Lark Mirror: African Men, Migration and the French Republic

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Being African or of African descent in today's world means contending with negative and derogatory images of the continent propagated on a daily basis through the media, academic work and even casual conversation. Although the production of these images has been in force for at least four hundred years, having originated in the need to justify slavery and European imperialism, Africans never get accustomed to the images because they distort the reality of lived experience.

The frustration with the West's stubborn adherence to stereotypes of the African continent has led Western-educated Africans to develop two reflexes. One is to question the motives of information producers, be they scholars, journalists, or more recently, Hollywood stars who use short guided tours of the continent to make broad, misinformed and ultimately prejudicial statements about Africa. This reflex, reflected in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and V.Y Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa* (1989), entails exposing the already pre-established paradigms of Western discourse, which necessarily require an artificial and superfluous portrait of the non-European world. However, critical essays and reviews of such texts expose the pitfalls of this approach. As Tiyambe Zeleza has observed in his two essays reviewing Said's work (1994; 2005), the major problem with deconstructing Western courses is that the scholar is forced to adopt the same discourses as the foundation of refutation rather than provide

alternative view points of the so-called Third World. In the end, as Zeleza observes of Said, those who attempt to undress the emperor do not remove the imperial robes but admire their fine texture (1994 112).

The second reflex of African intellectuals is to argue that the images of desperation from the continent reflect a minute aspect of the rich and fulfilling life in the African continent. Once again, condemning information on the basis of omission rather than commission has its pitfalls. The most immediate of these is a seeming lack of credibility on the part of the African scholars. As the intellectuals attempt to exonerate the continent from its unfairly tarnished reputation, they are faced with the irony of arguing that life in Africa is not all that bad when they are living and working in the West, probably because of opportunities that they would not find at home. Moreover, they are aware that with advanced university degrees, they are generally able to overcome the obstacles of visa fees, requirements of proof of income and the general bias towards professionals over unskilled migrants, obstacles which make migrants from poorer classes prefer to get to Europe through illegal channels.[1] They are also conscious that after returning home on a plane ticket that costs enough to feed an African family for at least 6

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[1] In his last year as interior minister, French president Nicholas Sarkozy proposed legislation known as "immigration choisie" (selective immigration), which would allow immigration for those with professional qualifications. His visits to Mali and Benin in 2006 were greeted by protestors who saw the proposed laws as racist and ultimately aimed at curtailing African immigration. Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade took a more neutral stance by challenging the legislation for encouraging brain drain from the African continent. Although African writers and university-trained scholars still contend with rude embassy officials, high visa fees and prohibitive demands for documents (some Western embassies ask 60-year old African travelers for their parents' pay slips), they generally acquire visas easier than young migrants with limited economic resources or academic qualifications.

months, their compatriots would find it difficult to believe that life in the West is not a bed of roses. This is the dilemma that Salie, the protagonist of Senegalese writer Fatou Diome's *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (The Belly of the Atlantic), confronts when she returns home on holiday. When she tells her younger brother and his age-mates that racism renders life in France difficult for Africans, one of the young men retorts: "Eh bien! Il faut croire que t'aimes bien les épines? Autrement, tu n'y retournerais pas à chaque fois. Elles me plairaient bien, tes épines" (Well! It seems that you really like thorns, otherwise you would not return [to France] every time. I would really enjoy your thorns" (238-39).[2]

Besides diminished personal credibility, another problem faced by African intellectuals who seek to salvage the continent's reputation is the reality that while the prejudices about African societies emerge from questionable interpretation, the evidence on which they are based is often irrefutable. This problem is particularly acute when we are confronted with images of Africans who risk their lives crossing the Sahara desert and riding in overloaded un-seaworthy vessels to enter Europe, where they hope to improve their fortunes and where a significant number of unlucky migrants are met by border patrols and charter flights to repatriate them to the continent. In the face of such reports, the African intellectual finds that a detailed analysis of Western discourses on Africa is generally impotent, especially when it is the prospective immigrants themselves who confirm that they prefer to risk their lives entering Europe rather than watch

[2] Translation from French is my own.

their families wallow in misery or return home in shame, having failed to achieve the success in Europe as is expected.

