

LISIBLE ET RISIBLE

Les noms et les titres sarcastiques dans une traduction anglaise de

La Préférence Nationale de Fatou Diome

par

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ABRÉGÉ

Ce mémoire se propose d'étudier le sarcasme: son usage, son lien fort avec la culture et sa traduisibilité. En traduisant *La Préférence Nationale* de Fatou Diome, nous examinons la difficulté de transmettre le sarcasme sous-entendu dans les noms et dans les titres de ce livre. Le traducteur comme médiateur linguistique et culturel doit jauger l'importance des éléments qui entrent en jeu pendant l'acte traduisant. Comme cette traduction anglaise nous le démontre, le traducteur doit souvent prendre la décision soit d'amener son lectorat vers l'écrivain soit d'amener l'écrivain vers son lectorat- un choix qui, entre autres, pourrait mettre en question la fidélité du traducteur.

ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes to study sarcasm: its use, its strong link to culture and its translatability. By translating Fatou Diome's *La Préférence Nationale*, we examine the difficulty in conveying the implicit sarcasm in the names and the titles of this book. As both a linguistic and cultural intermediary, the translator has to gauge the importance of the elements that come into play during the translation process. As this English translation attempts to show, the translator must often make the decision to either steer his or her readership towards the author or to steer the author towards his or her readership- a choice that, amongst other things, might call into question the faithfulness of the translator.

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« La visée même de la traduction – ouvrir au niveau de l'écrit un certain rapport à l'Autre, féconder le Propre par la médiation de l'Étranger – heurte de front la structure ethnocentrique de toute culture, ou cette espèce de narcissisme qui fait que toute société voudrait être un Tout pur et non mélangé. Dans la traduction, il y a quelque chose de la violence du métissage. »

Antoine Berman

L'épreuve de l'étranger

INTRODUCTION

La Préférence Nationale (2001) de Fatou Diome est un recueil de six courtes nouvelles qui raconte son parcours géographique et formatif du Sénégal, son pays natal, jusqu'en France métropolitaine. À travers ses histoires basées sur des expériences personnelles, Diome présente de façon romanesque une sorte d'enquête anthropologique qui à la fois démontre et dénonce la bêtise humaine et en particulier le racisme.¹ Ces récits pleins de nostalgie, de sarcasme, de violence et d'amertume nous emportent dans l'univers intime de Diome où elle nous dévoile les épreuves de sa vie d'étudiant, voire les injustices auxquelles les immigrés font souvent face. Armée de sa plume et d'un langage coloré, cette écrivaine sénégalaise manifeste contre la corrélation trompeuse : peau noire, cervelle vide. Elle nous fait comprendre que la mort de la colonisation géographique n'a

¹ Renée Mendy-Ongoundou, «'La Préférence Nationale' par Fatou Diome: Être libre en écrivain... » *Amina* 379 (Novembre 2001), 46.

fait qu'ouvrir une arène pour la colonisation sociale et psychologique dont les effets se font toujours sentir.

Ce projet de maîtrise marque ma première traduction d'une œuvre littéraire. J'ai découvert Fatou Diome dans un cours de culture à l'université de Nice en 2009 où j'ai étudié son deuxième livre, *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003). En 2012 j'ai eu l'occasion de travailler sur son premier livre, *La Préférence Nationale*, dans un cours de maîtrise. L'itinéraire douloureux de cette femme m'avait dérangée et attristée jusqu'au point où j'avais honte de la couleur de ma peau. Diome a fait ressortir un côté de la France que je n'avais pas connu; mon expérience en tant qu'étudiante canadienne et la sienne en tant qu'étudiante africaine n'étaient pas comparables. Sa manière de décrire la vie sans fard m'a fait contempler les difficultés que son style cru et poétique poserait à un traducteur. Lorsque j'ai appris qu'il n'y avait pas de version anglaise publiée de *La Préférence Nationale*, ce projet de mémoire est né.

Avant d'entamer cette traduction, j'avais relu *La Préférence Nationale* plusieurs fois pour assurer une pleine compréhension de ces nouvelles ainsi que du style de l'écrivaine. J'avais également consulté d'autres livres de Diome tels que *Kétala* (2006), *Celles qui attendent* (2010) et *Inassouvies, nos vies* (2008). J'ai commencé par traduire les deux premières nouvelles qui se sont déroulées au Sénégal et par la suite, les quatre autres qui sont situées en France. Pendant la traduction des trois premières nouvelles, le texte n'échappait pas à mes yeux. Dans un effort de ne pas oublier le moindre mot dans l'original, j'ai photocopié les pages que je traduisais et les ai affichées à côté de l'écran de mon ordinateur. Cette approche s'est avérée être très inutile et me poussait à faire une

traduction littérale, c'est-à-dire une traduction du 'mot' et non pas de 'l'esprit'. En m'approchant de la lettre, je perdais le sens ou bien l'essence du texte et finissais par créer des phrases lourdes et incompréhensibles. Ainsi, pour les trois dernières nouvelles, je lisais la phrase en question, puis je cachais le texte afin de traduire son message - le sens et le sentiment. Après chaque traduction je consultais de nouveau l'original et si nécessaire je faisais des remaniements. Il est important de souligner cet éloignement du traducteur avec le texte de départ. Cette expérience m'a fait tirer la conclusion que le traducteur a besoin d'un recul vis-à-vis de l'original pour mieux le transmettre dans la langue d'arrivée. Guidée par l'effet que l'original a eu sur moi, j'ai réussi à mieux capter le sens du texte et mieux sélectionner des équivalents en anglais.

Tout au long de cette traduction, je notais les passages qui me posaient problème. En fin de compte, la plupart des passages touchaient à la culture française et ont été exprimés sur une tonalité sarcastique. Plus précisément, c'était le sarcasme qui se manifestait dans les noms propres, dans les noms de marques et dans les titres qui représentait un défi. Ainsi, les questions qui s'imposent sont les suivantes : Comment faire passer le sarcasme d'une langue à une autre de façon fidèle? C'est-à-dire «... [fidèle] au vouloir dire de l'auteur, à la langue d'arrivée et au destinataire de la traduction » ce qu'Albir appelle un triple rapport de fidélité.² Le transfert du sarcasme, est-il toujours possible? Sinon, pourquoi et qu'est-ce qui est perdu? Ce mémoire qui se penche sur la transmission du sarcasme dans les noms et dans les titres a pour objectif de répondre aux questions ci-

² Amparo Hurtado Albir, *La notion de fidélité en traduction* (Paris: Didier Érudition, 1990), 118.

dessus à travers l'analyse d'une traduction anglaise de *La Préférence Nationale* de Fatou Diome.

COMMENTAIRE

Le sarcasme

À l'origine, le mot 'sarcasme' (*sarkasmos*) vient du mot grec *sarkazô* qui veut dire 'décharner un os' et par métaphore 'montrer les dents à quelqu'un'.³ De nos jours, le sarcasme prend un sens plus large et signifie une moquerie, une raillerie insultante et une dérision.⁴ Il s'agit d'une réaction vis-à-vis d'une personne ou d'une situation et se rapproche de l'ironie ainsi que de l'humour noir. Un jeu de langage tout comme un jeu de masquage, le sarcasme permet aux sentiments tels que la colère et la déception d'y trouver un exutoire. Il s'emploie souvent de façon drôle, mais a pour but de souligner une réalité beaucoup moins risible qui met en exergue les défauts des gens ou de la société. Selon Patrick Charaudeau, à la différence de l'ironie où il y a une discordance entre le dit qui est souvent positif et le pensé qui est souvent négatif, dans le sarcasme le dit et le pensé sont tous les deux négatifs. Néanmoins, le dit est toujours un peu plus exagéré que le pensé.⁵

Comme le triple rapport de fidélité en traduction, il y a une relation triadique entre le locuteur, le destinataire et la cible dans l'acte humoristique.⁶ Chez Diome (notre locuteur) nous, le destinataire, constatons une sorte de transfert de son état de victime vers

³ *Dictionnaire étymologique des mots français dérivés du Grec, édition 1809.*, s.v. « Sarcasme ».

⁴ *Le Petit Robert, édition 2012.*, s.v. « Sarcasme ».

⁵ Patrick Charaudeau, « Des Catégories pour l'Humour? », *Questions de communication*, 10 (Décembre 2006): 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

les cibles de son sarcasme, à savoir la France et les Français. En analysant *La Préférence Nationale*, nous voyons bien son usage du sarcasme non seulement comme ‘exutoire’ mais aussi comme ‘arme’. Diome nous livre ses expériences avec un langage combatif et pamphlétaire afin de militer contre le racisme qu’elle a connu en France et de briser le mythe de l’Eldorado français. Bien que l’œuvre entière soit parsemée de sarcasmes, certains éléments ont été très difficiles à reproduire en anglais avec le même lustre sarcastique qu’en français. Les parties qui suivent détaillent seulement quelques-uns des principaux enjeux que j’ai rencontrés pendant la traduction de ce livre.

Le sobriquet

La quatrième nouvelle intitulée *La Préférence Nationale* commence par le passage suivant :

« Monsieur Passe-Toi a fixé la règle sans avoir l'air d'y toucher : si vous êtes marié à un ou une Française, nous dit-il, il vous faudra deux années de baise pour capter l'odeur française, la nationalité. Pour les femmes africaines mariées à des Français, les chances de naturalisation augmentent proportionnellement à l'élasticité de leur utérus, où poussent des fœtus français qui ignorent la préférence nationale. Mais monsieur Passe-Toi n'est pas aussi bête qu'on pourrait le croire. En repoussant la date de l'acquisition de la nationalité à deux ans après le mariage, il compte sur le caractère volage de ses compatriotes et le racisme de la belle-famille pour briser les couples mixtes avant la date fatidique.» (p. 83)

Voici la traduction que je propose pour le passage ci-dessus:

“Mr. ‘Not You’ made the rules without even appearing to change anything: if you are married to a French person, says he, you need two years of sex to capture the French scent, the French nationality. For African women married to French men, the chances of gaining citizenship increase proportionally with the elasticity of their uterus, where French fetuses unaware of government policy on preferential treatment for French nationals grow. But Mr. ‘Not You’ is not as stupid as one might think. By extending the waiting time to obtain citizenship to two years after marriage, he is counting on the fickle

nature of his compatriots and the racism of the French in-laws to break up interracial couples before the fateful day.”

Pour le lecteur qui ne connaît pas le climat politique en France des années mille neuf cent quatre-vingt, surtout les lois sur l’immigration, l’allusion subtile que fait Fatou Diome avec le surnom ‘M. Passe-Toi’ n’est pas évidente à première vue. Alors que le contexte m’avait signalé que ‘M. Passe-Toi’ représentait une personnalité politique, en tant que lectrice anglophone il a fallu que je fasse des recherches afin de bien comprendre sa signification. ‘*Passe-Toi*’ fait référence à Charles *Pasqua* – ancien ministre de l’intérieur, voire chasseur de sans-papiers et défenseur de ‘l’immigration zéro’. Il a fait adopter la loi anti-immigration 86-1025 en 1986 sous le gouvernement Chirac, une loi qui n’a fait qu’augmenter le racisme et la xénophobie chez les Français.⁷ Cette loi a durci les conditions d’entrée et de séjour des étrangers en France, surtout des Africains.

Comme Diome nous le décrit avec son humour féroce:

« J’ai fini par prendre conscience que, dans ce pays, il y a la SPA pour les animaux abandonnés par leurs maîtres, mais rien pour les étrangères que des Français ont livrées à la misère. En fait, alors qu’on me refuse la nationalité, mon chat sénégalais, lui, a ses papiers français. C’est peut-être parce qu’il a le poil roux.» (pg. 84)

“I came to the realization that in this country there is the SPCA for animals abandoned by their owners, but nothing for foreign women once their French husband has

⁷ LegiFrance, « Loi n° 86-1025 du 9 septembre 1986».
<http://legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000317301>.

left them poverty-stricken. In fact, although I am denied citizenship, my Senegalese cat has his papers. It's probably because his fur is red.”

En utilisant ‘M. Passe-Toi’, Diome réussit à ridiculiser le nom de cet homme politique par le biais de la paronomase. Alors, puisque c’est la prononciation qui importe en français, une traduction anglaise des mots ‘passe-toi’ perdrait toute valeur artistique (la sonorité) et sémantique (le sens). Ensuite, j’ai contemplé l’emploi du nom ‘Pasqua’ tout simplement. Avec une note en bas de page expliquant sa signification, cette solution aurait été bien simple, mais trop explicite et n’aurait rien de sarcastique. Le sarcasme favorise le sous-entendu et le traducteur, en général, cherche à produire dans la traduction le même effet que dans l’original- le ‘fonctionnement’ pour employer le terme de Schleiermacher. L’usage de ‘Pasqua’ aurait trahi ces deux critères ou bien valeurs.

