Reconfiguring the Postcolonial 'Other' in 21st-Century African Novels: Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant*[1]

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In postcolonial discourses more generally, the categories of 'Self' and 'Other' have conventially been seen as an opposition (Olaussen 2009: ix). While this applies to Europe's 'Others' more generally, it is, as Achille Mbembe (2001:2) has stated, "in relation to Africa that the notion of 'absolute otherness' has been taken farthest". This paper argues that many contemporary African writers reconfigure the postcolonial 'Other' in their novels, ultimately challenging the convential perception and/or construction of African 'Selves' as 'Others' and thus a unidirectional production of alterity. As Tessa Hauswedell (2010: 1) states in her introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Europe and Its Others*, "the binary model 'Self'-and-'Other' has become a key operating concept in academic fields ranging from philosophy, psychology and anthropology to social sciences, literary studies and critical theories". While, as she adds, "the articulation of identity as such depends, very arguably, on an

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appointed Other in order to be recognizable and definable in the first place … Europe's self-image has been enduringly shaped by its more violent and antagonistic encounters" (Hauswedell 2010: 1-2). In colonial hegemonic discourse Europe represented – as Edward Said (1978) has demonstrated – the self-proclaimed universal standard against which 'others' were to be measured. Moreover, as Erik Camayd-Freixas (2013: 2) puts it, "to the extent they were not the same … they would be considered inferior. Thus, Eurocentric identity was constructed not only through differentiation and exclusion … but also by the biased attribution, projection, and transference of negative traits onto its 'others'", effectively legitimising Western colonial and cultural domination. V.Y. Mudimbe (1988: 12), too, has problematised this "ordering of otherness" in his seminal and provocative study *The Invention of Africa*, succinctly analysing "the grid of Western thought and imagination, in which alterity is a negative category of the Same".[2]

Not surprisingly, many African writers have engaged with this opposition in their literary works and continue to do so in the 21st century. As Simon Gikandi has noted, "[O]ne of the key motivations for producing an African literature was to restore the integrity and cultural autonomy of the African in the age of decolonization" (Gikandi 2004: 381). The formulation of *négritude* philosophy in the 1930s, with its revaluation of western cultural and racial stereotypes, represents one strand in the history of critical engagement with the categories of 'Self' and 'Other', basically accepting their binary opposition – conceivd either as a result of a common historical experience of oppression or as due

[2] In the immediate context of this quotation, Mudimbe is discussing the Western classification of African artifacts during the slave period but his point is, of course, a more general one.

to a more essential, racial difference – but inverting their connotations in Eurocentric hegemonic discourse, embracing and celebrating 'black' Otherness. The literature of African decolonisation produced in the 1950s to 1980s with its impulse to write back to the imperial centre (Ashcroft et al. 1989), counteracting and subverting colonial representations of the 'Other' can also be read in this context, as well as, more recently, 'African nativism' (Adeeko 1998).[3]

However, as Mbembe (2002: 258) has argued, such "African discourses on the self developed within a racist paradigm. As discourses of inversion, they draw their fundamental categories from the myths they claim to oppose and reproduce their dichotomies" (Mbembe 2002: 256-257). He postulates that "on a more anthropological level, the obsession with uniqueness and difference must be opposed by a thematics of sameness". In an essay written as early as 1965, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe (1975: 44-45) made a very similar point:

> You have all heard of the African Personality; of African democracy, of the African way to socialism, of negritude, and so on. They are all props we have fashioned at different times to help us get on our feet again. Once we are up we shan't need any of them anymore. But for the moment it is in the nature of things that we may need to counter racism with what Jean-Paul Sartre has called an anti-racist racism, to announce not just that we are as good as the next man but that we are much better.

[3] While these discourses have been very influential in postcolonial as well as African literary studies, their respective claims to speak for postcolonial or African literature as a whole as well as their underlying Eurocentrism have been convincingly challenged; see, for instance, Barber 1995 and Julien 2006.