Africans who began writing fiction in French over the past 10 years appear to be responding to this reality through their novels that explain the social dynamics that lead Africans to erroneously believe that the risks of going to Europe are worth the financial rewards that they and their families may receive in the long term. Diome's novel, for example, tells the story of Moussa, a young talented soccer player who is duped by a French scout into believing that he would receive a contract to play for a professional club in France, only to discover upon arrival that the offer was a hoax. Moussa's fate is similar to that of Massala-Massala in the novel *Bleu Blanc Rouge* (Blue White Red) by Congolese (Brazzaville) writer Alain Mabanckou. Massala-Massala is duped into seeking his fortunes in France by Charles Moki, a flamboyant young man who regularly returns home on holiday and recounts fantastic tales of leading a luxurious life. Upon his arrival in France, Massala-Massala discovers that Moki's stories were in actual fact a cover up for his life as an immigrant working illegally and living in an abandoned apartment complex in Paris. He is cynically advised by Moki to ignore these inconsistencies and inducted into a scheme of cashing stolen checks. Unable to successfully ignore the contradictions he is rudely inserted into, Massala-Massala does not muster the courage and nonchalance necessary to fulfill his task and naively walks into a police roundup. The book ends after he has served his prison term of eighteen months and is being repatriated on a charter flight to Congo.

In both cases, the novels offer the perspective of young African men whose lack of exposure to or familiarity with France makes them susceptible to believe the tall stories of returning migrants. From a moral standpoint, this perspective appears to offers an authentic account of the mental and emotional process by which African migrants from modest backgrounds decide to make the risky journey to France. This is particularly so in Mabanckou's novel, in which Massala-Massala's journey is narrated by himself in the first person. As Philippe Lejeune (1980) reminds us, the account of a witness narrated in the first person gives the narrative an aura of authenticity which readers find difficult to ignore. The importance of this emotional appeal is accentuated by the fact that *Bleu Blanc Rouge* opens with Massala-Massala in prison, contemplating his fate as he awaits repatriation after serving his prison sentence. With his evident emotional and physical suffering, the reader tends to instinctively consider his account of events as not only authentic, but also as morally binding. Massala-Massala thus appeals to the sympathy of the reader in a way that a narrating character such as Salie in Diome's novel, who is a member of the African intellectual elite, cannot.

By offering the perspectives of African migrants most adversely affected by immigration laws, the novels successfully depict the human dynamics behind African migration to France against the background of increasingly tight French legislation against immigration. The predicament of the youth as inherently naïve about the world but thirsting for adventure is a human predicament that any reader, regardless of cultural background, can identify with. However, I will also demonstrate that the depiction of the fascination with France among the African

youth inadvertently confirms the stereotype of Africa as fatally condemned to endless poverty and ignorance despite the intervention of the West or of African graduates. The question that inadvertently arises from this contradiction is why a realistic portrayal of African migration seems to achieve such damaging results. Through an analysis of Mabanckou's novel, I will argue that the main problem arises from the writers' and even scholars' reliance on empathy, rather than on justice, as the fundamental imperative for challenging the unfair treatment of African migrants in France.

The need to maintain a distinction between empathy and justice has become more urgent, especially in today's world in which well-meaning American and European entertainers increasingly misrepresent Africa's social and economic challenges as resulting from lack of Western goodwill and charity, rather than from concrete social and political problems, many of which are funded and engineered by their own governments. The contradiction between the goodwill that entertainers such as Bono, Angelina Jolie and Madonna proclaim for Africa and the insulting, degrading and ultimately racist manner in which they depict the African continent is tragic, because in tragedy, the innocence or goodwill of actors is irrelevant. As Christine Clark-Evans notes, "the tragic character acts consistently as the central agent and subject who, by neither virtue nor vice but rather some error, harms her own well-intentioned efforts" (46).

