2010, p. 189). Victoire seeks to leave her loved ones with her legacy, to ingrain within their memory, the destabilization of the powers which have subjugated her throughout her life, which have sought to keep her invisible and demarcated into a liminal silence. Through her *récit*, Condé now affirms the voice of her grandmother: "What I am claiming is the legacy of this woman, who apparently did not leave any. I want to establish the link between her creativity and mine, to switch from the savors...to those of words" (Condé, 2010, p. 59).⁵¹

As demonstrated, the *récit* connotes Victoire's use of cooking with the function of verbal expression in order to unite *les saveurs* ("the flavors") with *les mots* ("the words"), Condé's act of weaving her grandmother's story into the French language such that she can memorialize her narrative and empower her legacy. Yet Victoire's expression through her body also sources a significant mode of communication and identity formation. Victoire's body, rejected on all counts, is generally unwanted by the breadth of social strata in Guadeloupe and as such becomes autonomous, freed from the demands of cultural expectations. Without these cultural expectations, her body becomes a space of her own. Victoire's engagement with this bodily space as source and expression of personal pleasure pushes against a culture that denies women such enjoyment and agency in a culture where women are often rendered sex objects under the gaze of male desire. More specifically, Victoire's engagement pushes against the cultural norms that seek to other Victoire's body. Victoire's ability to take pleasure in her body demonstrates that, unlike society, she is not afraid of her body. Her comfort with her physicality expresses itself intimately, for, "Victoire had always loved water," perhaps because showering beneath it was what gave her a space where, "naked, she would crouch against the rough wall of the stone basin above which dripped a tap. She would wash her long, straight hair that during the day she rolled into buns bristling with pins under her headtie. She would rub her body with a bunch of leaves, lingering over her private parts, surprised at the pleasure she felt" (Condé, 2010, p. 68). Here, Victoire's ability to touch her body and find joy in its softness and roots recalls Aissatou's trip to the sauna. In these spaces of cleansing, these women stand embodied and in so doing, wash away the oppressive cultural forces which seek to diminish them,

51 Also, through writing the untold narratives of the people who reproduce a culture through food, Riaz Phillips uses his project Tezeta Press to collect and put forward into society the heretofore absent stories of the individuals who have made and continue to make up different food communities in the UK, beginning with those from West Africa. As he told Henna Zamurd-Butt, Phillips took on this initiative after going to the library and trying, without success, "to find stories of people who came over and how they started, and who the first wave of people were, the originators, but there was very little" (2016). Thus, like Condé, Phillips took it upon himself to, as Zamurd-Butt notes, "chronicle the missing histories of Caribbean eateries" (2016). See Henna Zamurd-Butt, "A Belly Full of Stories: exploring the history of Caribbean food in the UK" for *Media Diversified*.

those that encourage “bend[ing] or balloon[ing] to fit the latest clichés which decree what’s beautiful” (Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2016, p. 12).

Victoire’s comfort with her body demonstrates why she finds such solace in her inner world: her relationship to her body is one that colonizing norms do not touch. Jettisoned from the game-like power dynamic of the French female ideal, Victoire’s sexual relationships with men are sought not to impress a man, to impress power, but rather to engage her own pleasure. As is the case with the relationship between Aisatou and Mr. Bolobolo, Victoire’s sexual relationships allow her a space, similar to the space of the shower, wherein she can touch and be touched, wherein her physicality can not only be validated—a state of being with which her neglected body is oft unfamiliar—but also cherished. It is of note that after her first sexual encounter with Dernier, Victoire lost her appetite. Instead, “what nurtured her were the kisses, the caresses, and the sweet words breathed into her” (Condé, 2010, p. 38). This connective bodily relationship feeds Victoire with life. With her lover, Victoire’s body finds place. Reflecting on Victoire’s relationship with her later long-term lover, Boniface Walberg, Condé asks, “Was Victoire sensual? Was she fond of lovemaking? Everything points to the affirmative” (Condé, 2010, p. 67). The validating nature of Victoire’s relationship with Boniface is epitomized when, after sex, “they [would sleep] in each other’s arms, united by a fear of the dark, a survival of their childhood” (Condé, 2010, p. 67). Here, this shared space of vulnerability and togetherness suggests a mutual engagement. Sex, for Victoire, was not about pleasing a man, but rather about expressing and engaging with herself in the world through this space. This intention is made clear when, despite her responsibility to the Walbergs and to her daughter, and amidst a well-developed relationship with Boniface, Victoire disappears from this world to pursue pleasure with a newfound lover, Alexandre, in Martinique. Her relationship with Alexandre allows her to explore and express herself in newfound ways, as Condé writes, “I imagine it was something like the beginning of the world” (Condé, 2010, p. 90). The notion of the beginning of the world calls attention to the creative force behind Victoire’s engagement sex and her body, the self-narrative that she expresses, defines, and explores through her relationship with her body.