Par la suite, je me suis mise à consulter des journaux tels que *The London Times* et *The Guardian* en espérant que des journalistes anglophones auraient inventé un surnom anglais pour cet homme politique controversé. En fin de compte, le seul surnom que j’aie trouvé pour Pasqua était ‘The Old Fox’; il figurait dans un article publié par le Digital Journal et s’intitulait « Op-Ed : Charles Pasqua, the politician no one dares to send to jail ». ⁸ Néanmoins, ce surnom qui fonctionnait bien dans le contexte de l’article, semblait déplacé comme équivalent de celui créé par Diome. Par conséquent, j’ai décidé de tenter la création d’un surnom inspiré de l’original ainsi que des informations acquises lors de ma recherche. Je me suis donc concentrée sur la ressemblance entre ‘Passe-toi’ et ‘Pas

⁸ Michael Cosgrove, “Op-Ed: Charles Pasqua, the politician no one dares to send to jail,” *Digital Journal*, le 24 juillet 2010. <http://digitaljournal.com/article/295068>.

Toi' ('Not You'). Ce nouveau jeu de mots évoquait une sorte de sélection ou de tri ethnique et à mon avis, résumait bien le but du programme politique pasqualien. De même, cette traduction garde le mode injonctif employé par Diome dans l'original. Il est vrai qu'en anglais on ne voit pas aussi bien le lien entre 'Not You' et 'Pasqua' comme en français (pour des raisons tant visuelles que phonétiques), mais pour privilégier le sarcasme, il fallait renoncer à un jeu sur les sonorités. Cela dit, il est important de signaler que même la rime serait dénuée de sens sans les indices supplémentaires que Diome nous fournit. Dans l'original comme dans la traduction, ce sont les phrases qui suivent 'M. Passe-Toi' qui éclairent la personne à qui Diome fait allusion.

Les noms propres

Les noms propres sont porteurs d'informations et reflètent souvent des faits historiques, politiques et culturels comme nous voyons dans l'exemple de 'M. Passe-Toi'. Le même sarcasme apparaît de nouveau ailleurs dans les nouvelles *Cunégonde à la bibliothèque* et *Le visage de l'emploi*.

Dans la cinquième nouvelle intitulée *Cunégonde à la bibliothèque*, notre protagoniste, Satou(Fatou), nous décrit les conditions déplorables dans lesquelles elle a travaillé comme femme de ménage chez les Dupire. Madame et Monsieur Dupire sous-estiment l'intelligence de leur femme de ménage africaine et la surnomment Cunégonde, à savoir un personnage dans la nouvelle *Candide* de Voltaire qui se retrouve condamnée à une vie de servitude. Vu qu'il s'agit de la perte de l'innocence et de la féminité, voire de la bassesse humaine dans l'histoire regrettable de cette femme, le choix de Cunégonde comme surnom n'est pas étonnant. Il existe des traductions anglaises de *Candide* qui ont gardé l'orthographe française de ce prénom (celle de Roger Pearson (1990) à titre d'exemple), mais j'ai décidé de l'écrire comme Cunigund, son équivalent anglais. Nous voyons souvent cette adaptation aux lois phonologiques et orthographiques de la langue d'arrivée quand il s'agit de personnages historiques et fictifs.⁹ Néanmoins, c'est le nom accordé à la famille pour laquelle Satou travaille qui m'a poussée à m'interroger sur l'intraduisibilité de certaines formes de sarcasme: les Dupire. Diome a sans doute choisi ce nom pour illustrer non seulement le pire des mondes possibles dans lequel elle s'est

⁹ Michel Ballard, *Le Nom Propre en Traduction* (Paris: Éditions OPHRYS, 2001), 31-33.

retrouvée, mais l'ampleur ou bien l'étendue de la méchanceté humaine démontrée par cette famille française. Face à ce problème de traduction, j'ai contemplé l'invention d'un nom de famille en anglais qui capterait l'idée de 'du pire' avec des adjectifs tels que 'mean', 'nasty', 'worst' et 'terrible'. Cependant, à l'instar de la tendance courante de ne pas traduire les noms propres, j'ai décidé de garder le nom 'Dupire' dans ma traduction anglaise. Ceci dit, le lecteur anglophone qui n'a pas de notions de la langue française ne décèlerait pas le côté sarcastique de ce nom. Ce petit détail qui ferait rire un lecteur francophone, échapperait complètement à la compréhension d'un lecteur anglophone.

Nous voyons un enjeu semblable dans la troisième nouvelle intitulée *Le visage de l'emploi* avec la famille Dupont qui engage (à contrecœur) notre protagoniste pour garder ses enfants. Sa peau noire était prometteuse d'une femme obéissante, une bonne à tout faire. Monsieur Dupont la traite de 'ça' (*Mais qu'est-ce que tu veux qu'on fasse avec ça?* - une sorte de leitmotiv dans cette nouvelle) et quand lui et sa femme parlent 'des gens de couleur' (des Africains), ils disent 'ces gens-là'. Un des principaux thèmes de *Le visage de l'emploi* est l'ignorance de l'homme, donc le nom courant 'Dupont' reflète, de façon implicite, la banalisation de l'intolérance et du racisme qui existe en France. Dans cette optique, Monsieur Dupont veut dire Monsieur 'tout le monde'. En anglais, le nom de famille 'Smith' (ou 'Doe' – John Doe/Jane Doe) aurait la même signification. Mais en tant que traduction pour 'Dupont', 'Smith' ou 'Doe' rendraient la traduction plus étrangère pour une raison simple: cette histoire se déroule en France. À cet égard, la non-traduction de 'Dupont' et de 'Dupire' me semble justifiable afin de bien situer le lieu de l'action, mais le traducteur court le risque de ne pas générer le même effet perlocutoire

des noms originaux chez le destinataire de la traduction. Ces deux noms ont l'air bien français, mais Diome les a soigneusement choisis avec un but moins explicite. Ces enjeux obligent le traducteur de jauger l'importance de certains éléments sarcastiques et de réfléchir sur leur traduisibilité. En l'occurrence, le lecteur de la traduction doit s'orienter vers d'autres éléments qui évoquent la même généralisation du racisme. Mais puisque Diome s'exprime avec une telle langue incisive, le lecteur n'a pas besoin de ces souffles de sarcasme pour bien comprendre le racisme oppressif que décrit Diome. De la même manière que les Français l'ont mise dans la poubelle d'immigrés, Diome les met tous dans le même panier raciste avec son talent d'écrivaine.

Le titre *La Préférence Nationale*

Tout comme dans la traduction des noms propres, il y a une certaine délicatesse dans celle des titres aussi. *La Préférence Nationale*, titre de la quatrième nouvelle ainsi que du recueil entier, a représenté le plus grand défi de cette traduction. Abstraction faite de *Le visage de l'emploi* qui a nécessité un peu plus de contemplation, les titres des quatre autres nouvelles ont été faciles à traduire.

La Préférence Nationale – ces trois mots qui sont chargés de sens ont été forgés en français et reflètent une situation propre à la France. À la base, ‘la préférence nationale’ est une expression créée par un homme politique de droite, Jean-Yves Le Gallou, et son ‘cercle de réflexion politique’ le Club de l’Horloge.¹⁰ Elle est apparue pour la première fois dans leur œuvre *La préférence nationale : réponse à l’immigration* publiée en 1985 chez Albin Michel. Cette idéologie, pour ainsi dire, fortement prônée par le Front National, favorise les Français d’abord (surtout sur le marché du travail), et s’oppose à l’immigration. De nos jours, on la considère comme pierre angulaire de ce parti politique de l’extrême droite.¹¹ Il est intéressant de noter que dans le monde frontiste actuel, c’est-à-dire l’univers du Front National, il y a eu ‘une

¹⁰ « Une histoire de la ‘préférence nationale’, » *Le Nouvel Observateur*, le 14 février 2012. <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/l-observateur-du-lepenisme/20120214.OBS1365/une-histoire-de-la-preference-nationale.html>

¹¹ Abel Mestre, « Le FN établit un projet global tourné autour de la ‘priorité nationale’, » *Le Monde*, le 20 novembre 2011. http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/article/2011/11/20/le-fn-etablit-un-projet-global-autour-de-la-priorite-nationale_1606696_1471069.html

petite ouverture’; sous la direction de Marine Le Pen ‘la préférence nationale’ est devenue ‘la priorité nationale’.¹²

Avant de tenter la traduction de ce titre, je me suis posée les questions suivantes :

- 1) Pourquoi Fatou Diome a-t-elle choisi *La Préférence Nationale* comme titre? 2) Est-ce qu’elle essaie de ridiculiser cette expression en la mettant sur la couverture de son livre?
- 3) Son œuvre représente-t-elle une sorte de réponse à celle de M. Le Gallou puisque son œuvre porte le même titre?

Une interview de Fatou Diome menée par Renee Mendy-Ongoundou publiée dans *Amina* en novembre 2001 a éclairé la plupart de mes questions.

Pourquoi avoir gardé *La Préférence Nationale* le titre d'une des nouvelles, comme titre du livre?

« Parce que la langue française est riche et ambiguë. "La préférence nationale" n'est pas sans vous rappeler le thème favori d'un certain parti politique en France. Quelqu'un de peu cultivé peut penser que cela signifie favoriser les nationaux. Je crois qu'en réalité, c'est un concept qui se définit négativement. Car ce n'est pas tant favoriser certains, mais surtout en exclure d'autres. Dans les quatre nouvelles qui se passent en France, j'ai voulu montrer des applications de cette préférence nationale, qui exclut.»¹³

¹² Abel Mestre, « Le FN établit un projet global tourné autour de la ‘priorité nationale’, » *Le Monde*, le 20 novembre 2011.
http://www.lemonde.fr/election-presidentielle-2012/article/2011/11/20/le-fn-etablit-un-projet-global-autour-de-la-priorite-nationale_1606696_1471069.html

Ainsi, elle nous confirme qu'il y a une certaine ironie dans son choix de « La Préférence Nationale ». Son intention n'était pas de mettre en valeur une sorte de préférence comme le titre présage, mais plutôt de montrer l'exclusion, la mise à part et le délaissement de ceux qui n'ont pas la nationalité. Et même si elle ne le précise pas dans cette interview, il me semble bien que ce recueil, dans une certaine mesure, symbolise une réponse aux commentaires et reproches faits par Le Gallou. Après avoir lu la première page du chapitre 7 de son livre, je comprends mieux pourquoi Diome a utilisé le nom de famille 'Dupont' dans son livre. Voici un extrait :

« Quant au petit bonhomme qui salue **poliment** en soulevant **modestement** son béret et qui accompagne son geste d'un **timide** "vive la France", il n'est lui, qu'"un vieux con cocardier, chauvin, xénophobe et présumé facho". C'est en tout cas ce que se sont acharnés à nous faire croire ceux qui ont créé de toutes pièces le personnage de "Dupont-la-Joie". Dupont, l'archétype des Français, ne saurait être que stupide et raciste. Eh bien, cette attitude-là n'a jamais été acceptable. Et elle a cessé d'être de saison. Les temps ont changé. L'ère de la mauvaise conscience est close.»¹⁴

Comme nous pouvons le constater, les anecdotes douloureuses de Fatou Diome témoignent du fait que les temps n'ont pas changé.

¹³ Renée Mendy-Ongoundou, «La Préférence Nationale' par Fatou Diome: Être libre en écrivant... » *Amina* 379 (novembre 2001), 46.

¹⁴ Jean-Yves Le Gallou et Le Club de l'Horloge, *La Préférence Nationale : réponse à l'immigration*. (Paris : Albin Michel, 1985), 58.

Mais comment évoquer cette idée de ‘préférence nationale’ à un lecteur anglophone? Il ne s’agit pas seulement d’un titre que Diome donne au recueil et à sa quatrième nouvelle. Comme nous avons déjà vu au début de ce commentaire dans le passage de ‘M. Passe-toi’, Diome emploie ‘la préférence nationale’ à maintes reprises dans le texte :

« Les caélcédrats des tropiques doivent parfois leur chute à de petits termites, et tout comme la taille d’une fourmilière dépend du nombre des petites ouvrières, une cour royale ne serait rien sans ses valets. Ce sont donc les petits employeurs qui donnent sa consistance à la préférence nationale. » (pg. 84)

“Sometimes huge tropical mahogany trees fall to tiny termites, and like an anthill that depends on the number of little workers, a royal court would be nothing without its servants. So it’s those small business owners who give meaning to such hiring practices.”