Moreover, the impulse of Western philanthropists to come to Africa's aid is consciously or unconsciously motivated by personal interest; namely, the search for catharsis which would temporarily redeem them of the guilt of being

favored by global capitalism but would not necessarily reduce their power or influence. Lewis Gordon elaborates:

> [N]eocolonialism, bolstered not only by the fall of its Eastern European opposition, but also by years of successful political, economic and military destabilization of Third World sites of resistance, finds itself facing the classical theodicean problem of legitimacy that has plagued many a previous imperial order. How can it legitimate its conquest without depending on itself as a source of legitimation? … The heart of the regime must be demonstrated to be pure, to be good, in the midst of contradiction. (1997 166)

In the situation described above, the purpose of parading pictures of misery and tragedies from the African continent is to provide catharsis for a Western world unable to come to terms with the global injustice through which it amassed power and wealth over the last few centuries. In other words, what appears as expressions of Western sympathy and intervention is, in actual fact, the appropriation of the African experience for the West's moral edification. The dilemma that these dynamics pose for Africans, especially those who write in languages of former colonial powers, is that their appeals to the empathy of the Western world are appropriated as proof of Western goodwill and moral legitimacy. In the meantime, the social and political issues the writers address are reduced from human dilemmas that result from specific political and historical actions to occasions to engage in pity.

Since it is natural to instinctively sympathize with fellow human in situations of distress, the question arises as to what would be a more appropriate response of members of the global elite to Africa's dilemmas. Amy Shuman (2005) proposes that readers should avoid using empathy to their response to

narratives by victims of injustice, because empathy runs the risk of disempowering the victim. She observes that if empathy does provide inspiration, "it is more for those in the privileged position as the empathizer than empathized." She adds that a "critique of empathy…insists on obligations between tellers, listeners and the stories they borrow (5).

Shuman's observations seem to be confirmed by Odile Cazenave's (2003) analysis of Mabanckou's novel in her study on the theme of migration to France in African novels published over the last two decades. Cazenave proposes that the author of *Bleu Blanc Rouge* blames Massala-Massala's predicament on migrants like Moki whose tall tales inspire their compatriots to sacrifice their resources and risk their lives for an illusive dream in France (123-24). She describes this phenomenon as a lark mirror, known in French as *miroir aux alouttes*, which is metaphor for something that is attractive but deceptive. The implication of this argument is that Moki is individually and wholly responsible for Massala-Massala's fate. One of the major problems with this assessment is the over reliance on Massala-Massala's view of events when in fact, his perspective is largely unreliable. He is in prison, nursing the emotional wounds of his misadventures in France and anticipating the shame and disappointment of his family once he arrives in Congo. His turmoil, combined with his incarceration for 18 months, necessarily deny him a global perspective of the events leading up to his current situation, which he confirms when he says, "[m]on univers se limite à ce cloisonnement auquel je suis accoutumé" [my universe is restricted to this

enclosure to which I have grown accustomed] (11).[3] Under such conditions, he lacks a lucid view of the situation that engenders his predicament. He is inclined to blame Moki for his suffering, especially since Moki is the person whom he knows best. For this reason, Massala-Massala's claims that Moki "est à l'origine de tout" [is the source of everything] (39) must be treated with skepticism.

The need for this skepticism becomes clearer when one examines the moral and practical implications of regarding Moki as the principle actor in Massala-Massala's fate on Moki. Holding Moki entirely responsible for his compatriot's predicament overrides his own alienation stemming from his adoration of France, as well as the historical and political forces on which that adoration is based. Readers familiar with the impact of racist discourses of whiteness on African identity will almost immediately detect that Moki is less a liar and more a profoundly conflicted man exhibiting symptoms of alienation caused by the colonialist condemnation of African cultures. He uses chemicals to bleach his skin as a physical signifier of his success in France, and expresses contempt for African traditions during his visits home. When at home in Congo, he prefers to eat the French-style bread as opposed to traditional dishes, arguing that the local foods were not nutritious. He also claims that African languages distort the French language, which also strikes a sensitive chord of those familiar with the obsession of France with maintaining the dominance of its language in Africa against what it considers the dominance of the English language in today's

[3] All translations of Mabanckou's novel are my own.

world.[4] Regarding Moki's arrogance and dishonesty as the main cause of Massala-Massala's misadventures in France minimizes the painful histories that have been experienced by Africans on a collective rather than solely individual basis.