As if in fufilment of Achebe's prophecy, a new generation of African writers has begun to question and deconstruct the category of the postcolonial 'Other' in their works, opening up new ways of thinking and ultimately moving beyond discourses of inversion and an overly simple use of the 'Self' and the 'Other'. The 'thematics of sameness' which Mbembe proposes, should not be mistaken for an absolute negation of human difference; however, it emphasises the fact – as Paul Gifford (2010: 14), drawing on Ricœur (1990), has put it – that

> human existence, at all levels, is one vast and complex tissue of relationalities: with other 'selves' like *our*selves, or other groups or collectives like *ours*. 'Other' here means *distinct and distinguishable* ontologically; presenting characteristic and recognizable differences, while yet manifestly akin to 'us' – different members (literally or metaphorically) of the same species.

In what follows, I shall explore the ways in which two francophone African novelists, Fatou Diome and Emmanuel Dongala, reconfigure the postcolonial 'Other' in their work, employing diverse narrative strategies. The first novel I shall discuss is *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* by Fatou Diome, published in 2003. In this novel, Fatou Diome, who was born in Senegal in 1968 and who now lives in France, problematises the unrealistic hopes often connected with African immigration to Europe. Salie, the first-person narrator of her novel – like the writer herself a young woman from the island of Niodior in the Atlantic Ocean – is studying for a degree in the French city of Strasbourg, making a living with cleaning jobs, while her younger (half-)brother, who still lives at home in Niodior, is dreaming of following her to France to become a football star. Football also defines the time frame of the novel, which begins in Strasbourg at the end of June

2000, as Salie is watching the European Championship final between Italy and France on television so as to be able to report to her football-crazy brother the details of the last minutes of the match on the telephone later on. Her brother, together with other neighbours, has been able to watch most of the match on the old TV set of an aging repatriate. However, during the penalty shoot-out at the end of the match the TV set has broken down, which, symbolically, anticipates the brittleness of its owner's supposed success in Paris. In the view of her brother, Salie has achieved what everybody on the island is dreaming about: she lives in France. In his imagination, she must be rich, and he expects her to send him money, so that he too can come to France and realise his dream. In contrast to him, however, Salie knows only too well how hard everyday life in France really is for an African immigrant, even for a young, sophisticated woman like herself, who, unlike most of the boys on the island, commands the French language and is a university student. Reflecting on the material demands made by her brother as well as more distant members of the extended family, feeling both exploited and misunderstood, she compares their image of her as some kind of gold-ass to some of the harsher aspects of her actual experience of living in France. In the course of the novel, Salie also relates the stories of a few other people from the island, who once hopefully immigrated to France. While the hopes of some were crushed mercilessly, others later returned to the island supposedly successfully, like the so-called man from Barbès, the elderly owner of the TV set, who is doing his best to prevent others from guessing at the bleak existence he really led in France, eaking out a meagre living in a hostile environment. So as not to be regarded a failure himself, he continues to nurture the illusory dreams of a better life in France with embellished tales of Paris as a kind of paradise. Exasperated by the accusations of her brother, who believes that she begrudges

him the realisation of his dream in France, Salie eventually leaves the decision to him, sending him money which he might spend on the desired air ticket to France but also, as she hopes he will, on setting up a business at home. At the end of the novel the reader learns that it is now his TV set that enables the people of the neighbourhood on the island to watch the Word Cup quarter-final between Senegal and Turkey two years later, which implies that he has made his decision in favour of staying at home, and that it has begun to pay off.