« Je commandai un jus quelconque en me disant : c’est drôle, quand il s’agit d’encaisser, la préférence nationale baisse les voiles. » (pg. 91)

“I ordered a juice thinking: how funny it is, when it comes to money, preferential treatment for locals shows its true face.”

Diome réussit à utiliser cette expression sans avoir besoin de la reformuler- elle est tellement nette et parlante en français. Par contre, en anglais ma traduction a dû changer selon la phrase et le contexte. Dans les exemples ci-dessus, je l’ai traduit comme : such hiring practices and preferential treatment for locals. Dans le passage de ‘M. Passe-toi’ au début de ce commentaire, j’ai choisi ‘preferential treatment for French

nationals' (voir les pages 7 et 8). Ces traductions font toutes passer l'esprit de 'la préférence nationale', mais elles ne captent pas aussi bien la connotation politique souvent attachée au Front National; le parti auquel on attribue sa création ainsi que sa mise en œuvre. De plus, puisqu'il n'y a pas une seule traduction pour 'la préférence nationale' dans ma version anglaise, la traduction du titre (qui est sans contexte) s'avère être encore plus difficile. Bien qu'il y ait toute une terminologie concernant le racisme et la discrimination dans la langue anglaise, les origines de 'la préférence nationale' et son impact sur la société française lui sont étrangers. Nous avons de bons équivalents des mots 'préférence' et 'nationale' en anglais, mais 'National Preference' – sa traduction littérale- ne correspondrait à rien pour un lecteur anglophone sur le plan métalinguistique. Cela dit, une traduction littérale ferait sans doute passer le message ironique de ce titre ambigu une fois que le lecteur a lu les nouvelles. Il est important de signaler que 'National Preference' est la traduction anglaise utilisée par de nombreux théoriciens qui s'intéressent à la politique française.

Étant anglophone, 'la préférence nationale' m'a surtout fait penser aux mots suivants :

Birthright, homemade, 'Made in ...', white supremacy, second-class citizens, ethnic restrictiveness, ethnic assortment, social division, ethnic solidarity, ethnic/social entitlement, selective discrimination, selective racism, ethnic hierarchy, et NB: Preference may/will be given to ____ citizens, citizenship holders.

Le titre de tout livre non seulement présage ou fait le bilan de son contenu, mais il est censé attirer l'attention de ses lecteurs éventuels. Donc, bien que tous les mots ci-dessus reflètent le thème de 'préférence nationale', aucun ne me semblait satisfaisant comme titre pour la traduction. 'National Preference' n'éveillerait pas le même intérêt chez le lecteur anglophone. Je l'estimais important de trouver un titre avec un côté ironique ou un double sens tel que l'original. Ainsi est né mon titre provisoire pour ce recueil : *EthNOcentrism*. À mon avis, l'expression 'la préférence nationale' et le mot anglais 'ethnocentrism' sont deux euphémismes pour le mot racisme. Le « NO » illustre, de façon typographique, une sorte de refus quant à cette tendance négative de juger autrui. Il serait impossible de traduire 'la préférence nationale' de sorte que le lecteur anglophone sache qu'il s'agit du thème principal d'un parti politique français. Alors, au lieu de privilégier les racines de cette expression, je me suis concentrée sur son caractère euphémistique et ironique.

Les noms de marques

Comme la traduction du titre *La Préférence Nationale* l'illustre bien, il y a des choses que l'on ne peut pas traduire de façon nette dans la langue réceptrice. Ceci dit, le traducteur réussit parfois à trouver 'des équivalences de situations' pour employer le terme de Vinay et de Darbelnet.¹⁵ Dans la nouvelle intitulée *Le visage de l'emploi* (*The right face for the job*), j'ai appliqué le procédé d'adaptation en traduisant deux passages où Diome avait utilisé des marques françaises de façon sarcastique.¹⁶ Il est important de signaler que je visais un destinataire nord-américain.

1 : « Quoiqu'il fût midi passé, les Dupont n'avaient pas l'air de se préparer à déjeuner. **Marie** était sans doute à leur service. » (pg. 67)

“Although it was past noon, the Dupont family didn't seem to have prepared lunch. **Betty Crocker** was probably at their service.”

2: « Tu es en terminale, peut-être? »

« Non madame, lui dis-je, j'ai ma licence de Lettres depuis deux mois. Chère madame, les enfants de **monsieur Banania** sont aujourd'hui lettrés. »

“You're what, in grade 12 maybe?”

¹⁵ J.P. Vinay et J. Darbelnet, *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*. (Paris : Didier, 1958), 52-53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

“No Madam, I said to her, I’ve had my Undergraduate degree for two months now. I thought to myself, my dear Mrs. Dupont, **Aunt Jemima’s** children are well-educated nowadays.”

Dans le premier exemple, le sarcasme se révèle à travers l’usage de la marque française, *Marie*; une entreprise qui se spécialise dans la fabrication de plats surgelés. Ainsi, *Marie* représenterait une façon de se moquer de la paresse ou de l’impatience de la famille Dupont. Puisqu’il existe plusieurs marques comme celle-ci dans le monde anglophone, j’ai décidé de remplacer *Marie* par une marque américaine du même genre qui porte le nom d’une femme aussi (*Betty Crocker*). Cette adaptation à la culture alimentaire américaine évoque le même sarcasme que *Marie* renforçant l’importance de la traduction oblique.

Dans le deuxième exemple, je me suis servie de la même technique. *Monsieur Banania*, une marque française de cacao en poudre m’a fait penser à *Aunt Jemima*, une marque américaine de farine à crêpe. Toutes les deux ont pour mascottes des personnes noires ainsi que des slogans écrits en pidgin : *Y’a bon Banania* et *I’se in town, Honey!* Nous voyons bien ce stéréotype ‘des gens de couleurs’ à travers les Dupont qui parlent à Satou en petit-nègre : *Toi y en a repassé pour Madame/ You iron for Madam, Toi y en a aspirateur/ You vacuum, Toi y en lavé carrelage/ You wash tiles.*

CONCLUSION

Toutes ces déviations de la langue et de la culture de départ alliées aux tentatives de ‘compensation’ dans la langue et la culture réceptrices permettent de réfléchir au rôle du traducteur et d’examiner ses décisions. Face à la traduction du sarcasme, le traducteur doit souvent prendre la décision soit d’amener le lecteur vers l’auteur soit d’amener l’auteur vers le lecteur – un débat ‘éthique’ qui persiste toujours dans le domaine de la traduction. Ces deux approches ne sont pas aussi opposées que l’on pourrait le croire; tout dépend des éléments linguistiques et extralinguistiques qui sont en jeu. En ce qui concerne cette traduction anglaise de *La Préférence Nationale*, il est évident que j’ai hésité entre les deux. Dans le cas de *Monsieur Banania* et de *Marie*, par exemple, j’ai amené Diome vers son lectorat anglophone par le biais de l’adaptation. En revanche, la non-traduction de Dupont et de Dupire, des noms de famille qui sont chargés de sarcasme, oblige le lecteur anglophone d’aller vers l’écrivaine, le lieu de l’action et en fin de compte la langue française.

Le travail du traducteur, comme médiateur ou bien pont culturel entre l’original et l’étranger, dépasse le domaine de la linguistique comme la traduction du sarcasme nous le démontre bien. Ce qui est important dans une langue et par extension, dans une culture, ne l’est pas forcément dans une autre. Ceci ajoute à la subjectivité de la traduction littéraire rendant le processus complexe et le résultat discutable. Il me semble qu’à chaque fois qu’on ne peut pas faire une traduction littérale qui capte aussi bien l’esprit de l’original, la fidélité du traducteur peut être remise en question. Comme Diome essaie de nous sensibiliser au racisme qui existe en France (voire dans le monde occidental), la

traduction du sarcasme nous sensibilise aux différences entre langues et cultures et la difficulté de les traduire de façon fidèle, c'est-à-dire fidèle au message de l'écrivain, à la langue réceptrice et au lectorat de la traduction.

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EthNOcentrism

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

FATOU DIOME

The Beggar and the Schoolgirl

A few roasted nuts. Peanuts stacked in piles, disturbed only by a hand pouring them into a cornet where they slide like days through the funnel of time.

Another cornet, then another. The expert hand would make them without even needing visual aid. Its fingers were shriveled, chapped, hard and trembling. A tormented muscle extended from the forearm and hid in the thumb where it emerged again—powerful, like an invisible string forcing each sheet into its ultimate cone shape. Another muscle stretched from the inner elbow and ran the length of the biceps where it lay poised. It disappeared just below another muscle following a large vein and a thick line in the neck and found its destination underneath Codou's left jaw.

The paper supply was made of old school exercise books. Before becoming a cornet, each sheet would undergo two processes: firstly, two thighs would hold the remainder of the exercise book and release one sheet erect like a blade pointing toward the sky. A swift hand would then tear it out. Next, they would release pressure, the booklet would close and become a table. A stump would wedge into place the page that the hand would smooth down a little, then pour a cup of peanuts before rolling it back over itself and folding it over the top.

When it was windy, the torn pages would blow away. Old Codou would run to catch them as they whirled around in the courtyard. Sometimes she would have to pull them from the bamboo fence where they would hide. But some sheets bearing a human touch were carried away and landed on wounds still bloody, threatening to leave the neighbourhood with limbs amputated and eyes blinded forever. Old Codou lived in the leper district with her son, Diokéle, who was deformed by polio. As for Guignane, her husband, his eyes had been pierced by the arrows of leprosy fired from the big cities. His

nose was flanked by two empty eye sockets that oozed whitish tears, washing away the daily dust that he could no longer rid himself of. Since leprosy had stolen his vision, old Guignane, clinging to his cane, would pace the streets of Foundiougne chanting: *Nguir yalla, sarakhelene, nguir yalla* -- by the grace of Allah, give alms in the name of Allah. Each time someone would toss him a coin, a piece of bread, a handful of rice or millet, he would give his blessings to the kind soul and prophesize the most comfortable of Mohammed's seven heavens.

He was the first to catch the flesh-eating disease. When he was placed in quarantine, Codou, as a devoted wife, had accompanied him and nursed him without thinking of the risk of contagion. *I am not afraid*, she would say to the multiple warnings, *only God can decide for us*.

And God did just that: leprosy had eaten away her right hand which, gloved in faith, had so lovingly sponged the infectious secretions from Guignane's eyes.

With one less hand, Codou could no longer cut the wood to sell at the market with which she would cook the meagre fish that the fishermen gave to her farmer husband in exchange for a few portions of millet. Indeed, the only memory that old Guignane still had of his fields was an uncertain image of autumn hidden away in his mind. When he lost his sight, he foresaw his retirement from farming and only made a living from his tremolos heard all around Foundiougne. And so he gave a few lessons to his wife making her an expert beggar in no time.

She would go into houses making regular, five-minute stops. Gifted with a beautiful voice, she would start off singing religious hymns which portrayed God's promises as likely as possible, and finish with popular songs intended to play on the

feelings of the townspeople. She would recount the extent of her tragedy that God, she would say, could place on the shoulders of anyone he chose. Codou made sure that the alto reached its climax and that the ending was soft enough to give shivers to even the darkest of souls. One of her favourite songs for loosening purse strings went like this:

Walaye walaye soumako walaye

Yalla ma nattou ma dik di yélwane

Walaye walaye Soumako walaye

Yalla bima binde moye séne boroom

Walaye walaye soumako walaye

Yalla kouko nékh mou tégko ndogalame...

Which means:

I swear in the name of Allah

God has tested me and I come begging

I swear in the name of Allah

My creator is also yours

I swear in the name of Allah

God tests whomever he chooses...

Some people gave out of concern, and others driven by the desire to protect themselves against the divine thunders, gave coins and food to Codou. They all prayed beforehand that their offering would purge them of their various worries and that misfortune, sparing their loved ones, would instead befall her as the beneficiary of their donations. As a precaution, some would go see old Codou on the eve of an important

event and give her a more substantial offering to ward off bad luck. In this world so deeply entrenched in superstition, no one valued her in the least, but her cathartic role was of utmost importance. Like a magnet buried deep in the sand of an old forge, Codou gathered society's leftovers. And so unfolded her life as a beggar.

Sitting on her bench, elbow on her thigh, neck projected forward and chin pressed against the palm of her only hand, Codou waited. Her large, nearly-empty basket indicated a successful morning. Her peanuts had sold well, but she was still there, alone and motionless. Codou waited in silence, her eyes wide-open. The light from her stare was fixed on a broken window in the front of the school and seemed to reflect and transform deep within her into a torch illuminating, little by little, her life before the peanut stand. Her jaws clenched, she thought she could hear her beautiful voice that all the surrounding neighbourhoods liked so well, as it took away a piece of her dignity every time she sang one of her laments. She shuddered as if switching off a bad song that gets played far too much.