The second element in the novel that resists attempts to hold Moki and like-minded migrants responsible for the risks that Africans take to reach Europe is the fact that while Moki's claims about his luxurious life in France are dishonest, there is concrete evidence in his home country to confirm them. His residency in France enables his family to ascend the socio-economic ladder in their home village. His father, previously regarded as weak by the community, eventually becomes the president of the elder's council after moving into an imposing villa whose construction was supervised and funded by his son. Moreover, Moki refers to French institutions still in Congo, which act as evidence of the wealth that France offers. Moki states in the novel that he laid the groundwork for his trip to France by borrowing literary classics from the French Cultural Center at the port city of Pointe-Noire. He tells his young admirers at home that he strengthened his knowledge of French culture while still in the

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[4] In contrast to its English counterpart, France has ideologically pegged its imperialism on language and culture as opposed to economic interests. This obsession with language manifests itself in the international organization *La Francophonie* that purportedly unites countries under the common banner of the French language, despite the fact that less that 20% of the population in the African member states speaks French (Kom, 2000). It has also been blamed for the Republic's support of the genocidal regime in Rwanda in 1994 in order to push back the Kagame-led Rwandan Patriotic Front, which French politicians purportedly considered "Anglo-Saxon" by virtue of having been based in Uganda, a former British colony (see Verschave, 1999). For a personalized and moving analysis of the implications of French language policy in Africa, see Boubacar Boris Diop's article "Write … Or Keep Your Mouth Shut!" (2005).

Congo by reading magazines discarded by French expatriate workers at the hotel where his father worked. He refers to these institutions to reinforce his advice to his young compatriots that the preparation for migration to France begins at home, rather than upon reaching French borders. Since these manifestations of French wealth are independent of Moki's claims, they become a mitigating factor in his community's belief that he is telling the truth. Moreover, his credibility confirms a simple self-evident truth, which is that Westerners who can afford to travel to and live in Africa are often have significant resources at their disposal, since they rarely come from poor and modest backgrounds unless they are sponsored by their home governments or other institutions. It is difficult for Africans in the continent to gain access to information about the limited resources at the disposal of the "average" European or American, since the diffusion of such information about the Western world is still dominated by the media that gives a one-sided view of the Western world and effectively submerges warnings from individual African intellectuals against the harsh realities of poverty and racism in the West.

These dynamics emerging from France's continued relationship with its former colonies demonstrate that the bulk of credibility of Moki's stories about France as a land of prosperity emerges from socio-historical factors rather than Moki's own stories, as Cazenave seems to suggest. Moki's dishonesty, cynicism and contempt for his community reveal that he too suffers alienation despite his financial success.

Because of the risks that come with aligning oneself too closely with Massala-Massala, the question therefore arises as to what are the obligations – as Shuman calls them – of readers and critics of Mabanckou's novel. Gordon proposes a means to appropriately respond to narratives exposing injustice when he argues that the task confronting the intellectuals is to identify the different roles that all actors – including scholars and writers – play in the global arena. The role of the Third World intellectual is not to plead on behalf of his or her compatriots or to lead a revolution against injustice, but to "dramatize" global capitalism and its effect on various societies; in other words, to "help set the stage, as it were, for the characters to unfold in their peculiarities" (1997 167). If we consider African migration to France as a theater of economic, cultural and political relations enacted on a global stage, then we can clearly see the intellectual as the playwright who writes the script and develops the different characters.

From this perspective, the weaknesses of Cazenave's interpretation become clear. As I have already indicated, the first is the failure to situate Massala-Massala in immediate environment as a young man on the verge of despair in a Parisian cell and therefore unable to offer a balanced perspective of events. The second pitfall is the failure to dramatize the events in order to gain an overview of all the social, individual, historical and political agents that partly contribute to Massala-Massala's misadventures. The third weakness is the failure to distinguish the moral responsibilities of each of these actors. The framework of tragedy, in particular, demands that the victim of suffering is a member the most

powerful classes rather than the less powerful. Many scholars of tragedy are agreed on this principle that is articulated by Harvey Birenbaum who observes: "[w]e kill the king because he matters enough" (4). When the victims of suffering are members of the less powerful classes, Gordon observes, "there is not tragedy but blatant injustice, for the burden of bearing the community's evils is placed on the powerless instead of the powerful" (1995 75). From this perspective, the actors who should ideally suffer in the tragedy of African migration to France are the French and African elites, rather than African migrants like Massala-Massala and Moki from modest backgrounds. Since it is the latter who suffer, tragedy demands that the French Republic, its citizens and its African allies receive moral blame and even condemnation for the injustice suffered by African migrants from modest backgrounds, regardless of their goodwill or innocence.