At the beginning of the novel, gripped by a sense of nostalgia on hearing her brother's voice on the telephone, Salie beautifully describes how she experiences the difference between living in Europe on the one hand and living in Africa on the other, in words clearly echoing the literature of Négritude:

> Voilà bientôt dix ans que j'ai quitté l'ombre des cocotiers. Heurtant le bitume, mes pieds emprisonnés se souviennent de leur liberté d'antan, de la caresse du sable chaud, de la morsure des coquillages et des quelques piqûres d'épines qui ne faisaient que rappeler la présence de la vie jusqu'aux extrémités oubliées du corps. Les pieds modelés, marqués par la terre africaine, je foule le sol européen. Un pas après l'autre, c'est toujours le même geste effectué par tous les humains, sur toute la planète. Pourtant, je sais que ma marche occidentale n'a rien à voir avec celle qui me faisait découvrir les ruelles, les plages, les sentiers et les champs da ma terre natale. Partout, on marche, mais jamais vers le même horizon. En Afrique, je suivais le sillage du destin, fait de hasard et d'un espoir infini. En Europe, je marche dans le long tunnel de la performance qui conduit à des objectifs bien définis. Ici, point de hasard, chaque pas mène vers un résultat escompté; l'espoir se mesure au degré de combativité. Ambiance Technicolor, on marche autrement, vers un destin intériorisé; qu'on se fixe malgré soi, sans jamais s'en rendre compte, car on

> se trouve enrôlé dans la meute moderne, happé par le rouleau compresseur social prompt à écraser tous ceux qui s'avisent de s'arrêter sur la bande d'arrêt d'urgence. Alors, dans le gris ou sous un soleil inattendu, j'avance sous le ciel d'Europe en comptant mes pas et les petits mètres de rêve franchis. (Diome 2003: 13-14)

Soon, however, it becomes clear that things are not as simple as that. While sharing her sense of nostalgia with the reader at the beginning of the novel and also intimating her awareness of the stigmatisation, marginalisation and hardship she, like many others, experiences as an African in Europe, Salie soon deconstructs the stereotypical, essentialising opposition often underlying Négritude discourse. She does not stylise her village on the island as a "paradise of childhood" (to borrow a phrase used by her compatriot Léopold Sédar Senghor, one of the founding members of the Négritude movement), symbolic of pure, vibrant, warm, and wholesome traditional African culture in opposition to modern European civilisation, conceived as artificial, congealed, cold, and morbid. Rather, the reader learns that even 'at home' on the island of Niodior, she has always been an outsider, growing up as an illegitimate child, not with her mother, whose shame she represented as a child, but with her grandmother, in a different village where she was always marked as a stranger, an 'Other'. Her sober, critical perspective on living in France, where, in spite of everything, she has now made herself at home, creating for herself the freedom she needs, is matched by an equally disillusioned, critical perspective on the difficult living conditions and people's narrow, preconceived views in the village and sharp criticism of the Senegalese government.

I would like to suggest that in this way, Salie reconfigures the terms of Négritude discourse. Rather than embracing a

nostalgic sense of 'Otherness' inspired by the deliberate revaluation of African culture in the face of alienation and in opposition to the universalist claims of Western civilisation, she insists on constructing for herself an identity beyond the confines of preconceived notions of the postcolonial, or African, 'Other'. At the end of the novel, Salie reflects on this process of identity construction in very poetic words:

> Chez moi? Chez l'Autre? Être hybride, l'Afrique et l'Europe se demandent, perplexes, quel bout de moi leur appartient. … Exilée en permanence, je passe mes nuits à souder les rails qui mènent à l'identité. L'écriture est la cire chaude que je coule entre les sillons creusés par les bâtisseurs de cloisons des deux bords. Je suis cette chéloïde qui pousse là où les hommes, en traçant leurs frontières, ont blessé la terre de Dieu. Lorsque, lasses d'être plongées dans l'opaque repos nocturne, les pupilles désirent enfin les nuances du jour, le soleil se lève, inlassablement, sur des couleurs volées à la douceur de l'art pour borner le monde. Le premier qui à dit: "Celles-ci sont mes couleurs" a transformé l'arc-en-ciel en bombe atomique, et rangé les peuples en armées. Vert, jaune, rouge? Bleu, blanc, rouge? Des barbelés? Evidemment! Je préfère le mauve, cette couleur tempérée, mélange de la rouge chaleur africaine et du froid bleu européen. Qu'est-ce qui fait la beauté du mauve? Le bleu ou le rouge? Et puis, à quoi sert-il de s'en enquérir si le mauve vous va bien? (Diome 2003: 254)