Yet, even though her memories would sometimes force her heart to come to terms with her past, Codou was happy to see them slowly slip away. But the one thing she could not forget was the humility shown by the destitute who were able to overcome life's bitterness.

Sitting on the doorstep of her house, Codou faced the school which supplied her with a loyal clientele. At recess and lunch, pupils would come running. For a lot of them, the roasted nuts were their only meal. Codou was always there. She could still be seen even after the last cornet in her large basket was sold. In a little basket carefully placed

underneath her bench, a square note pad concealed two cornets of peanuts much bigger than the ones for sale. Codou would pat them at times and waited a while longer.

The flood of children poured toward the main city street and carried me with it in a dense mass. An aerial view of the group would have shown blobs of black wax melted by the sun into the same mould. Heads were so close together, a calabash thrown at the crowd would not even hit the ground. An optical illusion projected them in wave-like motion like surf breaking on a beach. But not all ports offer the same haven and this apparent fusion was merely an illusion, for zebras in a herd all have different stripes.

Style of dress led to the following assumptions: those wearing store bought dresses, skirts, pants and shirts were the children of civil servants and other intellectuals. Traditional dress was made from sheer cotton and bristle and worn by the offspring of merchants and other prominent citizens. The latter were usually religious leaders who, dissatisfied with the privileged position they had claimed for themselves close to God, intended on preparing their offspring to conquer the political and economic scene. CVs meant nothing yet for us, but wrinkled uniforms were our calling cards.

In my flea-market jean shorts and multi-coloured t-shirt, I lamented the era when Senghor had enforced school uniforms: shirt and shorts for boys, button-up dress for girls, everything made of solid blue cotton. Nowadays, ducks no longer mingle with the peacocks.

A few metres away from the school, the parade started to clear. The ones most in a hurry knew they had a hearty meal waiting for them. I glanced to my right. The bakery in the little square was still open, where the smell of *thiéboudjène* had driven away the last

remaining checker players when the school bell rang. As usual, I branched off to the right toward Codou's house. Voices that I still curse to this day rose in unison.

“Look there, the first in the class with holes in her shoes! Wooh! She's going to, *Couddou's* the leper! If you catch her leprosy, bring it back to your own village! Wooh!”

The doctor's children and their followers were the only ones who never bought Codou's peanuts. They deliberately mispronounced the name of the peanut vendor because of 'Couddou' which means spoon or ladle in Wolof. It was to allude to her abnormally enlarged, orphan hand. Grotesquely bent out of shape from doing everything on its own, this same hand dangled in front of her as if to measure the depth of her unhappiness during her beggar days. I turned around and gave them the finger and went on my way.

I was walking. The sun danced a striptease but only the minaret rose to the occasion. My head felt like a pressure-cooker. Unfinished mathematical equations rolled around in my jelly-like head. I was calculating in CFA francs. What did I get? One answer. A terrifying one.

$$50 \times 99 = 4950$$

$$5000 - 4950 = \dots$$

I found myself standing in front of Codou before I had the answer.

“There you are at last,” she said in a friendly tone. “I finished earlier than usual. I was waiting for you.”

Without giving me a chance to say hello, she asserted with false authority, “Here are your thirty francs, now go buy your bread before the bakery closes.”

While she talked, I rummaged through my bag that I wore over my shoulder. It was incredibly deep. My grandmother had spent an entire night sewing it. From the scraps of an old polyester sheet, she had succeeded in making this bag which I had used as both a travel bag and school bag.

“What are you looking for?” asked Codou.

“My pen, to mark down the 50 francs for today: 30 francs for the bread and 2 x 10 francs for the two cornets of peanuts like always,” I replied, my hand still buried in the bag that hung to my knees.

“The bakery is going to close, young one,” she replied. “Go on. I’ll wait for you. We’ll sort that later.”

I took the 30 francs and hurried on.

To and from the bakery, I thought about how Codou and I met. Our destinies, like seaways born from different sources, had crossed paths and intertwined while waiting to carry on their respective journeys towards destinations that only fate could determine. The same fate that had my school built in Codou’s city and not in my village.

I had met Codou when she was a beggar. Her songs played on people’s faith and consciences and were able to coax a few meagre donations from the pockets of the Foundiougnois villagers. Codou knew that her main enemy was the indifference caused by routine, so she visited the different neighbourhoods, but never at the same time. And so, her visits at my house were always unpredictable. Having come from the Saloum Islands, I was taken in by a polygamous family. The importance of the head of the house was determined by the number of starving mouths that he had to feed: two wives and eighteen children crammed into three bedrooms and one living room. Though wool hid

the bony spines of the three sheep that grazed on the sand in the courtyard, the children's bones were not so discreet and seemed to blame the heavens. Similarly, the food parcels that my grandmother would send to me regularly disappeared as fast as a teardrop at high noon in the Chinguetti desert.

At meal times, the unlucky stragglers sat down around Ceres' communal bowl, large and flat, and always three quarters empty. Not only did they have trouble reaching the bowl, once they did only found remnants- a fish head with eyes wide open as though looking up into the faces of misery gathered round.

Codou often left empty-handed from this household. She knew however that the dead don't pay any taxes and that the *zakat* doesn't come from an empty attic. But her pitiful feet followed the pathway of hope and had memorized all of her stopping places.

My school was located three kilometres from my foster family's house. By the end of the first month, I had given up on the race to the food. Pretending to go home at noon to avoid being questioned by the supervisor on duty, I would leave with the crowd and branch off on my own a few streets further along. I would then take a detour back to the school after buying some peanuts and a piece of bread.

Biting, chewing the bread, then the peanuts lobbed one by one in my mouth like a basketball net as I walked. I was happy to gulp them down, to mix them with the bread. Saliva? I had plenty of that. The taste of salty chocolate was the taste of survival. Disappointed like a basketball player who misses a shot, every time a peanut deviated from the trajectory and wound up in the sand. I would pick it up and brush it off. The referee whistles: a free throw. A point is scored. The game, the meal carries on. One mouthful of bread, one peanut, one mouthful of bread, two peanuts, one mouthful of

bread, three peanuts, no more bread, one peanut and another...the referee whistles. It's the last shot.

A fine swallow of water at the school's fountain and my stomach stopped its incessant groaning. Lying beneath a tree in the deserted schoolyard, I would study while waiting for afternoon classes. But this brief taste of tranquility vanished all too quickly.

One evening I found my old suitcase upside down. The few notes that I had hidden there were no longer to be seen. The houseful of children made the investigation impossible, but I could not allow myself to let the little money I owned disappear like a glass of water in a manure heap. The bills were still damp with my summer's sweat. While tourists were worrying about the quality of their tan, I was hired as a young maid by a Dakaroise family. A lot of sweat was needed to pay for the school year.

The lion feeds on the doe's blood and the cubs lick the blood-stained grass. So I questioned the six oldest children. "Slander!" they shouted. After each feeding, the lion licks his chops. As my punishment, the father of the house planned a form of torture worthy of any concentration camp. He had me restrained by a team of four: they held me more than a metre above ground. His henchmen, his four oldest sons, had positioned themselves like four cardinal points and picked me up by my arms and legs. The patriarch stood over me and gained momentum from above his great height to beat my back and backside with a club. My crying did not upset the rest of the household. In spite of my calling out their names, the wives did not come to my rescue. I was counting on their protective, maternal disposition, but I quickly understood that in the realm of polygamy, no one dares to defy the master.

I was awakened by the stabbing pain of my blood-drenched knees. The henchmen must have surely thrown me on the concrete after my beating. When I opened my eyes, I became aware of a heavy silence. Everyone was asleep, but the head of the family was sitting on a bench in front of me. My fainting had forced him to watch over me. He had not pulled the tatters of my shirt over my reluctant chest which seemed to push him far away. Like a pair of scissors, my forearms separated where his body merged from the spot where his eyes were looking. In a voice the color of blood, the patriarch uttered these words:

“Let this beating serve as an example,” he said. Then in a hushed tone, he added: “I’m the one who took your money. How can a child like you dare keep 2000 francs without entrusting them to an adult? Instead you had your own secret stash!”

This last sentence was said with an angry grin. He had solved the mystery of my days at school. I awaited his verdict and it didn’t take long.

“From now on, you will come into my bedroom every morning and I will give you the amount that you need.”

He got up, centred his head between his shoulders, looked at me sideways, licked his lips and before leaving whispered:

“Don’t forget that the hand that punishes knows how to caress as well.”

The next morning before going to school I knocked on his door. He invited me in.

“Good morning Pa-Dioulé,” I said. “I need 50 francs.”

He was seated on the edge of his bed; his caftan extending below his ankles. His wallet was visible on a little table next to the door. He asked me to give it to him. As soon as I handed it over, he grabbed my wrist and lifted up his tunic. He was naked underneath,

a coin placed on his penis. His throat emitted a thick and slimy voice that I had never heard before.

“You see, he also needs something this morning and then I’ll give you your money. Come on, come on, shhhh!”

I struggled like a fish caught in a net. Fear had rendered me speechless. But the sudden configuration of my mouth forewarning an imminent cry made the patriarch hesitate about his next move. He loosened his grip and with one swift movement I threw myself against the half-opened door.

In my scramble I had knocked over a small basket containing two little, greenish-black mangos and an overripe banana with a shriveled up peel. I have never gone back to Pa-Dioulé’s room, either to see what became of his overripe fruit, or to demand my money.

Like sewers beneath a city, these memories flooded my mind. Reflecting back on them, I stopped not too far from the bakery and I was now circling around a pile of filth left there by the housekeepers in the vicinity. When I thought back on my errand, the bakery had already closed its doors. I turned and went back. Old Codou was probably growing impatient. Not to mention, the calculation, the figures that I was meant to record in our little notebook.

$99 \times 50 = 4950$. Yes, I was around there. Old Codou only owed me 50 francs more: two cornets of nuts and 30 francs for bread, tomorrow’s lunch.

My financial relationship with Codou had begun a few weeks after the patriarch had stolen my money thinking he had gotten all of my savings.

Little did he know my Niominka roots.

Serer Niominkas never store all of their harvest in the same cellar; the house never holds as much as the hiding-place in the bush. What Pa-Dioulé thought was a large sum was only a portion. The main part was elsewhere.

In fact, I had arrived in Foundiougne with a total sum of 7500 francs in my bag. The first few days of school, I kept them on me in a sock, a jeans pocket, or tucked inside my skirt. It bothered me a lot, especially at the gym where I had to watch the changing rooms.

Tired of the constant surveillance, I decided to spread my cash between two hiding places. So I buried 5000 francs at the foot of the big tree in the centre of the school, first wrapping them in a plastic bag and then placing them in a small, empty milk bottle. The little treasure discovered at the bottom of my suitcase had up until now been a convenient reserve supply.

Loyal to her ever-changing schedule, one day, early in the morning, old Codou, had decided to show up at my foster family's house. Her songs softened the first rays of light. But after a while, she left empty-handed and went towards the main road which leads to the school. Her stride was involuntary. She seemed to exert superhuman effort in order to push her misery in front of her. And as I was heading to school, I caught up with her quickly.

“Hello ma'am Codou,” I said.

“Hello my child,” she responded. “Alms will not get your hosts the key to heaven,” she added painfully before continuing vociferously.

“They are stingier than the skeletons of their oldest ancestors and have hearts of teak wood; to think that I would stoop so low to sing for the likes of them!”

Her thoughts weren't far from my own and her words hung over me like a dark cloud.

In fact, as I still wouldn't always come home at lunchtime, the patriarch's suspicious questions were becoming more insistent. He had guessed that I was content with a snack for lunch and so speculated that I had more money. And while Codou strived hard to squeeze out an unlikely donation, I was racking my brains to find a way to remove the rest of my savings from his clutches. It was then that I thought of forming a partnership with Codou.

Foundiougne was the region's agricultural centre. Farmers came here to sell their groundnut harvest which made the peanut industry thrive: all that was required was wood, salt and a little money to get started. Since Codou was only lacking the latter, I offered to lend her my 5000 francs so she could buy two sacks of groundnuts at the market to make her peanuts. Codou already knew where she would sell them since she lived opposite the school; all she needed to do was stand in front of her house to attract the captive clientele of pupils whose only snack often times consisted of a cornet of peanuts.

On the matter of repayment, we had a verbal agreement: it was decided that every day at lunchtime she would give me two cornets of peanuts in exchange for 20 francs, plus three 10 franc coins to buy a small piece of bread. As soon as Codou had started her business, I gave her a notebook in which I would carefully take note of the amount spent and the amount owed. With her earnings, Codou kept her family fed; she had even managed to replenish her peanut stock and her days as a beggar were nothing more than a sad remnant of her past.