Despite the weaknesses of Cazenave's analysis of Moki's role in Massala-Massala's misadventure, the lark mirror provides a useful analogy of migration to France, provided that one has a thorough understanding of how it functions. Arentsen *et al*. (2004) explain that the lark mirror is a hunting decoy used in Western Europe between the 17th and 19th centuries by hunters during the seasonal migration to larks to warmer climates. It consisted of a flat block of wood inserted with pieces of mirrors or glass that was attached to a spindle and a wooden peg inserted into the ground. Hunters would stand some meters away from the mirror and rotate the mirror by pulling at a string or rope attached to the spindle. The rotating mirrors would catch the attention of the birds in flight, and as the birds drew near, the hunters would shoot them. As some birds dropped dead, the others

would flutter away, only to return a few minutes later because they cannot resist the attraction to the mirrors.

Understanding how the lark mirror functions requires specifying the different roles played by human beings, birds and the season changes that spur migration. With this understanding, one cannot credibly hold larks responsible for their deaths on the grounds that they are unable to resist the attraction of the mirrors or learn from the deaths of their fellow larks. Human beings take full responsibility for their deaths because it is they who build the decoys, ambush the birds and shoot them down. Consequently, applying the lark mirror as a metaphor for human migration demands the same specification of the different roles that different actors play. This task is not self-evident, for the distinction between the larks and hunters is easier to draw than that between human beings in both Africa and France.

To overcome this obstacle, it is important to identify the parallels of lark and African migrations, which are the inevitability of migration, the inexplicable attraction to certain images, the manipulation of these images to entrap migrants, and the ambush awaiting them. I shall accomplish this task by comparing migration in Mabanckou's novel to *fadenya*, the Mande term for a tradition in the Sahel region of Africa, also known in Songhay as *baba-izeteray*, that loosely translates to "father-child-ness" (Hale 1998).

Fadenya aptly captures the phenomenon of migration as a necessary stage of human life because it is generally related to the passage of the male adolescent from childhood to adulthood. As Hale observes, epics, genealogies and other

verbal art forms of communities from the Sahel region which embody *fadenya* portray the hero as one "who must break with tradition, pursue his own path, and go through a series of transformations as he acquires power" (135). This break is made necessary by the increasing tension between the father and his sons as the young men search to insert themselves in their society's history, a tension that gains monumental proportions when the family concerned wields significant wealth and power in the society.[5] The principle of *fadenya* is thus more apparent in epics about aristocratic families from the region. However, the epics differ little from African oral narratives in which ordinary characters learn important life lessons through journeys (Kane, 1982) or European folk tales such as *Puss in Boots* or *Jack and the Beanstalk* in which the protagonists leave home to seek their fortune.

In Mabanckou's novel, this imperative for migration is also evident in the phenomenon of *la sape*, to which Moki claims allegiance. *La sape* is derived from the French verb *saper*, which means "to dress," and is a form of dandyism commonly associated with world-renowned Congolese musicians Kofi Olomide and Papa Wemba. It generally evokes the search of young African men from the Congolese republics to buy European designer clothes as a mark of assimilation into French culture (Thomas 2003). However, Didier Gondola (1999) also argues that *la sape* serves an economic and symbolic purpose, which is the entry of young men into adulthood as professionals and men who can financially support

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[5] Although this paper restricts itself to the male adolescent, I have explored the implications of migration and communal identity for women and alternative models of male adulthood in my dissertation entitled "In Search of El Dorado? The Experience of Migration to France In Contemporary African Novels" (2007).

their families. This role of *la sape* is particularly important because, as he notes, the monetary economy introduced by colonial governments instituted difficult socio-economic conditions that maintained young men in the artificial status of being half-child, half adult, particularly in the cities (19). Moki's fortunes confirm these dynamics of *la sape* because his return home for the holidays is not only matched by a change in his physical appearance, but also by the improving financial fortunes and social status of his family. He subsequently becomes one of the village's most eligible bachelors, and so his visits are characterized by numerous young women seeking to go out with him to the local pub. It is in fact this status that Massala-Massala covets and hopes to acquire by working in France. *La sape* thus bears similarities with *fadenya* and the lark mirror in that it demonstrates that migration is an imperative that is both individually and socially instigated.