COLONIZATION IN REVERSE⁵²

Victoire’s daughter, Jeanne, feels entitled to a world more sophisticated than her mothers, as she has been raised alongside the White Creole children of her mother’s employer, the Walbergs. Navigating a more privileged role in a Whiter space, Jeanne simultaneously experiences both re-enforcement and resistance to French cultural norms. Additionally, unlike Victoire, who, at birth, was deemed monstrous, “As soon as [Jeanne] emerged from her mother’s womb,” she was “beautiful [...] a mass of hair more curly than frizzy or downright kinky” (Condé, 2010, p. 46). While Victoire’s

52 Lifted from Jamaican poet Louise Bennett’s poem, “Colonization in Reverse,” on the relationship between colonized, colonizer, place, and power, re: Jamaica and England. Reference the final stanza for titular line: “Wat a devilment a Englan! Dem face war an brave de worse, / But me wonderin how dem gwine stan / Colonizin in reverse” (Bennett, 1982, lines 41-44).

White father had socially cursed her with the lightness of her skin, Jeanne's father was a prominent Black activist in 19th-century Guadeloupe. Unlike her pale mother, Jeanne's skin was darker, her familial roots reflected in her curls, which symbolize her otherness in the eyes of colonial hegemony, as it does for Beyala's Aissatou in the heart of Paris. Jeanne's physical presence is a marker of her otherness in White spaces and she ascends into Hall's second process of identity formation: assimilation. Jeanne takes on French cultural norms she learned in her formal French education. Upon discovering her mother's affair with Boniface by a surprise encounter with their naked bodies, Jeanne seeks to separate herself from her mother's narrative: "Jeanne discovered what was going to matter in her life: her studies" (Condé, 2010, p. 75). And it is through such studies that she is taught that "Africa doesn't count. Over there is a bunch of savages and cannibals who eat one another in a cooking pot" (Condé, 2010, p. 76). Jeanne's tutor was highly regarded for his ability to apply French standards, functioning as an agent of indoctrination to French systems of power and meaning.⁵³ His imagined narrative about Africa is likely a calculated one. The tutor's ludicrous articulation of Africa's place in history is a means to other those with similar ancestry. He claims that without Africa, "All that is left is Europe. Situated at the center of the world...it has constantly generated a torrent of fertilizing ideas" (Condé, 2010, p. 76). Here, the tutor clearly articulates to a young Jeanne the power system in play, of European values as central to all that is of worth. A fastidious student, "Jeanne swallowed all that hook, line, and sinker," to which "M. Roumegoux marveled at her intelligence," telling her "You could go far. Pity you're so black!" (Condé, 2010, p. 75-76). Roumegoux's praise of Jeanne's innate intelligence, though quickly flattened by his subjugation of her body, communicates that her only impediment to success is her physicality, her Blackness creating a barrier to certain spaces. Unlike her mother, Jeanne is able to harness the tool of her learning the French language, the oppressor's system of communication and power. Modulating from within this system, Jeanne's relationship with her body becomes one of subversion as she assimilates to French cultural norms, claiming the ideals of the colonizer as her own, as point of access into spaces of power, a way of advancing her own agenda and, by extension, claiming her own narrative, one that differs from the position in society occupied by her mother.

Equipped with the French language and a thirst to take in its knowledge, Jeanne rejects connection with her mother's narrative. In rejecting the traditions of her past, Jeanne skips over Hall's first process of identity formation, retention. First developed during adolescence, a time hallmarked by a coming into her own, Jeanne's sudden distaste and outright refusal for her mother's food—Victoire's only method of connecting and expressing love toward her daughter—symbolizes her forsaking her mother's narrative: "From one day to the next all ceased, replaced by a muted hostility, at least in Jeanne. It was expressed by mere nothings. Jeanne no longer allowed her mother to dress her and do her hair," no longer allowing her literal access to the space of her body and metaphoric access to her roots (Condé, 2010, p. 96). Instead, "she combed

53 See Grenadian poet Merle Collins' poem "The Lesson" for poetic depiction of such educational power dynamics (Collins, 1989).