As I was walking, I repeated, “4950 francs”. In two days time, the 5000 francs will be reimbursed. It was the beginning of the end. On arriving at Codou’s, I was almost happy that I had not been able to buy my piece of bread. The remaining 30 francs would get me three more cornets of nuts.

“But where is your bread?” Codou asked.

“The bakery is closed,” I replied.

“Oh little one,” she said regrettably. “You needed to go faster, you are still a dreamer. Here you go, your two cornets of peanuts and a third one to compensate for your bread; but this one’s on me, so don’t count it.”

“Where is the notebook,” I asked after thanking her. “I will jot down the 20 francs for today and I’ll give you the 30 francs for the bread for...”

“Don’t worry about it, little one. We aren’t making note of anything today,” she replied firmly.

“But we must, ma’am Codou,” I retorted. “Besides, in two days you will no longer owe me anything. You already gave me 50 francs x 99 minus the 30 francs for the bread which makes...”

“That’s enough little one,” she said using her bent hand for emphasis. “I don’t know how to read or write, but I do know how much it is. Remember this, there are some things that the White school can never teach you. And since no one invented a measurement for friendship, your cornets of peanuts and your money for bread will always be there for you. See you tomorrow little one, I’ll make some beautiful cornets with our little notebook.”

Stolen Marriage

The eyelids of his big eyes were not weighed down by the afternoon lull. He stood side on. His tall body pressed against the gate of the city hall and all of his being seemed to hold back the saturated and heavy atmospheric veil of the dry season.

The Senegalese mahoganies were almost withered. The asphalt sparkled with its ritual melt. Some young country folk who had abandoned the bush carried on their heads their sole possession, an ice chest. They raved to the passers-by about the quality of their ice cream and dragged along with them the misery that they thought they had left behind by coming to Dakar. They weaved between cars; horns reverberated and were answered by the clamour of a few obscenities. These street vendors stood and faced death every day, driven by a thirst for life only granted to those who have nothing.

The young man looked at them without seeing them. He had come from his little city the night before for a less existential reason. He had come for THE wedding. He was going to start off the year with a wedding. His face was serious.

A beautiful, white, Japanese car pulled up in the city hall courtyard. The driver got out, walked around the car, opened the back door on the passenger side and like any gallant and refined man, helped the bride out.

The crowd of parents, friends and well-wishers which up until now had been divided into small like-minded cliques, stood up and in one movement congregated at the entrance of the town hall while admiring the bride. There were blacks, whites, Christians, Muslims, Europeans, Senegalese and Americans too. The multi-coloured clothes would make you think of a giant patchwork. What was most extraordinary though was the

synchronized beating of hearts filled by the wedding atmosphere. If God is truly everywhere, he must have thought on this day that his creation was perfect.

But if each man's eyes merged with those of his neighbour, one young man in the congregation had his own. The crowd soothed his solitude. His heart beat along with the others, but not in unison, for his own rhythm humbled all competition. He had left his post, the understanding metal gate, which had supported his athletic body, supple and svelte, as he waited for the princess of the day. He was plain, but elegant, despite those few excess centimetres of height making his head look like the dot above a large "i".

For once, a representative of the French Republic wore a smile. I smiled back, then changed my mind. No need to get carried away. It was only put on for the occasion. And then again, it was not meant for me, but for the bride.

The mayor paraded around in a navy blue suit. His red tie with yellow and blue designs tightened the collar of his light-blue shirt. Over his suit, he had attached, belt-high, the national flag. Did he do so to symbolize the country's virility? I admit that the moment was opportune, but I would have preferred him wear our three colours over the shoulder, on his heart and not around his waist. His face was illuminated by the reflections of a pair of glasses that he no longer needed for reading those words that he had repeated one thousand times and not once ever heard, but which complimented his style. The mayor persevered. He performed all the duties required by his office which he had occupied for so long it seemed hereditary. He naturally took his seat in this room so familiar to him that he forgot what it looked like. He automatically perched himself on his

platform escorted by his deputy and only had to say “pen” or “law book”, exactly like the surgeon who, without turning his head, orders “scissors” or “lancet”. And so they were ready for the ceremony and faced the bride and groom. The room was attentive and silent. On the back wall, an enormous painting spilled over with the beauty of a tragic event. The theme of the painting was slavery. It showed vigorous, black men exerting a physical effort visible in the strain on their muscles. They were depicted in single file, shackled to one another. The extent of their freedom did not exceed the length of five links of that large, steel chain which mercilessly tied them to their fate. The mayor took the law book from his deputy’s hands and started to seal the links of another chain, that of marriage. The tall, young man was too preoccupied to think of his departed brothers who crossed the Atlantic Ocean centuries before. But maybe, like me, he was thinking about that day when fate, without asking our opinion, made our paths cross. That day which had stopped his sun from shining for the last five years, so it could shine today on this wedding ceremony.

It was an afternoon like any other. African midday at peak temperature. Weighed down from the *thiéboudjène*, *domoda*, *maafe* or maybe floored by other no less rich dishes, Wolofs, Serers, Diolas and Toucouleurs sank into a siesta common to local ethnic groups. Those who resisted the heat sipped noisily on their tea beneath the baobab tree. The Harmattan wind nipped us as usual. Dead leaves crackled underneath the feet of passers-by and were buried in the hot sand, deprived indefinitely of a damp tomb. Dozens of tongues hung from dozens of dogs’ mouths and flies in quest of coolness landed there finishing in a sort of sticky metro.

That day the tall, young man had surely noticed the enormous, golden ball the colonizers had forgotten which hung in the sky. It was bright enough to light the passage for the rains which like to visit us at this time of year. In this season when noses dilate, when we compete for oxygen and are packed underneath the baobab tree- the only place of mercy in the vicinity -only a rainfall could appease the growing human discontentment. You would have to shout to be heard over the others and for more effectiveness, wave forcefully. All this made the atmosphere hazy; if Prometheus had been there, the city would have gone up in flames. It was as if God had opened hell's gate to make us feel the blast. The day chosen by the Department of Education for the preliminary Baccalaureate exam in French was purgatory.

In the official room, more than a hundred sets of eyes watched the backs of the young couple facing the mayor as he bound them with a mutual leash. The mayor, a true professional, pronounced phrases that no longer affected him. He knew that the only unwavering loyalty is between the dead person and his grave. Feeling so unconvinced by what he wanted to make us believe, I decided to go back in time to the day of the preliminary Baccalaureate exam in French.

That day, there was no siesta for me. Despite the heat, I salivated abundantly. Worry liquefied inside me. The Mbour firemen had lost their hose because I had it in my throat. Outside the sun was caramelizing everything and everyone. But, in spite of the waves of saliva that flooded me, I was the invisible flame. So I left the baobab tree to spare its life.

In my bedroom, Baudelaire minded the flowers, but I thought that he was planning something evil. Aimé Césaire offered me a return to the native land. Apollinaire was there, majestic. He had seen the beheaded sun which as it turned out was still there. So I thought that he was itching to behead me. In this labyrinth, only Molière knew the exit and to get me out of there, he wanted to disguise me as Tartuffe. I declined because it was not carnival time. It was the day of the preliminary Baccalaureate exam in French. And so it was best for me to go the high school ahead of time.

To cover the few hundred metres that separated me from Demba Diop High, I put on my most beautiful pair of shoes, my heels cowardly protected by the hide of an unknown animal, avoided the burning sand. In my mind, bourgeois writers thought they were in Vienna. Intoxicated, they danced the waltz and yelled out rhymes to unfaithful beauties. In the tropics my temples drummed to the Sabar. All year, teachers had fed us knowledge which we were supposed to keep fresh in anticipation of this day, in the same way that the goose fattens its liver until Christmas.

While walking toward the examination hall, I could feel the cracks in my brain, I prayed for no breach. I had to stop my school learning from leaking; it would be just awful to lose my year's supply. Tired of searching in the archives of my brain, I gave up, knowing that inevitably my ideas would all evaporate.

In the ceremony room, someone cleared their throat and brought me back to the day's event. The mayor was in the process of requiring of the two young people that they

mummify their feelings for all time. This utopia brought back the uncertainty of that day I took the preliminary Baccalaureate exam.

Arriving at the high school, I was surprised to see that I was not the only one to be early. There was already a crowd of hopefuls. Only the teachers, whose power raised them high over us, gave themselves the luxury of calmly arriving on time, well-prepared, finely dressed and even perfumed. We waited for them hoping that they would never come. These examiners had to come in from other parts of the country. We did not want to be surprised by the enemy. So to picture what he looked like, each person imagined a face. Is this how a girl conjures up her prince charming?

Somewhere in Mbour that day, there was a tall, young man. Twenty-six years old, at least six foot three, he was a teacher of French language and literature and prepared for the exam in a completely different way.

What had he eaten for lunch? *Yassa? Thieb?* What had been different with his rice that day? In any case, it was not *mbakhale* that he had eaten before coming to the exam. Besides, had he even eaten? For the first time his pen would point out a destiny; would mean a whole year was lost or not. His movements were slowed down because of the length of his arms and legs. He stowed away his documents in his leather bag and had made his way to the high school. He walked, probably to calm himself down and try to contain the emotion that risked revealing to the candidates that like them, he too was afraid. His mind was full of faces still unknown. Was he trying to picture the high school student who would earn his best grade in the class by amazing him? Teachers are keen on

surprises. They get as much delight as the few lucky or talented ones who manage to loosen their pens and let flow the creative ink that will produce the highest grade.

We were there, in the hall, the twelve girls of the grade ten A3b class which had a headcount of fifty-three students. The boys stood a few metres away. The excitement that overwhelmed us made us forget how momentous an occasion it was. Our faces were frozen into falsely relaxed smiles. Ever since then, I have been sure that there is nothing tenser than the stomach of a Baccalaureate candidate. With a superficial smile, we try to impress our neighbour with a skillfully chosen quote. Making fun of the others sweating while holding back our own, on the verge of a breakdown. We talk about the latest fashions to escape from the task at hand. We tell jokes that betray the fear that we try in vain to hide. In short, like in our group of girls, each one of the boys waited for the arrival of the examiner and his turn for the oral exam by concealing to the best of his ability the turmoil stamped all over his face. The closer we got to the time, the less chatty we were. High school boys, roosters under normal circumstances, were now mere chickadees. As for the girls with their nightingale voices, they were nothing more than cicadas. Future high school graduates and future failures, all alike facing the unknown, with the exception of a few, could foresee the same things: the radiant image of parents, their pride if we succeeded and their saddened look if we failed. But we all preferred to focus on a happy outcome. The oral exam was to start at two o'clock. According to the list arranged in alphabetical order, I had the luck or the bad luck of being at the very top. So the heavy task was upon me to get the ball rolling. At one forty-five, on the front steps of the

school, talking started to die out. So all together we held our breath and awaited the last judgment. With just a stroke of a pen, the tight group of candidates would be split in two.

The result of the exams is just as cruel as a final match at the Olympic Games. On one side, there are always the medalists and on the other those who hoped to be, who now find themselves relegated, despite their efforts, to the category of “also ran”. The only difference is that the only applause for Baccalaureate candidates is an empty arena.

As for the successful candidates, long-term workers or last minute crammers, frantic sprinters or fortuitous winners, their joy is certainly comparable to the ecstasy of Olympic medalists.

In the official room of Dakar city hall, the list of requirements for marriage seems never-ending. The union of two young people has lost all spontaneity. Their kisses perfumed by the fragrance of the Atlantic were now to decay in the dusty government archives. They would no longer caress one another out of love, but because they would be husband and wife. The mayor seemed to invent a new civil code. It was one requirement after another. I thought: when you add a rafter to a roof, it's a good thing because you're afraid it will collapse. As the construction seemed to go on forever, I decided to continue the recollection of my day of the preliminary Baccalaureate exam in French.

A few minutes to two, every face was glued toward the front hall. We scrutinized the area, from top to bottom, where the teacher, examiner, future angel or demon depending on the grade he would attribute to one and all, was to arrive. There was complete silence. But incidentally, would I dance with the devil or the prince?

I often spent a lot of time mulling over the images of that day. A failing memory does not prevent them from surfacing. “Hiss hiss”, I hear the tea kettle boiling, the bottom leaf layer taunts the one above it. What strange magma our lives are made of with all their stories and layers of history. The archaeologist scrapes the stratum and hears a crackled voice telling him: vile nosy parker, leave me in peace! On my surface I offer asylum to tomorrow’s sediments, on the bottom layer I find my support.” The aroma of tea rises as the leaves are overturned. Those on the bottom are now on top. Though washed out, they still keep a bit of their color and reveal a picture.