Once we see migration is a human imperative at both the individual and social levels, we can understand that the issue at stake here is not with migration in and of itself, but with France as a destination. If we use *fadenya* as an alternative model of migration engrained in African traditions, the most effective means to discourage Africans from risking their lives going to Europe is by providing alternative destinations for migration that are already valued by African societies through traditional narratives and other art forms. However, Frantz Fanon makes the important argument that the crucial role of African traditions in providing the models and standards by which young men are integrated into societies is currently impeded by colonial rule and global capitalism. In his classic

text *The Wretched of the Earth* (1962), he states that the onslaught of these forces distracts the African youth by offering consumer goods to which they have extremely limited access. He explains:

> It is to the youth of an underdeveloped country that the industrialized countries most often offer their pastimes...But in the underdeveloped countries, young people have at their disposition leisure occupations designed for the youth of capitalist countries: detective novels, penny-in-the-slot machines…pornographic literature, films banned to those under sixteen, and above all alcohol…in an African country…where the violent collision of two worlds has considerably shaken old traditions and thrown the universe of the perceptions out of focus, the impressionability and sensibility of the young African are at the mercy of the various assaults made upon them by the very nature of Western culture. His family very often proves itself incapable of showing stability and homogeneity when faced with such attacks. (195-96)

Fanon's argument illuminates the fundamental problem with *la sape*, which is that it lures young African men with the hope of acquiring expensive European *haute couture*. It also coincides with the analogy of the lark mirror because it exposes the French Republic as playing the role of the hunter in African migration to France. Through its sustained business interests and political presence in Congo, France exploits the human need for young people to assume adult roles by presenting itself as a source of wealth and hence a favorable destination for migration. This attraction is not organically rooted in an abstract superiority of European over African culture, but in colonial rule that imposed French culture on young Africans through exploitation and armed force. For instance, the lure of European designer labels, on which *la sape* is founded, dates back to colonial rule when the French assimilation policy encouraged Africans to wear European

clothes as a signifier of the adoption of French culture (Thomas 2003). The economic and social success of Moki and his family continue this legacy, ultimately enticing Massala-Massala to seek his fortunes in Europe. Through the analogy of the lark mirror, the image of a prosperous and hospitable French Republic therefore appears as the decoy that entices young African men to seek their fortunes there. Meanwhile, the ambush awaiting the migrants emerges as the immigration laws established in Europe and primarily targeted at unskilled Africans. One thus sees a contradiction between French foreign policy in Africa and its domestic policies. While in Africa, the Republic actively promotes itself as a favorable and prosperous destination for migration, but at home it simultaneously sets up stringent immigration policies that unfairly target Africans.

However, even though the lark mirror provides a useful analogy by which one can determine the contradictory role that the French Republic plays in African migration, it cannot adequately account for the apparent naiveté of young African men who risk their lives to reach Europe. Comparing young naïve migrants like Massala-Massala to larks also downplays human choice as an important element in the migrants' decision to reach France against all odds. This is particularly evident when one examines the hurdles that migrants overcome without asking themselves if risking their lives is worth monetary gain that is not even guaranteed. Moki, for instance, makes his way to France by first passing through Angola where he works to earn enough money to make his way to France. Massala-Massala seems even more reckless in his decision-making, for despite suffering imprisonment and repatriation to Congo, he decides that he will try and

get back to France. In the final pages of the novel, we see him on the flight back to Congo, determining that he must return to France as a matter of honor. The reader is thus left wondering at his apparent inability to learn from mistakes, and is tempted to conclude that Africans, like larks, are fatally condemned to adore France at the risk of their own lives. It would therefore appear that Cazenave is indeed correct in her assertion that the author ultimately blames Moki for Massala-Massala's unfortunate fate. Moreover, since I have argued that migration to foreign lands is not a novelty in Africa but a phenomenon embodied in oral traditions and in principles such as *fadenya*, the question arises as to whether African cultures are so vulnerable to Western cultures as Fanon appears to indicate.