In this way, Salie, while once again referring to the established categories of difference, boldly claims an identity for herself which is both hybrid and individual and the beauty of which lies in its complexity; she makes herself at home, as she puts it, "là où on apprécie l'être-additionné, sans dissocier ses multiple strates. Je cherche mon pays là où s'estompe la fragmentation identitaire"

(Diome 2003: 254). Salie's first-person narrative discourse confidently establishes her as a 'Self' rather than as a narrator who conceives of herself as an 'Other'. Moreover, the way in which she explicitly and freely links this 'Self' to aspects of both worlds, the African and the European one, can be read as an instance of what Gifford (2010: 17) describes as "relational growth", as the "ultimate step" in the "dialectic of identity formation", when, "thanks to the mediations supplied by interactions with the Other … identities can be reconfigured", making possible "advances in wisdom, moral progress, creative self-fashioning".

The second novel I shall discuss is *Johnny Chien Méchant* by Emmanuel Dongala, published in 2002. Emmanuel Dongala was born in the country known today as the Republic of Congo in 1941. *Johnny Chien Méchant* is an example of the literary engagement of many contemporary African writers with civil war and, in the extreme case, even genocide. It is set at the end of the 1990s in the capital of an unspecified country in Central Africa during a civil war between two fictional ethnic groups, the Mayi-Dogo and the Dogo-Mayi. The chapters of the novel are more or less alternately narrated by two youthful first-person narrators, a 16-year-old girl named Laokolé, or Lao, whose family is on the run from rebels claiming to represent one of the two ethnic groups, and a boy of about the same age named Johnny, who fights on the side of the rebels. Lao's narrative bespeaks her maturity and empathy, while Johnny's narrative seems self-concerned, sophomoric, and emotionally crude. While Lao takes on responsibility for her invalid mother and her younger brother after their father's violent death, Johnny is obsessed with finding the most bellicose and intimidating war name for himself, eventually deciding on 'Chien Méchant'. Despite all the terror and violence depicted in the novel, it does not end in despair. Having suprisingly succeeded in killing Johnny, defending herself

as well as a little girl child she has taken under her wings, Lao ties the child to her back with her wrapper and leaves, deciding to call her by the name of Kiessé, meaning 'Joy'. Her departure, carrying the little girl on her back and moving on, symbolises hope for a new beginning, for herself and the child as well as for the nation as a whole, and its future.

The narrative strategy chosen by Emmanuel Dongala to allow his readers a double perspective on the civil war depicted in his novel represents a very interesting reconfiguration of the postcolonial 'Other'. One of the most stereotypical images of Africa in the West today is that of a continent ravaged by hunger, disease, and war. While the latter certainly *are* huge global problems, the way in which this image of Africa is reiterated in Western media very often consolidates the continent's perceived 'Otherness'. While a novel engaging with civil war inevitably runs a certain danger of corroborating this image, Dongala counteracts this by introducing both Lao and Johnny as young, urban characters whose respective first-person narratives display the ways in which they partake in present-day, global popular culture and in which they are aware of international political developments, even though the two of them obviously show different degrees of sophistication and critical reflection. While their narratives are inseparable from the experience of war and the respective roles they assume in this regard, it is made clear that in terms of their human experience of life, there is no categorical difference between them, as young Africans, and young people in Europe or other parts of the world.

Especially Lao is easy to identify with as she talks of her dream of graduating from high school and becoming an engineer or a great scientist, of her friend Mélanie and the beautiful news presenter they both admire, and of her relationship to her parents and brother; and in proportion to the degree in which she comes

across not as an anonymous victim of yet another violent war in postcolonial Africa but as a perfectly ordinary young girl with very reflected views on all kinds of things beyond the experience of war, the reader is struck by the extraordinariness of the horrors of war, of loss, and of dislocation she is going through, not as a postcolonial 'Other' but as an individual human being. Assuming Lao's perspective, the reader is sensitized to the implications of encounters she has with various Western institutions and individuals in the course of her flight. No matter how well-meaning their intentions may be, at least in some cases, in varying degrees they also expose the double standards of Eurocentric perspectives in all their half-heartedness, hypocrisy, and even cruelty.