The image of a painting chiseled by time, a young teacher entering the corridor. He is tall, thin, with an intellectual’s glasses, carrying a luxurious bag on his arm. Frail, he seems to lean heavily against the weight of his head. In our high school world, his greatness is unquestionable. We respect those who know more than us. But that day, the consideration that we showed him had something sacred. The candidates felt either the emotion of the convict when faced with his executioner or that felt by the shipwrecked sailor who sees a boat. Not knowing if he would be executioner or saviour, each preferred to hide behind an expression of icy respect; a smile could only have been a fake grin made wider by nervousness. Dizzy from fear or anxiety, I close my eyes. Stability. I open my eyes. Here he is, sure of himself, proud of his appearance.

A murmur from the girls: “Wow! Who is this playboy?” But since in a group no one knows who spoke, the second whisper was as anonymous as the first: “That can’t be the teacher, he’s too young.” But the young man continued to come closer. It was true that he was too young for us. Between those writing the exam for the second, third, fourth

and even fifth time, not counting those who made themselves look a few years younger, there were definitely some who were his age. So the girls looked at him as a potential partner. I was not the most worldly nor the prettiest in the group, but I made myself look good. But as he approached, I secretly examined myself: “How am I dressed? Am I elegant enough for him to notice me in this constellation of girls...?” I had not finished asking myself these types of questions when he reached us. And as if guided by an invincible power, he looked straight at me- at least that is what I thought- and for the duration of a flash of lightning, our eyes met. Without my rivals knowing, a lightning bolt just made a crater in my heart. All that was left for me to hope for was that Mister tall, beautiful, young man was as affected as me. I could not move. My heels seemed fused with the concrete of the hall. My breathing was choppy and loud. After a look that was as delicious as it was unbearable, he introduced himself: “Hello, I am Mr. Fallou..., you are going to do your oral examination in literature with me...” After which he disappeared into the classroom. While we waited for the call, I was doing an examination of my own emotions instead of literature. I read what I had wanted to see in the glimmer in his eyes and I was afraid of being mistaken. So, to reassure myself, I said to my girlfriend, Louise: “He’s going to be my boyfriend.” Needless to say, she laughed at me: “You’re crazy,” she told me. “Did you see how good-looking he is, he’s a souped-up city-slicker, and what’s more he’s a teacher, he must get all the chicks that he wants, you’ll never have him...” I wasn’t listening anymore. She had at least understood that the least coveted things are the easiest to get. She was an intelligent, young girl and she lusted after another teacher a lot less stylish and endowed with an enormous nose, a real mismatch for his angular face. To tease Louise, I said to her: “when your sweetheart comes to school, we’ll need to call

emergency; with his huge nose we're likely to run out of oxygen." The speech that Louise gave out about the charming examiner didn't discourage me at all. And I was still in my little daydream when he appeared at the entrance of the room with the class list in hand. I stepped forward, knowing that I'd be first to be called. Lifting his eyes from the sheet, he looked at me as if inviting me to dance a wickedly intoxicating imaginary tango. I responded to his voice calling my name, but to my heart as well. In the class, he asked me to choose a text. I opted for a poem by Aimé Césaire, *Leaving*. It was the only theme in line with my thoughts of leaving with the handsome examiner. I saw that he was looking at me oddly and lowering his eyes every time I looked up. Then I noticed that he was affected by something. He wasn't really listening to me and I wasn't listening to myself. I went through Aimé Césaire's mushy poem and my judge got lost in it with me. Those were the first steps of our love story, the first time I fell in love. The shivers from each embrace, the late night strolls by the sea seemed to me to be the greatest joys of the only paradise possible. And since we had reached it without first having to die, I wished to experience this love for a thousand years.

I thought about that, then about the five years that saw our passion go further and further inside of us and then further away from us, when the mayor said:

"Miss Satou...do you wish to take Mr. Fried as your husband...?"

"Yes," I said, in a voice barely audible, caught up in the moment and the memories. The mayor made me repeat myself. It was torturous. In the back of the room, the tall, young man listened in a silence so profound that its echo reached me. After the

required kiss, he was the first to clap. Was this a message, this first clap of lonely hands? Then there was the traditional hugging and kissing; he came, like everyone, to wish happiness to Mr. and Mrs. Fried. At the end of the polite greetings, the wedding party made its way toward the heart of the city to reconvene at the hotel where the other guests were waiting. The celebration made everyone's face bright with excitement, but oddly my stomach was just as knotted as on the day of the Baccalaureate exam. Late in the evening the emcee put on a melancholic song. Mr. Fried who was dancing with me suggested, out of courtesy or wickedness, that I dance with Fallou, then went to him and said:

“Fallou, I'll let you dance with the bride!”

Fallou came closer and said to me:

“Miss...Mrs. you are very beautiful.”

But we had barely started dancing when the song finished. Etiquette required that I join my husband. Fallou and I exchanged a gaze full of bitterness and regret. And suddenly reality sank in: Fallou and I would leave, for other years, other shores and other tests, without one another.

Aimé Césaire's poem, *Leaving*, had just become an adieu. Ever since, I mistrust the words of poets for they slyly punctuate our destinies.

The right face for the job

A multitude of faces, languages, accents, outfits, and suitcases of varied weights. A throng of hearts beating, each to the rhythm of their dreams. A loudspeaker alternates between the most important languages on the planet, if not the most imperialistic ones. The voice seeps into the brains of those who understand and bypasses the others. You can hear the sound of shoes stomping the poverty or the wealth of their owners on the tiled floor. Charles de Gaulle airport awakes from its slumber draped with a winter coat and already opens its arms like a hooker welcoming a rich client. Behind its smile hide many destinies. But the appearance of a front door does not portend the quality of a home.

So I went to the part of France that Paris does not reveal. Strasbourg, a virile city which bears its cathedral like an erection pointing up toward the sky. I hibernated there from January to May only going out when I couldn't do otherwise. Outside everything was bleak.

Equality was never so well-named, no one escaped bundling up: coats, gloves, scarves and boots creating a winter world, an artificial race of the bounded-up. People were nothing more than factory-grey balls of wool. Ethnic features were hidden. One day on the way to the university, an old woman was walking in front of me, she bore such a likeness to my grandmother that I wouldn't pass her for fear of seeing her face and breaking the spell.

She walked slowly, gracefully, with me behind her. I smiled on the inside at the idea of telling my grandmother that I had seen a Toubab that looked like her, or saying to this Alsatian woman that she looked like my ebony black grandmother.

Summer, after being desired for long months, finally came. Without a single ounce of modesty, it revealed its shapes. It showed arrogance in attractive bodies and embarrassment in the most unattractive. Each person found himself or herself decked out in his or her natural identity card. You didn't walk about in coats, scarves, gloves and boots anymore, but only in your origins, your skin. Some wore theirs like a trophy, others like a cross.

Dressed in my own, I crossed town while thinking about the arguments which might impress the person I was meeting. It was eleven o'clock and I was heading to a job interview for babysitting. I walked quickly in the streets, but I had a feeling that people were looking at me more than usual. Suddenly, I wanted to be invisible. I wondered why these insistent stares seemed to jostle and interrogate me all at once.

“But where to hide?” I said to myself picking up speed.

The communal, discreet blanket that winter brought with it had melted with the last hailstones beneath the hot sun. From that point on, silhouettes, houses, everything had its own face. The face is like an airport, an entrance whose features never reveal enough of the labyrinth hiding inside. The face contains all our genes, our culture; it's an ethnic and racial identity card. And so that's why I was eyed so much: I had all of Africa inside me, with its real and imagined characteristics and my face was no longer my own, but its looking glass onto Europe. So when I arrived at my meeting, I decided to give only my first name; saying that I was African would have been redundant. In any case, my potential employer already had her own idea on the matter.

Comfortably seated, she watched me come when her daughter had opened the door.

“You found the house alright?” she asked me.

“Hello Ma'am,” I said, shaking her hand.

Without giving me time to answer her question, which didn't warrant one, she continued:

“Ah, I was right about your little accent on the telephone, I thought that you were African, but it's cute!”

I started to get suspicious. When those women say “it's cute” with that nasal tone, what they mean is that it's awful.

Faced with my silence, she knocked me flat by shaking her head with a silly grin.

“You understand Madam well?”

“Yes, Madam,” I answered, holding back my smile.

As if to reassure herself that I spoke the truth, she asked me how long I had been in France using hand movements that had nothing to do with sign language.

To give you an idea of the ridiculousness of her mannerisms, I would hesitate between a bad clown and an awkward dancer. Then, pointing to a suitcase, she stood in front of me, her ten pudgy fingers spread apart, her eyes lit up as if to enlighten my mind and questioned:

“You in France, how long?”

To reinforce her stupid judgment of me, I decided to indicate the month.

“January, Ma'am.”

She turned slightly toward her daughter to give the impression that she wasn't talking about me and, with a disdainful pout, said:

“Well, we're no further ahead now, are we?”

Then the front door opened. A beanpole leaned over weighed down by his briefcase.

“Hello my darlings!”

Madam and her daughter rushed to greet this walking skeleton: it was the man of the house coming home from the office. I found myself in the path of his swiveling gaze. Madam proclaimed:

“This is Mr. Dupont, my husband.”

“Hello, sir,” I said, rising up from my seat; but I didn't have time to shake his hand, he was already hurtling up the stairs. I heard his wife say after joining him:

"Darling, it's a girl here for the babysitting job."

Above my head, the parquet creaked beneath Madam's heavy steps; she surely had never heard of Slim Fast or Weight Watchers. I thought: back home where men prefer plump women, she would certainly be worth her weight in gold. And like the

talking drum which softens the roar of the *djembe*, the husband's footsteps put rhythm into those of the round woman. Then his high-pitched voice snapped:

“So what?”

“She doesn't seem to know how long she's been in France, but she appears to understand most of what I tell her,” replied Mrs. Dupont.

The husband's voice livened up a little.

"So what do you want us to do with her?"

My gaze, which was looking around in the American-style kitchen, stopped on a couple of large flies that were doing naughty things together on the dishes piled in the kitchen sink. Although it was past noon, the Dupont family didn't seem to have prepared lunch. Betty Crocker was probably at their service. In a few moments, Madam would open the freezer: a cardboard box would be promptly torn open, an aluminum tray would emerge, the microwave would do its work and the Dupont family would be fed. But that was of no concern to me. So I thought back on the husband's question:

“But what do you want us to do with her?”

So I was 'her'. That's why I was looked at strangely. I was not me with my own name, not Mrs. nor Miss, but 'her'. So I was 'her' and not even 'the girl'. Maybe by calling me 'her', the husband was feeling the same revulsion towards me that I felt towards the flies mating on the dishes.

After a short silence, Madam tried again.

“So?” she said to her spouse.

“You can hire another one!”

“But which one, come on,” she screamed. “It’s been two weeks since I posted the ad and you know it; meanwhile I’m the one stuck with the kids.”

The Dupont family had two children. The younger was one year old. That day, Madam dropped him off at daycare.

“You should’ve hired that girl from last week,” said the husband.

Madam rallied:

“Can you hear yourself? Didn’t you see her expression? You’d swear that she came from a concentration camp. She didn’t smile, she looked angry at the whole world. I would never entrust my children with such a terror.”

Her words made me smile. I could understand why the girl in question introduced herself to Madam with a death mask and a distant smile. It’s safe to say that the people who look for babysitters go about it sometimes as if they were recruiting for NASA. In fact, to wipe the butt of their charming blond youngsters, you need to have all the qualifications imaginable, a slew of diplomas and be poor enough to work for a pittance.

A few minutes later, Mr. Dupont started again:

“You could have hired the girl from the day before yesterday!”

“No way!” replied Madam. “She has a kid and what’s worse, she is pregnant again. She would not be completely available for my children. Besides I wonder how she is going to make it with two children in her little hovel of a council house. But that’s not my problem. All she had to do was think about that before having a baby in such a thoughtless manner instead of coming to me to take pity on her because she’s so poor. I don’t want to hire her and run the risk of seeing her rob my children’s things to give to her own.”

After this tirade, the husband’s silence made it clear to me that he had no more arguments. Only his question at the start of the conversation was still on his mind, and he came right back to it:

“Don’t tell me that...but come on, Geraldine, what do you want us to do with her!”

“Listen here, Jean-Charles, tomorrow you leave for a whole week because of your job, and me here with all this? I have my job too. And those people are hardworking and more obedient; there’s no comparison with the brats that we have over here. Do you remember the one from last year? She made an official complaint to get some money out of us; at least with this one, we would be worry-free. I’m going to hire her. My friend Anita has one like that and she’s at her beck and call, she does everything in the house.”