However, questioning Massala-Massala's decision-making is unacceptable within the tragic framework, because it blames him for his own fate, yet as a naïve young man in jail, he stands as the actor with the least power and therefore the greatest moral authority. I therefore propose that Mabanckou's portrait of Massala-Massala and his home community as hopelessly gullible and oblivious to the contradictions of Moki's character is largely unconvincing. This is particularly the case because Moki's behavior is transparent to readers familiar with the cultural impact of colonialism. He exhibits contempt for his neighbors and relatives when they welcome him home, and together they look forward to the guests leaving. Meanwhile, he distributes cheap trinkets as items of great value, and later on he insults the community by deeming its culture and language irrelevant in comparison to French foods and the French language. In a continent

where the loss of African cultures is a common complaint, it seems rather odd that no one in the community would detect the contempt of Moki and his family and or question his assertions that France is an El Dorado.

Secondly, the reasons for Massala-Massala's determination to return to France after he has been repatriated contradict certain elements in the novel. While awaiting repatriation, he hesitates to return home on the grounds that his family expected him to return with the economic rewards of his stay in France because he believes that he is the family's last resort. However, his father does not confirm this belief. Before leaving for France, Massala-Massala still lived with his father and did not seem to have suffered any pressure to move out of home. Moreover, he says that he hesitated to tell his father of his initial plans to leave for France because his father had educated him and his sister "dans l'esprit de nous contenter du peu qu'on avait au lieu d'aller voir ce qu'il y avait dans l'assiette de l'autre" [in the spirit of being content with little instead of peeking to see what was on others' plates] (93). Finally, as he leaves for France, his father does not voice any expectations of financial help. Instead, he advices his son to be careful and to follow his conscience. While the impulse to financially support one's parents is understandable, the values of Massala-Massala's family still contradict his decision not to tell his father about his misfortunes in France and instead try to return.

On the other hand, questioning Massala-Massala's decisions is inevitable because of his role as the novel's narrating character and as the tragic victim. Because the reader is inclined to sympathize most with him, they are also inclined

to believe Massala-Massala's portrait of Moki as a dishonest and cynical young man. However, this belief also renders Moki transparent and even comical, so that the reader who laughs or scoffs at Moki essentially blames Massala-Massala for being so gullible as to unquestioningly believe him. The clash between the satirical portrait of Moki and the pitiful character of Massala-Massala is anti-tragic because it reassures readers that they are wiser than Massala-Massala and therefore not prone to making the same mistakes. This reality confirms Oscar Mandel's observation that when tragedy invokes amusement, the audience tends to distance themselves from the tragic hero on the grounds that "we can (and usually do) choose not to imitate him" (83). By distancing themselves from Massala-Massala, the readers can subsequently attribute his fate solely to his personal flaws, as opposed to the combination of those flaws with his social circumstances. They can also blame his fate on the gullibility of communities in Africa and on the dishonesty of returning migrants. However, as the discussion of the lark mirror indicates, the French Republic should ultimately receive the blame for the predicament of African migrants because of its colonial history, contemporary foreign policy in Africa and the current advantages it enjoys from the global system put in place by capitalism.

From the analysis so far, it is evident that empathy is inadequate as a framework through which to understand the global stage on which African migration to France. In the case of Mabanckou's novel, empathy leads readers to appropriate Massala-Massala's experience as proof of negative stereotypes about African immigrants and their home communities or as a tool for catharsis which

redeems readers from examining their social and personal implication in the circumstances that favor the discrimination of African migrants from modest backgrounds. It also exonerates the French Republic and global elites from implication in the suffering of African migrants by affirming their moral authority to sympathize with the migrants while retaining the privilege of being spared some of the inconveniences imposed by French immigration laws on people of African origin. The novel thus perpetuates the illusion that what African people require to tackle their challenges is sympathy from the West rather than a destruction of the social inequities institutionalized by global capitalism and racism, inequities that suppress information, economic autonomy and African cultural values that would successfully provide alternative models for young men to became functioning adults in their communities.