One instance of this is the way in which the stream of refugees, including Lao, is treated by Western agencies actually designated to serve and protect the local population. While they are eventually allowed to enter the court of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, where they are, for a short time, taken care of, they are left behind defenseless when all the European and American foreigners are evacuated only a short time later. Most cynically, Lao's friend Mélanie is hit and run over by one of the military transporters with which the foreigners are being evacuated and which has unexpectedly backed up to fetch a foreign lady's pet dog, which has been forgotten in one of the buildings. During her short stay in the UN building Lao has been befriended by Tanisha and Birgit, two UN employees from the United States and Sweden respectively. On their evacuation, the two women get permission to take Lao, but not her invalid mother and her brother, along on a helicopter to save her from the rebels. While this clearly represents a potentially life-saving gesture – which the reader almost hopes she'll accept – it also blatantly exposes the cruel logic behind the politics of evacuation,

which is informed by the underlying notion that the lives of the evacuated western foreigners, including even their pets, are somehow privileged and more valuable than those of the mass of anonymous 'Others'. Allowing the reader to experience all of this up close, from Lao's perspective, forces him or her to question the implicit bias of such practices. Another drastic case in point is Lao's encounter, in the middle of her desperate and lonely flight through the rainforest, with western ecologists in the process of evacuating gorillas by helicopter. As their leader, a lady called Jane, explains their mission to Lao: "Nous sommes là pour en évacuer autant que possible car ils sont menacés par cette stupide guerre où l'on massacre même des animaux, de pauvres animaux innocents" (Dongala 2002: 319). The ecologist's wording suggests that she feels empathy with the gorillas rather than with the famished young girl, whose life is at the very least equally threatened. Coldly refusing to save Lao, as she is not an ape, and hurrying the soldiers accompanying the group along as there might be others like her also expecting – from their point of view apparently quite unreasonably – to be helped.

At the same time, however, Dongala carefully avoids reducing Lao to an African victim of war. The reader's close perspective on the enormity of her suffering is complemented by a much fuller impression of her as an individual, of her character and her intelligence and the fact that before the war, her everyday life was very different. This is highlighted when, during her short stay in the UN building, Lao is interviewed by Katelijne, a TV journalist from Belgium, who is very angry about the fact that western media have been silent about the terrible tragedy unfolding in 'Africa', as she puts it rather unspecifically, and who tells Lao that she wants to give a face to the suffering and misery she has been witnessing. On the one hand, Katelijne is well aware of the process of 'Othering' at work in the media in the United

States and Europe, cynically describing the inadequacy of their assessment of what is happening when she says

> Évidemment, ce n'est pas le Kosovo ni la Bosnie. L'Afrique c'est loin, n'est-ce pas? Qui s'occupe de l'Afrique? Le coltan, d'accord, le pétrole, le diamant, le bois, les gorilles, oui. Les hommes ne comptent pas. Ce ne sont pas des Blancs comme nous. (Dongala 2002: 168-169)

However, to the reader who has been following Lao's narrative, the way in which Katelijne describes her work suggests that she does not quite realise the extent to which she herself is implicated in the process, how she herself, without actually intending to offend Lao, also shows a tendency to reduce her to an 'Other'. Having recalled the painful story of her flight from home, Lao is asked to talk about her hopes for the future, and the interviewer's troubled expression clearly anticipates a troubling answer. At first, Lao replies, as expected, "que l'on ne pouvait avoir aucun espoir dans un pays où il fallait marcher sur un tas de cadavres pour prendre le pouvoir, où on vous pourchassait parce que vous étiez mayi-dogo, un pays où on tuait des enfants" (Dongala 2002: 170). However, when Katelijne insists she begins to talk about the dreams she used to have before the war, of her fascination with science and construction work and her dream of becoming an engineer. When she finishes, she notices that her answer has come quite unexpectedly:

> Quand j'ai cessé de parler, j'ai vu que Katelijne et son opérateur me regardaient comme si je descendais d'une autre planète. Moi aussi, comme si je sortais d'un rêve, je me suis demandé pourquoi je racontais toutes ces choses alors qu'en ce moment je me trouvais dans un camp de réfugiés, affamée, avec ma pauvre mère impotente. (Dongala 2002: 170-171)

In Katelijne's view, Lao's dream, which dares to reach beyond her experience of war, may seem inappropriate, irrelevant, or even trivial in the face of her suffering; in its normalcy it may also seem to counteract the forcefulness of Katelijne's own message to the world. However, Dongala seems to insist that Lao's individual humanity – her 'Self' – must not be sacrificed to a role scripted for her by the demands of the news industry, that she must not be reduced to a stereotypical African victim of war. Equally problematic is the way in which Katelijne wants to use pictures of Lao's invalid mother and most specifically the stumps of her mother's amputated legs to enhance the psychological impact of her report, arguing that "les spectateurs cherchent l'image forte, l'émotion forte" (Dongala 2002: 171). Lao, however, firmly objects to the way in which her mother is meant to be reduced to an image or even a spectacle of suffering addressed to the world:

> Ces moignons de Maman, c'était notre torture, notre peine. Elle ne voyait que ce qui pouvait attirer son audience. Était-elle sans cœur? Non, je ne le pense pas, elle vivait tout simplement dans un autre univers, elle ne comprenait pas que pour indigents que nous soyons, nous le faisions pas parade de notre douleur, celle-ci avait le droit d'être privée. 'Non, ai-je dit fermement, l'infirmité de Maman n'est pas un spectacle'. (Dongala 2002: 171).

In cases where such encounters involve Westerners, their perception of her – and those around her – as somehow 'Other', tending to reduce the complexity of her experience as a 'Self', strikes the reader as inappropriate and disturbing, in sometimes subtle ways. Importantly, such encounters are complemented by equally troubling encounters with local institutions and individuals.

At the same time, it is also made clear that there are

further, even more destructive dynamics of 'Othering' at work in the society, resulting, for instance in the civil war between the Mayi-Dogo and the Dogo-Mayi, which, according to Katelijne, has caused nearly ten thousand deaths and half a million displaced person and refugees. The names of these fictional ethnic groups suggests that beyond instigative ideologies they have more in common with each other than some of them want to admit. Moreover, while Johnny conceives of Lao and the other Mayi-Dogo as his 'Others', who deserve to be killed, in the context of the novel he himself is cast as an 'Other', not in terms of 'racial' or ethnic identity but in terms of what has gone wrong in his life, of an imbalance of opportunities and social privilege. While Johnny may be difficult to identify with in the same way as Lao, as he narrates his side of the story it becomes clear to the reader that his negative development has not been inevitable but has resulted from social disprivilege, political mismanagement, and a serious lack of perspectives for young people like him, all of which have made him susceptible to manipulation by unscrupulous individuals hungry for power. Dongala's representation of Johnny as Lao's tragically misguided opposite thus implies a good deal of political criticism, and the reader cannot help feeling that in different circumstances, Johnny's development might have taken a very different course and Lao and he might even have been friends; their difference is not a fundamental one. The alternative, equally problematic or even disastrous processes of 'Othering' shown to be at work in the society depicted in the novel contribute to decentering the more conventional dichotomy between Africa and the West which has dominated postcolonial literature as well as postcolonial discourses for a long time.

Doubtlessly, in many contexts the category of the postcolonial 'Other' is still relevant today. However, as I have

argued and illustrated with reference to Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* and Emmanuel Dongala's *Johnny Chien Méchant*, the authors of many African novels published at the beginning of the 21st century suggest new, more complex readings of the postcolonial 'Other', which, rather than just inverting the discourse of 'Self' and 'Other', contribute to the deconstruction of postcolonial 'Otherness' as either a stigmatised and repudiated or a desirable but equally essentialising form of alterity.

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