So it was just that: for Mrs. Dupont, ‘African’ is a synonym for ignorant and submissive. Mr. Dupont would now know what to do with ‘her’: a maid to do everything in the house. I tell myself that it’s probably why, in this country, even jobs have faces.

Especially the hardest and most poorly paid. When you hear a jackhammer, no need to turn around, it's without fail a Black man, a Turk, an Arab, in any case a foreigner, who is operating the machine. As for the noise of a vacuum, it almost always signals the presence of an African, Portuguese or Asian woman. And for what Madam was proposing, I had the right face for the job. What's more, hiring me doubled her luck: African meant ignorant and submissive, which allowed her to have an employee who was unaware of her rights, therefore easy to manipulate and exploit. She could also count on the latent racism of her spouse to eliminate the risk of the nanny becoming a rival.

When Mrs. Dupont came down to meet me in the living room where the flies were circling around me, it was almost 1:00 pm. She flashed me a robotic smile and said:

“You going start tomorrow morning, thirty hours a week, minimum wage, service employment cheques. You arrive thirty minutes early, Madam show you what to do.”

“Yes, Ma'am,” I said, shaking her hand before leaving.

The next morning, I showed up at 7:30. After a short greeting, Mrs. Dupont showed me the essentials. Her daughter would show me the route to the school. Before going to work, Madam put some colors on the face of the watch and on the baby bottle so that her African nanny would be able to follow the instructions concerning the feeding times and the baby's milk.

The days went by. Madam and I crossed paths early in the morning and late in the evening. In the mornings she had just enough time to add a few orders to the instruction list for the children:

“You iron for Madam.”

Other days, it was:

“You vacuum.”

Or again:

“You wash tiles,” etc.

Every morning I would say, as always:

“Yes, Ma'am.”

And when she would come home in the evenings:

“Good evening, good bye, Ma'am.”

One evening, she said to me:

“Miss Dupont, my daughter no happy, you play with her.”

Indeed, the little girl was a bit reticent with me, despite my smiles and my diplomatic attempts. At noon, she locked herself away in her bedroom where I brought her lunch. There is nothing more unbearable than a bourgeois child, especially when it's been drilled into her head that all other people on the planet are nothing but primitives. But I needed to keep my job. Because of my colour, all I ever get from potential employers is a refusal. So I made it my duty to satisfy the little girl and did what was expected of me: play the monkey to get in the good graces of Miss Dupont. A week later,

I was known as her African nanny by all of her classmates. And one day, at the kitchen table, she asked me:

“Why are you black?”

“It’s because I eat too much chocolate.”

She looked at me and gave a big smile. I could see that she wasn’t convinced. I didn’t say anything else. And I thought to myself that when her mother heard what I’d told her daughter, she would consider me even more stupid than she had judged at first glance.

Like a fickle lover, summer had come and gone as if to make sure everything it had left behind was back again. I was still at the Dupont’s, changing nappies, powdering a little, pink bottom, trekking to school four times a day, pushing a stroller with a blonde baby that I could not even pass for my own, vacuuming, ironing, washing the tiles all through the house and cursing the Dupont’s shit that stuck to the sides of the toilet and smelled rotten. All that for a babysitter’s wage.

Madam was happy with me. One day, she gave me a dress that was too tight for her. I didn’t want it; it was ugly and dated back to the 60s at least. I must say that Madam dressed like the Queen of England: her hairdo was like a head of lettuce and true to her appearance, she dressed like a cauliflower. I thought while looking at her: if this woman could turn on her husband, then there must be men who find Mother Theresa sexy. I accepted the dress out of politeness and got rid of it at the annual clothing fundraiser. Money can buy a maid, but not style, thank you very much.

Mrs. Dupont played the intellectual and had tried to civilize me. One day when my employers had come home earlier than usual, the younger daughter asked me to put a videotape in the VCR for her. She wanted to see that damned Cinderella which is to blame for so many generations of women being obsessed with the size of their feet. I refrained from touching any equipment in the house the day I broke a vase while doing housework and Madam deducted five hundred francs for some terra cotta. So despite the little girl's insistent demand, I refused to touch the VCR. Madam said to me:

“You know turn on video?”

“No Ma'am,” I responded.

She gave me a look that was half motherly, half scornful:

“Your brain no work?”

Then turning triumphantly toward her husband before sizing me up all over again, she declared:

“*Cogitum sum*, I am thought, as Descartes would say.”

Obviously Madam was hinting at something to her husband and excluding me from the discussion that was to come. But this time it was too much to take, it was a huge insult and Descartes' legacy was at stake. I couldn't prevent her from pretending to be a scholar at my expense, but demanding that she get it right, I corrected her:

“No Ma'am. Descartes says *Cogito ergo sum*, which means ‘I think therefore I am’, as we read in his *Discourse on the Method*.”

Madam dropped her videotape. Mr. Dupont's hand, which was bringing a biscuit towards his mouth, stopped. It was the first time that I had formulated a complete sentence in front of them. The husband gained his composure and said to me:

“Who do you think you are, talking like that to Geraldine? You know, we are not like you, my wife got her Baccalaureate before working. As you can see for me, I'm university-educated; I have my Baccalaureate plus a university degree!”

I didn't say a word, but my calm smile was like a scalpel cutting into Mr. Dupont's skin. Mrs. Dupont humbled herself enough to say:

“You're what, in grade 12 maybe?”

“No Ma'am,” I said to her. “I've had my Undergraduate degree for two months now.” I thought to myself, my dear Mrs. Dupont, Aunt Jemima's children are well-educated nowadays.

Then, in my mind, I added: That'll shut you up!

Mr. Dupont climbed the stairs like the first time I had come. I bet he was still wondering, but this time for other reasons:

“What do you want us to do with *her*?!”

Madam went up to join him. The poor little girl was still waiting for Cinderella in front of the VCR. One day, she would understand like her mother that prince charming doesn't exist and that Cinderella's little foot does not tread upon everything in her path. I said goodbye to the little one who was sulking and with a sonorous voice wished Good

Evening to Mr. and Mrs. Dupont from the bottom of the staircase before closing the door behind me.

After a peaceful weekend, I showed up at the Dupont household on Monday morning at eight. I had decided not to work the extra half an hour which I had not been paid for in more than two years now.

“Good morning Ma'am,” I said.

“Good morning,” she responded. “I was waiting for you, the little one has to go to school. If I bring her, I will be late for work. Would you like to continue starting work a half an hour earlier, I'll pay you for it?”

“Ok,” I replied.

I wasn't dreaming, the grand lady had rediscovered her manners; she who had shown such disrespect within the first minute of our meeting was now worried about what was proper. The week was a cold one. Then time passed and with it the embarrassment and the hard feelings. A few months later, I would give free French lessons from time to time to Mrs. Dupont who was preparing for a competitive exam. She no longer talked to me in pidgin French, we grew closer and called each other by our first names. Even Jean-Charles started doing it. Sometimes we would eat together. They seem to like Senegalese specialties and when they talk about Black people they no longer say 'those people', but rather 'Africans'.

There is only one problem. Since Jean-Charles knows that I read Descartes, he has come to realize that voluptuous, chocolate-brown backsides may also be attractive.

EthNOcentrism

Mr. 'Not You' made the rules without even appearing to change anything: if you are married to a French person, says he, you need two years of sex to capture the French scent, the French nationality. For African women married to French men, the chances of gaining citizenship increase proportionally with the elasticity of their uteruses, where French fetuses unaware of government policy on preferential treatment for French nationals grow. But Mr. 'Not you' is not as stupid as one might think. By extending the waiting time to obtain citizenship to two years after marriage, he is counting on the fickle nature of his compatriots and the racism of the French in-laws to break up interracial couples before the fateful day. The foreign woman, the Frenchman's ex-wife just becomes an ex-object of curiosity. And like all objects, she doesn't have any rights, not even the one to earn a good living for herself. So, she tries to survive on her own. To keep a clear conscience, the government supplies a multitude of addresses all equally as useless. They constantly say to you: yes, but you are not eligible for this program. Go to that other department.

I came to the realization that in this country, there is the SPCA for animals abandoned by their owners, but nothing for foreign women once their French husband has left them poverty-stricken. In fact, although I am denied citizenship, my Senegalese cat has his papers. It's probably because his fur is red.

But let's come back to this idea of preferred hiring practice for locals. If we accept the idea that Poseidon's chariot was pulled by seahorses, then the great trunk of the baobab tree has only fragile roots. The laws of the powerful are only taken into account when the little people choose to apply them zealously. Sometimes huge tropical

mahogany trees fall to tiny termites, and like an anthill that depends on the number of little workers, a royal court would be nothing without its servants. So it's those small business owners who give meaning to such hiring practices. I was in Strasbourg looking for a job and reading a free newspaper when an ad caught my eye:

Wanted: Cashier. Large bakery in city centre. Knowledge of local dialect an asset. Apply in person.

I jotted down the address and spoke about it that same evening with a French girlfriend of mine.

“Are you crazy or what?” she began. “You can find lots of other jobs. I have the same degree as you and now I'm finishing a program to be a teacher. Why the hell would you sell bread rolls!”

“I'd love to do something else,” I replied. “My degrees are certainly French, my dear, but my brain is not recognized as such and that's what's preventing me from working. In the meantime, I need to eat. At least selling these bread rolls, I won't starve.”

“But this is ridiculous,” she says to me. “You can surely find something other than that. You probably just didn't look hard enough.”

It was the hundredth time I had heard this criticism. My French friends had no clue as to what I was experiencing and thought that I was being paranoid. I didn't blame them for it. When you have a nose like Cleopatra and skin like the Queen of Austria, you don't feel racism in France like you do when you're African.

The next morning, I went to the bakery in question. Apart from the chocolate cakes and a few overdone baguettes, everything was white. The only men were Pierre, Paul, Joseph and Martin; Gertrude, Josiane and Jacqueline represented the fair sex. There was no sign of an Aicha or a Mamadou.

I was greeted by the boss, with his German moustache, Alsatian accent and hat embellished with the red, white and blue of the French flag. By the way that he looked at me, I could see that the elimination process had already begun. This was a man who didn't like chocolate-coloured skin. I forced a smile and said:

“Hello sir, I've come to inquire about your job vacancy.”

He nodded his head as if to say: another one who wants to take our children's livelihood. But instead he found a more snide way.

“Ya, ya, you speak some Al-sa-tian?”

It was true that the job description stated: knowledge of local dialect an asset. But I had come with my own and not his. I thought that all French people spoke French at least as good as those they had colonized. And here I was linguistically more French than one of Victor Hugo's compatriots. And what's more, he was asking me to build an Alsatian bridge between his bakery and his clients. So I gave him the answer he was waiting and hoping for:

“No sir.”

I said to myself: I've been eating *kouglofs* for barely two years now and he already wants my language to be his. Refusal was written all over his face and as if to justify his negative answer and humiliate me all at once, he said to me:

“But why don't you go work back where you came from?”

He addressed me formally, but not out of politeness. He lumped together all the foreigners that he would have loved to dump in the Rhine. This gave me the right and the duty to be impolite. I unleashed my outrage, if only in my mind:

“You should be asking me why I want your dirty job so much. In fact, for two whole years my vagina obediently serviced a cock likes yours, a plastic-coated, French penis which left me nothing but its crabs. One sperm cell from it, just one, carried up into my uterus would have given the government a reason to support me or rather to feed the young child with French genes and I could survive on the leftovers. But it didn't happen: my feelings kept me isolated and my in-laws' attitude towards foreigners got the best of my dreams of freedom. Goodbye sir. You depleted our African soil by continuously growing peanut plants and sugar cane for your people, you stripped our mines of phosphate, aluminum and gold to make your country wealthy at our expense and to top it all off, you made my fellow countrymen into Senegalese infantry and used them as cannon fodder in a war that is not their own. A war in which you had them killed in the name of freedom, a freedom that you had denied them of on their own African land. A war on white land where my grandfather's eye was torn out by a piece of shrapnel. To this day, his eye is still there, watching you Sir, you can see in its gleam your past

atrocities and it can see today what you are doing to his children who have come to find it. I came today, Sir, guided by the smell of the blood my ancestors who left their fertile women and despite their courage enriched your proud soil. I came today because I could hear the war cries from the unmarked crosses in Verdun that reach all the way to defenseless Africa. Finally, Sir, I came to set the record straight. You taught me how to sing 'Our Ancestors, the Gauls' and I know now that it's false. I want to teach your children to sing 'Our Ancestors, the Senegalese soldiers', because France is built on stilts and some of its beams come from Africa.”