her hair as best she could...[and] picked out and slipped on her panties all by herself” (Condé, 2010, p. 96). Jeanne’s refusal of her mother’s hands to do her hair illustrates the agency Jeanne claims at a young age to separate her body from her mother’s in order to arrange her roots herself and craft her narrative to her own liking. However, “she who previously had a healthy appetite began to eat like a sparrow. In a single month she consequently lost twenty pounds, signifying therefore that she wanted nothing to do with earthly nourishment, as a way of punishing her mother, who placed so much importance on it. In a manner of speaking she refused any type of dialogue with her” (Condé, 2010, p. 96). Jeanne’s appetite stands in for a hunger to connect with her mother, an ability to trust her growth in the hands of her mother’s nourishment. The absence of her appetite illustrates the evaporation of their relationship and Jeanne’s connection to her past. Her sparrow-like pecking illustrates Jeanne’s claimed authorial hand, selecting what she will and will not consume into her narrative. This authoritative approach to identity formation can also be read into Jeanne’s rapid weight loss; once usurping directive power from her mother, she quickly sheds what she no longer desires: the weight that had been nourished by her mother’s dishes. The narrator verbalizes how the end of Jeanne consuming her mother’s dishes signifies an end to their communication, for this claim serves both to validate Victoire’s form of culinary expression and to illustrate how Jeanne wants nothing to do with her mother’s way of being in the world. No longer consuming her mother’s messages, Jeanne “always had her nose stuck in a book with an expression what seemed to say: ‘I’m the only one in this house who has other things on her mind that stuffing her face with food,’” positioning herself, again, against her mother, as we have shown and, too, against Beyala’s protagonist who, like Victoire, valorizes “food [as] the stuff of life” (Condé, 2010, p. 96; Beyala, trans. Cohen, 2016, p. 98). This difference suggests Jeanne’s reliance on other resources to form her identity. Perhaps these resources can be found earlier on in Jeanne’s narrative. Although Jeanne’s adolescent refusal signifies her choice of independence, her nourishment as a child, too, illustrates Jeanne’s independence from her mother’s narrative from an early age: “Unlike most children, Jeanne was weaned very early on and placed in a box room that had been converted into an English nursery for the Walberg children” (Condé, 2010, p. 48). Jeanne did not consume her mother’s maternal care, her time, her milk, her biological nourishment; instead, she was left alone in a box. This image shows how Jeanne develops without nourishment from the past, relying instead on the rigid European structures, as denoted by the box her body is contained within, that corralled her youth.

Rigid reliance on the controlled structures that corralled Victoire’s first moments set the tone for the rigid control continued as Jeanne crafted her narrative and fashioned her body. Condé does name Jeanne’s controlling relationship with her body, commenting how during a dinner scene Jeanne’s “mood translated into her refusal to feed herself, which perhaps today we would call anorexia or something similar” (Condé, 2010, p. 108). This rejection shows that Jeanne does, in fact, utilize food to communicate her emotional mood. For Jeanne, what underlies this behavior is a desire to control herself. For Jeanne, and for each of the female protagonists discussed so far,

French cultural norms are legitimate and fully-identified external forces. Jeanne's acceptance of her body in its natural form recalled her mother, who, in Jeanne's view, embodied a compliance with patriarchal control: "Jeanne could not bear seeing Victoire and Boniface go into the same bedroom holding a candle. The four-poster bed of locust wood where they slept seen through the half-open door made her vomit... She was no different from a courtesan, a woman who sold her body, except that those Italian women were usually excellent poets, whereas Victoire couldn't even read" (Condé, 2010, p. 107). Her mother's relationship with Boniface arrested her societal status as servant, comparing her to Italian prostitutes. But, rendering Victoire even worse off, she did not have access to the language of the state in power. As with the shedding of her pounds, Jeanne's vomiting illustrates the urgency with which Jeanne must push away her mother's narrative in order to set herself apart from it. Commenting on the sexual relations between races, Jeanne writes of Boniface Jr., who persistently seeks out Jeanne:

In his eyes...she was nothing but black meat he could take for pleasure as he wished. Not an ounce of feeling in his propositions. Moreover, she was convinced a white man could never love a black woman. Only lust and concupiscence could exist between them. (Condé, 2010, p. 108)

Jeanne refuses objectification. Condé writes of Victoire's relationship with sex: "I don't know what my mother thought of her wedding night or any of the following nights. What I do know is that I never heard her broach the subject of sex—which is unusual, even exceptional in our islands—without some measure of disgust" (Condé, 2010, p. 138). For Jeanne, there is no place or use for desire or such connection with the body in her narrative. She lives a life of the mind. She will not allow herself to be equated with "earthly nourishment," as Victoire does (Condé, 2010, p. 96). The only use for her body is to manipulate it in such a way that allows her mind access to spaces she would not otherwise be allowed into on account of her skin color. Unable to change her color, Jeanne controls her frame. In conversation with Zora Neal Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression," journalist Jaylin Paschal comments on how clothes "operat[e] beyond the functional use of covering one's body appropriately for the occasion, to serving as a declaration of self" (2017). We see Jeanne engage with this behavior when, as a young adult, she leaves home for boarding school:

Jeanne is walking in front, dressed in the elegant Scotch plaid uniform that the nuns demanded—pleated skirt flapping around her ankles, blouse buttoned up to the neck, patent leather pumps with a low heel, and smart white Panama hat. She is tall, slender, aloof. Something in her expression puts a stop to the racy jokes by the ragamuffins who are already idling in the streets. Hard on her heels, the mother with her headtie, heavily loaded, dressed in her shapeless dress with a leafy pattern, looking like a servant. (Condé, 2010, p. 99)

Here, the placement of her body walking in front of her mother demonstrates the power Jeanne feels in relation to her—she independently leads the way forward in her narrative. Her fashion is well-constructed; she wears classic European pieces, arming her with a uniform, a tool, with which she can more swiftly navigate Versailles, her rather appropriately named boarding school, the school's name recalling the heart of Louis IX's power.⁵⁴ Through Jeanne's fashioning of her body, she "puts a stop to the racy jokes," demonstrating the efficacy of her choices. The contrast between Jeanne's sophisticated self-fashioning and her mother's unshapely presentation also reflects Jeanne's successful separation from her mother, allowing her access to spaces her mother is not welcome, and making this departure from her "without a farewell gesture" (Condé, 2010, p. 99). In these spaces, Jeanne would come to win many accolades, making history as the 'first' black woman to succeed in various domains. Although her Blackness presented obstacles to such achievements, it remained integral to her identity; Condé reflects on her mother as "a black militant before her time," arguably demonstrating that Jeanne's use of assimilation was in fact used as a tool, as a means to her ends (Condé, 2010, p. 2). bell hooks writes of this use of assimilation when commenting on the character of Mignon in Julie Dash's *Illusions*: "though she is passing to gain access to the machinery of cultural production represented by film, Mignon continually asserts her ties to the black community" (hooks, 1996, p. 103). Jeanne, too, asserts her ties to the Black community by advancing herself through these traditionally White norms, through these traditionally White spaces. Moreover, by achieving objective success and accolades within them, her presence in these spaces subverts the power in play. These moves ultimately gain Jeanne access to the Black intelligentsia of Guadeloupe, an intellectual space where her mind is most welcome and lauded, where she can pursue her agenda: "For her this was Desirada, the promised island for the sailors of Christopher Columbus, reached after days of misadventures. For better or for worse she had to carve out a place for herself" (Condé, 2010, p. 123). The imagery used to describe Jeanne's achieved access to her desired intellectual space is of note for it recalls Columbus' colonization of the Americas. Given that Jeanne exists herself within a colony, to some this metaphor may not seem aptly chosen. Yet I read its power precisely through its comparison to colonization. As Aissatou redefined the Place de La Bastille through the mere presence of her confident Black body, here, Jeanne, too, engages in a breed of this embodiment, of this, to recall one of poet Louise Bennett's memorable lines, "colonization in reverse." By reclaiming the norms that were enforced to suppress her mobility, Jeanne subverts systems of cultural oppression, allowing her subjectivity to take shape in a way she controls.

54 I do not make the claim about Jeanne donning a more 'Western' fashion in order to say that this sort of fashion belongs to any one group of people. Fashion is, like identity, subject to a various amalgam of personal elements: ancestry, geography, culture, preference. Rather, I make this claim to show the power of choice clothing and how it can be a tool to communicate and navigate oneself and one's role in society.

TEXTUALIZATING BODY POLITICS

Despite spanning temporal and spatial worlds, the power wielded by each protagonist's recipe for narrative production is formed within the tangible body of the text. Through fixing the stories of these Black francophone women within French language (and, too, in translation) that the texts insert such body narratives into dominant culture. These narratives, in their strength and multiplicity, diverge from ideals endorsed by those in power, paving way for their rightful space beneath the umbrella of French identity. Beyala and Condé's texts boldly assert the voices of their protagonists within cultural zeitgeist by taking up space within it via the texts' materiality, in like fashion of the bodies of their own protagonists. Nigerian author and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie critiques Western hegemonic production of a "single story," saying that "it robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar" (2009).⁵⁵ It is this single story of otherness that relegates other-than-white-and-thin subjectivity as both other and less-than, for, as Adichie goes on to say, "Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person," one which renders anything that does not satisfy it as abject (2009). This dynamic suggests why, for Adichie, it was "because of writers like Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye," writers in whom she could finally see a reflection of unrepresented parts of herself, that she "went through a mental shift in [her] perception of literature. [She] realized that people like [her], girls with skin the color of chocolate, whose kinky hair could not form ponytails, could also exist in literature," exist within a cultural narrative (2009).⁵⁶ With Beyala and Condé's texts into Western society, a physical reclamation of space for our protagonist's narratives, thus functionally destabilizes the power of France's sterile and exclusive notion of *égalité*: the absence of difference.⁵⁷ These divergent narratives demonstrate how, despite the upholding of the stale cultural ideals which seek to efface their presence, that these women still, in fact, exist, and exist boldly. Condé's act of publishing *Victoire les saveurs et les mots*, the act of recreating her grandmother's story and preserving its space in the world, for example, is literal

