

Sankara, Edgard. *Postcolonial Francophone Autobiographies: From Africa to the Antilles*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2011. viii, 232 pp. \$25.00.

One of Hampate Ba's popular comments is "In Africa, when an old man dies, it's a library burning to the ground." This remark highlights the importance of the dead in the cycle of life, the threat of extinction, and the values of genealogy, identity and filiation, knowledge of history, communication, and transmission in maintaining social cohesion. *Postcolonial Francophone Autobiographies (PFA)* is a valuable contribution to that tradition. It examines a transnational archeology of literary autobiographies across Africa and the Caribbean to demonstrate that autobiographies are more than cultural products. Showing how leading writers from Africa and the Diaspora carve themselves a creative space to tell their stories, it covers their authorial intents, their mechanics of writing, and their efforts to reconcile the tension between creation and re-creation. It interpellates the author's commitment to an interpretive community that demands and expects an accurate representation of a reality they can identify, insert themselves in, and claim as their own. It correlates the dichotomy between languages as the signifier of a separate reality versus narrative textual strategies that target language in its creative power, eclectic capacity, and universal appeal. It expresses the fundamental difference between languages as mimetic tools to describe and control reality versus languages as the demiurgic ability to conceive and stabilize new realities. Since these interconnections produce autobiographies that, for the most part, are fascinating in their social realism but uneven in their value, these autobiographies face mixed reception from the public.

Presumably, *PFA* supports the hypothesis that context defines the reception of the text. It takes into account outside elements and forms of intervention, such as power and politics, which can challenge authorial intent. Consequently, it puts into perspective the power of literature to rise against the odds and transcend time and space. Sankara highlights the tension among autobiographical forms, interpretive communities, and the forces that shape and influence narrative projects in Africa and the Caribbean, especially the recognition that the work of decolonization is yet to be achieved. As such, *PFA* claims that the principal factor complicating these processes of textual identifications in Francophone autobiographies is the asymmetrical power of France, which cannot be underestimated. In its selective reading of history and events that have ramifications in Francophonie intellectual history and colonial legacies, *PFA* poses questions regarding the diversities of points of views and audience relations to them. It calls for the exploration of a de-essentialized practice of reception that requires alternative models of publishing economy. *PFA* ties into the knowledge that commercial viability for the Francophone writer entails accommodating the interests of the Parisian elite who run the cosmopolitan publishing economy. Operating as a "hybrid result of the encounter between two 'subaltern entities' and France, . . . [t]his type of autobiography also manifests a tension in which the autobiographers wish to express themselves to a local community, but at the same time they are confronted with their choice of a French reading audience and the publishing policies of the French press" (7).

*PFA* examines this tension in separate chapters devoted to Hampate Ba, Valentin Mudimbe, Kesso Barry, Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant, and Maryse Conde, whose intellectual itineraries and productions of narratives and bodies reveal the creation of subjects coming into being through words that yield various forms of individualities and consciousness answerable only to themselves. These itineraries signal individual actors who introduce complexities to the social determinism that organizes these diverse Francophone societies they

represent. Barry exemplifies these forms of individualities. Her story from beginning to end is one of defiance against the patriarchal society in order to highlight the oppressed status of female bodies in African history. Barry shows the necessity to assume one's identity and to make the autobiographer's voice vital to the public discourse, particularly, in Barry's case, for the Peul people of Guinea. But Sankara's familiarity with the cultural context complicates Barry's autobiography and the notion of the reliable narrator. He indicates that this genre of writing is not simply about causal chronology and sequencing events in one's life. It is also embedded in aesthetic and ideological clashes and some reliance on the exotic. Hence, *PFA* explores autobiography through the subtle distinction between auto-ethnography and auto-fiction. As such, Sankara reveals that the writing and reception of Francophone autobiography is never culturally and ideologically neutral. It is symptomatic of cultural politics that often work to decontextualize and neutralize Francophone autobiographical cultural practice, technique, style, analogies, musicality, power of images, feelings behind the words, and little things on the ground that make the whole difference. The consequence is the de-personalization of narration and a storytelling that slope back into the ethnicization of literature and reception practices through the crystallization of exotic elements that continue to format knowledge. Indeed, the reception of African autobiographies occurs within historical and economic factors that still define France's continual dominance in that Francophone space. That dominance explains the constant tension between postcoloniality and postcolonialism, readership and passive consumption.