The weaknesses of Mabanckou's novel have significant implications when one considers that the novel's readers are primarily French, since the novel is written in French and published in France. It exonerates French citizens from their implications in the suffering of migrants, even though they are the ones in whose name their politicians have enacted policies that have harmed Africans in both the continent and abroad. Moreover, the novel allows French readers to confirm stereotypes of Africans as economic refugees fleeing a continent in perpetual turmoil. Cazenave hints at these implications when she makes the following observations about *Le Paradis du nord* [The Paradise of the North], a novel by Jean-Roger Essomba whose plot resembles that of *Bleu Blanc Rouge*: "[C]ertains lecteurs peuvent inférer à partir du roman qu'il y a une majorité d'Africains entrés

illégalement en France, que leur vie quotidienne signifie une succession des petites trichéries et d'actes frauduleux de toutes sortes" [Some readers may infer from the novel that the majority of Africans are in France illegally and that their daily lives are characterized by a succession of small crimes and fraudulent acts of all sorts] (220).[6] Since *Bleu Blanc Rouge* is Mabanckou's first novel, one may argue that the author did not anticipate the possible interpretations of his readers. However, his naiveté and inexperience would make him tragic because the novel did get an endorsement from the French Republic when it was conferred the Grand Prix littéraire d'Afrique noire [The Grand Prize For Literature From Black Africa] in 1999. African critics have already voiced concerns that this particular award is used by the Republic as a tool of cultural dominance in its former colonies. Ambroise Kom, for instance, states that main interest of the organization that awards the prize, l'Association des écrivains de la langue française [Association of Writers of the French Language], is political (55). Consequently, it would appear that Mabanckou's novel meets the expectations of the French political class anxious to maintain dominance in Africa without doing so overtly, and of readers anxious to affirm stereotypes of Africa as a desperate continent on the basis of evidence that seemingly emerges from the horse's mouth.

Having argued that Western sympathy for Africans is ultimately destructive and motivated by self-interest, the question arises as to what an appropriate response to the tribulations of Africans in distress would be. Once again, a close examination of tragedy may yield an answer. Since tragedy

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[6] Translation from French is my own.

necessarily provokes conflicting emotions within audiences, a tragic response to Mabanckou's novel would be to experience the clash between the instinct to empathize with Massala-Massala and the apparent callousness that resides in treating the perspective of a person in his position with skepticism. By contrast, a sentimental response motivated solely by empathy devalues his experience because it appropriates his suffering for the moral exoneration of the West and the African elite. It also obscures the role of the French Republic in simultaneously encouraging and criminalizing migration and of African writers – in this case Mabanckou – who affirm the moral authority of their Western readers by appealing to the Republic's sympathy or sense of shame. Tragedy thus demands that Mabanckou, in his capacity as the author, be seen as the tragic figure of *Bleu Blanc Rouge*. This assessment is risky for a scholar in an academic culture that insists on objectivity and the anonymity of the narrator. However, avoiding such polemic positions eventually reveals the scholar as primarily concerned with her own innocence in a world in which she is relatively favored by global institutions, and in which the poor and the less powerful – who are also "innocent" – suffer.

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate that any diffusion of African tragedies that portrays intellectuals, charities, philanthropists or Hollywood stars as selfless and generous or as spokespeople of the downtrodden ultimately affirms the racist ideology that Africans are desperately poor, backward and urgently in need of intervention from a culturally superior Western world. It exposes the Western world and the African intellectuals who appeal to its empathy as unwilling to accept that they are the tragic beneficiaries of an unjust global system

whose roots are at least four centuries old. This denial manifests bad faith, for it attempts to deny the eternal reality that moral authority and power are inversely proportional. The fight against injustice does not lie in more sympathy or charity from the privileged classes, but an acceptance of the human tragedy that we are all implicated in global injustice, regardless of our social background, goodwill or ideological leanings. It is only when we accept this tragedy of the human condition that we can challenge and change the social conditions in which young African men from modest economic backgrounds, like Massala-Massala, suffer for daring to assert their dignity and identity as human beings.

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