55 Read Dorothy Lennon and Antonia Opiah's article for *Un-ruly* "the ideal beauty from hollywood to nollywood" to begin answering the questions: "What is the Nigerian standard of beauty and, in a country where most people are black, how is it different and similar to the American standard of beauty, where "white traits" dominate?" (2014).

56 I have found that such desire to see physical reminder of self in text, read by extension in cultural domain, and, too, from within the text, such reclamation of space in cultural domain through food and body, is, too, found in writing outside of the francophonie. A few noteworthy examples: In Kadija Sesay's short story "Love Long Distance" (2008), Sesay details her British-Ghanaian protagonist's straddled relationship to her body/food/power/identity. Through her closeted protagonist, Barry, and his fashionista daughter, Maxine, Bernardine Evaristo discusses the relationship between body presentation and projected identity utilized in order to navigate both British and Antiguan cultural norms. Also, Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1997) looks at food culture and its power to influence identity within a British-Indian community.

57 See Jonathan Romney's article "The stars of Girlhood: 'Our poster is all over Paris, with four black faces on it. . .'" in *The Guardian* for discussion of the French film *Girlhood*, its representation of Black women in French media, and the films influence on French society and culture (2015).

demonstration of how such creation can both serve to archive an otherwise lost history and, through such archiving—as seen through both Condé’s recreation and our interpretation of it—catalyze new and newly nuanced intertextual conversations on being francophone into present dialogue on being. For, as Condé is first to assert, such engagement with her grandmother’s narrative was not just reclamation for her grandmother, but “it was a way of coming to terms, through [her] mother and grandmother, with Maryse Condé. How [she] became a writer, why, what are the causes that [she] do[esn’t] even know [her]self” (Doll, 2010). Bodies are powerful, acting as vessel for the stories uniquely held by ourselves yet shared by those in solidarity with us, and in so doing forging communities that validate their power.⁵⁸ Like a recipe, the stories of these women offer an archived process, in language, to the re-creation of self. As one may reference a recipe in order to recreate a dish, in turn, readers can reference the recipes for self-offered by the protagonists’ relationships with their bodies in colonized spaces in order to engage in the formation of their own identity under present forms of discrimination, taking from these narratives what they uniquely need to exist and subversively, to tangibly reclaim the narrative arch of their bodies, of their uniquely and rightfully confectioned selves.⁵⁹

58 Today, this community can be found online through social media accounts designated for discussion on black bodies and beauty, aimed at sparking visibility and solidarity. Too, online journals and topic specific websites have been created to write and share and make space for the narratives of Black women as written by Black women such as Antonia Opiah’s *Un-ruly*, which, through its online platforms, “take[s] an in-and-out approach to beauty, looking at it on both a surface and profound level. [The site] know[s] that hair and beauty create experiences shared by women all over the globe, and so [it] ultimately aim[s] to be a supportive community, stirring productive dialogue within the female and Black communities at large” (n.d.). Mina Salami’s *Ms. Afropolitan* “connects feminism with critical reflections on contemporary culture from an Africa-centred perspective” (n.d.), while *Black Girl in Om* “creates space for Women Of Color to breathe easy,” through fostering a community around holistic self-care” (Carpenter, 2018) Sites like these are important because they foster a space to be heard, to be seen, to collect, to validate in spite of outside forces that do the opposite. Now, this is not to say that these forces do not exist online. They most certainly do, and often in unharnessed, extremist ways, though, too, of course, through micro-aggressions, as is demonstrated in physical reality. Yet, I argue that the space of the Internet can allow for more accessible community to be formed around shared narrative despite immediate external circumstances, equipping more tools for self-narrative formation.

59 “*Il devient indifférent que je me souviens ou que j’invente, que j’emprunte ou que j’imagine*” – Bernard Pignaud. Therein lies the beauty of fiction. (Condé, 2010).

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