As a pedagogy of reading, *PFA* points to the relationship between literature, space and lived experience. As such, within that Francophone space, there is no singular typology of space but different migratory contexts and experiences. Armed with vivid examples of strategic essentialism and list of textual cues, Sankara provides an opportunity to assess mutations and evolution within this disparate Francophone space and the way these works resonate with Francophone audiences, particularly the French cosmopolitan elite who appear as the primary target of these literatures.

These autobiographies exhibit a wide range of methodologies, which Sankara groups loosely under the label "Classical" and "postmodernist." These entail "conformist" and "non-conformist" methodologies linking autobiographical processes to the construction of diverse meta-universes, each negotiating its own cultural modernity. Sankara also highlights the role of spaces as sources of inspiration and resources for creative work. Indeed, spaces, circulation, and mobilities become a pretext to represent different forms of modernities taking advantages of how mobilities and social relations institute new forms of subjectivities and identities. Thus, this literature uses symbolic practices to create and reflect convention, codes, and norms to organize these disparate Francophone spaces and help think about the complexities of these spaces. In these instances, one has to reflect on the different levels of language being used, particularly, Chamoiseau's and Confiant's "postmodernist" approach and reliance on the Creole. This re-appropriation of French words not only reflects a desire to subvert the language and to infuse a different meaning into space and time so as to challenge to the respectable middle-class Parisian tastes controlling and policing the circulation of these texts. Such re-appropriation also acknowledges the diversity of experiences and the belief that the Francophone space cannot be easily unified unless if it is done so ideologically. Consequently, it produces the mixed result of turning Ba into an avatar of the French "good" Muslim and the problematics of Barry's attempt to elevate Parisian bourgeois values as a standard for the Francophonie. It puts politics at the center and brings up thought-provoking debates on literature, liberation, independence, and neoliberal values.

These autobiographies equally invoke notions of belonging and the redefinition of the family in societies in transition. Barry is writing for her daughter who is biracial, Mudimbe for his dual African and African-Americaness, Conde for her return to her roots via Africa, Ba for a syncretic humanist Muslim. Confiand and Chamoiseau develop a form of metissage that appreciates Edouard Glissant's notion of "Tout Monde," a polymorphic and evolutive ideal of thinking that produces fluidity of consciousness as an expression of modernity and that emphasizes creativity and embracing all the forces and imagination that constitute the present. Such an ideal testifies to an ongoing process of discovery, a puzzle that the author never stops to reconstruct, and a rhizomatic way of thinking based not so much on roots but on heterogeneity, imagination, and new connections.

*PFA* claims that in the turbulent postcolonial environment and economy of reception that commodifies its texts, a genuine recognition can be achieved only through literary crafts and penetrating insights that exceed that environment's horizon of expectation. In this pact of surplus and truth between the writer and the reader, authors are committed to the burden of representation. They have to confront all presuppositions and categories in order to personalize themselves in an original fashion that is recognized as authentic and valid. As with Ba's notion of library, the goal is to become a point where a remarkable experience and objectivity come to make sense. *PFA* claims that Mudimbe's and Conde's autobiographies fulfill these categories most closely.

As Sankara explains, autobiography constitutes a kind of intellectual coming out whereby authors fleshes out their real perspective on life and share their experience with the rest of the world. Thus, more than a predictable formula, these forms of self-documentation in *PFA* constitute an effort in cultural and subjective restoration. Their biggest concern is how to retrieve subjectivity after the slave and colonial experience by interpellating both the writer and the audience on the capacity to reclaim the power to think for oneself.

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