Still jobless, I continued to believe that my grandfather's eye would light my way in Europe. After all, the African gods who we made sacrifices to, promised eternal protection to the mutilated as well as to their descendants. Maybe the European gods could display the same generosity. So three days later, I picked up another free newspaper. A new job ad caught my eye: *Looking for a French tutor. University degree required. Call for appointment: 03- 88..., after 7pm.*

I wrote down the number, but didn't say anything about it to my girlfriend this time. She would have asked me how the meeting with the baker went and wouldn't have believed a word of what I told her. She would have lectured me again and said: “Are you paranoid or what? I'm sure that he isn't racist, he was just being a bit rude.”

At 7:10pm, I called the number in the ad. A woman answered and told me that she was a cashier in a large supermarket in Strasbourg and that she was looking for some

educational support for her daughter in grade six. And so she agreed to meet with me in a downtown café the following afternoon.

Considering the ad mentioned a university degree, I had expected to be teaching someone preparing for the Baccalaureate exam. But I agreed to the meeting, everyone needs to eat whether it be Job or Jupiter paying the salary.

When I arrived at the café, it was full of people, but Madam had told me that she would be wearing a white sweater with blue stripes. I spotted her very quickly: with her blood-red lipstick, she looked like the French flag. After introducing myself, I showed her a part of my brain which had up until now been concealed in my pocket: the requisite, required degree. Then, seeing a new customer arrive, the waiter came over, gave me a smile and said:

“What will it be for you Madam...?”

I ordered a juice thinking:

How funny it is, when it comes to money, preferential treatment for locals shows its true face. The waiter brought my drink.

The person facing me scrutinized my diploma, then handed it back to me saying:

“I want someone European.” Raising her pointed chin in the air, she added: “I don’t want anyone to screw up my child’s education.”

It is true that Madam is French, but she doesn’t even have her Baccalaureate and knows she cannot provide enough academic help to her daughter. I can speak Molière’s

language at least better than she can, but because I'm black, she denied me the job. Angrily downing my juice, I got up and yelled as I was leaving:

“Goodbye Madam, but if you had my brain, you would not be a supermarket cashier.”

“Come back here,” she cried out. “You didn't pay for your drink.”

“No,” I said with a grin. “I'll leave that to you, that covers my transportation costs; as a good cashier you know that everything has to be paid for, even the services of coloured people, as they say around here.”

I wasn't attacking her stupidity, which was only the result of her limited cultural awareness, but rather the fact that she played the part of Mr. “Not You's” servant. After all, only people in power cloud the minds of the general population. When the leader is blind, all those who follow are led astray. I was thinking these thoughts when I heard her scream out:

“Go back to your jungle!”

It's interesting how racist people lack vocabulary, maybe it's because they're uneducated. My mother-in-law said the same thing to me and before I had a chance to go back home, she had reclaimed her little boy.

“You should come with me and take advantage of the fresh air,” I replied. “It's rejuvenating and would save you from needing a facelift.”

She shut her scarlet coin purse and plopped her saggy butt cheeks on her chair while mumbling something under her breath. Her face was crimson red. Secretly, I thanked God

for not afflicting me with the same external sign of embarrassment or anger. At least my black skin keeps its dignity.

As I was leaving the café, a middle-aged man winked at me and indicated the vacant seat in front of him; before taking off I gave him a little smile muttering to myself: another lonely bachelor who regrets the family life he had not been able to build by dint of loving only himself in those rare moments of joy and frequent tears shared with women he had known. No, I will not accept his invitation; he's probably one of those old fogies who loves or hates his mother too much to be able to make another woman happy. No, because although he might act like a man who likes a black woman in his bed, he would be ashamed to hold my hand in public and would ask me to stay hidden upstairs when his mother arrives unexpectedly. Good day to you, Sir!

While walking, I instinctively took out my resident permit. On the back, just below my arrival date and above my address was written in capital letters: ANY OCCUPATION IN METROPOLITAN FRANCE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE EXISTING LEGISLATION. Such a pretty lie! I thought, I would add in at the bottom of those two lines: OFFICIAL OR UNOFFICIAL.

That evening, I called my girlfriend, a platinum blonde, a true blue white girl. She was doing her undergraduate degree and looking for a part-time job. I gave her the phone number of the cashier. The following evening, an ecstatic voice blared from my answering machine:

“... thanks for the tip. I started at the lady’s this morning. But if you’re interested, she has a neighbour who is looking for a maid.”

Cunigund at the library

Pangloss taught Metaphysico-theologico-cosmo-codology. He proved in admirable fashion that there was no effect without cause, and that in this best of all possible worlds, (...) “It is proven, he would say, that things cannot be other than they are: for everything having been done for a reason, everything is necessarily for the best reason. Note that noses were made for wearing glasses, and thus we have glasses. Legs are established for wearing trousers and thus we have trousers. (...) and pigs having been made to be eaten, we eat pork all year round: consequently, those who claimed that all is well are mistaken: what needed to be said is that all is for the best. (...) individual misfortune contributes to the greater good, so that the more individual misfortune there is, the better for all.”

Voltaire

As the Dupire’s cleaning lady, my mind was occupied with proving the validity of Dr. Pangloss’ theory. Deep down, the man was right. For the Dupire family, my personal unhappiness guaranteed the well-being of an entire family. Polishing always polishing. Months spent getting rid of cockroaches. I traded a mop and a broom for a plate always full. I traded a mop and a broom for rent always paid. A wage that was always minimum. And that’s why the Dupires left such a mess for me to clean up. I would come and clean their house every Wednesday and Friday. While I was picturing myself in the worst of all worlds, Mr. Dupire thought he was at *Thunder-ten-tronckh*, in the best of all worlds.

Every morning, he would drink his coffee standing in front of the table where his wife was laying out breakfast. His left hand held his cup and the right one scribbled down some last minute calculations before he headed into the office. His brain was part

calculator; he was an accountant. It was always Madam Dupire who would open the door for me. She wanted the living room to be cleaned first. Mr. Dupire, with his pocket calculator, would go finish his coffee in the kitchen. As soon as the door opened, he would ask his wife without fail:

“Has Cunigund arrived?”

He had started off by asking this insolent question in a hushed voice; then getting bolder he would say it out loud sometimes adding little comments to make his wife laugh. This situation carried on as long as I pretended to not understand. Yet, I could have snapped back at him:

No, Mr. Dupire, I am not Cunigund. Cunigund washed dishes on the banks of the Propontis for a prince who owned very few dishes, but certainly more than you. She was the slave of a former sovereign called Ragotski; and I may be your slave, but you, Sir, have no claim to nobility. No, Sir, you are not a great aristocrat and this is not my Eldorado. There are no streets paved with gold and the humble things that I am able to buy myself thanks to your money do not exceed the number of dust mites that I had to swallow in your house. You don't know this, but I like croissants; and if I don't buy them anymore with your money, it's because their shape reminds me of that sperm stain that your wife's buttocks leave on your bed. No, Sir, I am not Cunigund, who had become horribly ugly, and would be incapable of arousing that thing, which I imagine quite tiny between your legs, and which pushes out on your pants when your eyes, fed up with that plank which you call a wife, can only find my backside and décolleté to feast on. No, Sir,

you are not in the best of all possible worlds, your nose was not made for intellectual glasses, even if you do wear them; your mouth was made not to eat the flesh of the pig with which you have a certain resemblance, but to reveal the gaping hole of ignorance that humanity will never be able to fill.

That's what I would have liked to say to Mr. Dupire, but I kept quiet. What do you expect? Hunger and dignity cancel each other out when they are joined together inside us in the fight for survival. Reacting would mean losing the privilege of cleaning the Dupire's square-tiled walls. One less hour cleaning would mean one less steak, soap, loaf of bread or book. I had to put up with Mr. Dupire and listen to him mangle Voltaire because I couldn't afford to give up the modest amount of money that he would deposit every month, money I would use to buy books that he would never read. I shut my mouth and let him poke fun at me with his wife by calling me Cunigund. In this world full of hardships where you depend on others for your livelihood, you are always someone's bitch in one way or another. The relationship between an employer and an employee is not a person to person relationship, but one we have with food. And in the best possible world of domestic labour, when the employee burps they say it stinks, but when the boss farts to them it smells as sweet as lavender. For me, at the Dupire's, everything was clear; I knew why I was there and why I kept quiet, that was the most important thing. Everything was clear in my mind because I did my job well and sometimes Madam would tell me:

“My friends compliment me on my housekeeping. You are a good cleaning lady. Good job.”

I responded with a smile which meant: you've got some nerve.

Mark my words, I will hunt down anyone who claims that I hated my employers and I'll break their legs with a baseball bat. The Racinian verse: *I love who you are, but hate what you've done* seems quite fitting for this situation. I didn't hate my employers, in fact I was somewhat grateful to them for giving me a job, so I would take great care in cleaning their pigsty to earn my living. What infuriated me was the fixed image that they had of a cleaning lady. They forgot that the mop meant clean floors for them, but not an empty head for me.

Madam would pester me every Wednesday morning:

“Hurry up, do the living room quickly, the girl who tutors my son arrives at 9:00. Everything needs to be properly cleaned and stowed away, pick up my husband's slippers, put them on the shoe rack, close my bedroom door, I will take a quick shower and get dressed.”

Of course Madam would always greet me in her bathrobe with her big slippers, dark rings under her eyes, messy hair and even sometimes her rollers. To see her run and make me run around just to make the house nice for this student really bugged me. I was jealous of the respect that she showed for this university friend. I asked her to never speak about me to the Dupire family and she kept her promise. The Dupire's admired her and Madam dressed up to greet her when she arrived. Whenever I came, I would find the apartment in the most disgusting state imaginable.

In the bedroom, Madam would leave her panties lying around; sometimes a used tampon would be left in between the blankets or at the bottom of the bed. You never put two swords in the same sheath; one is bound to drive the other out. So, Madam assumed that I was incapable of understanding this and shamelessly left all this around which showed what consideration she had for me. It was an insult to my humanity and femininity. But as I had some experience with housecleaning jobs, I found the right reaction. Accepting this crude behaviour didn't make me inferior, everyone has to make a living. What Madam did by making me put up with such humiliation was disgraceful. Sometimes, I would even sing while slaving away. When you are treated with scorn, you create a shell, which some might call courage and others, pride; but whatever the name for it, this shell allows you to salvage that last bit of dignity which defines the barrier between yourself and the rest of mankind. Cunigund says: *an honourable woman may be violated once, but her virtue is only strengthened by it*. I had not been defeated, but made just a little stronger psychologically.

For one whole year, the Dupires subjected me to their dirt, their flaws and their vulgarity, all of which they concealed when in the presence of people they supposed were educated, that's to say, people who looked like them, and who for the most part couldn't teach anything to an orangutan.

I can assure you that Freud's entire study of the human being is approximate because he spoke only to people who were convinced of his intelligence; yet the social man doesn't open up completely until he believes you incapable of reflecting on things

and judging him. If Freud, equipped with his knowledge had dressed like a domestic worker, he would have learned more about human nature.

As for me, it was not just my maturity that enabled me to overcome the harsh tasks and name-calling. My childhood memories were of great help. Two images engraved in my mind served as crutches when my willpower was about threatened to crumble. More than five thousand kilometres away, my grandparents, perhaps without knowing it, were helping me in my fight for survival.

I have the best grandmother in the world. She didn't read me stories at night or kiss me on my birthday. But she stuffed me with couscous and told me about life how it really was. She refused to lie to me like all the other grandparents in the world who tell their grandchildren about a fairy-tale life that they will never have.

My grandfather is the best anyone could ever have. When we were in his fields of millet, nourished by the Sahelian rain, my grandfather did not give me flowers. He passed me a hoe and told me to work the soil. Through sweating, I learned that only sweat made the most beautiful flowers grow, the ones that embellish a dignified life, the only one worth living.

The degrading manner in which Mr. Dupire depicted me meant nothing more to me than a pile of shrubs that I needed to cross in order to reach the thirst-quenching river. He could carry on because whatever my labour can produce, his words cannot destroy. The devil may be able to take over the night, but it won't be long before the sun rises and blinds his eyes. Life is an unfaithful lover, only holding onto darkness to better see the

sun shining and its light dispel the shadows. Mr. Dupire seemingly ignored this up until the day he met Cunigund at the National Library of Strasbourg.

I devoted my days off to my studies. And because on Saturday mornings I had no classes or cleaning to do, I went to the library. It was a quiet ritual that I truly enjoyed. I was able to meet my university friends there and feel a little like a student. The library was my waterproof bubble where Javex couldn't burn my nostrils, where the nonsensical words made up by Mr. Dupire would correct themselves and where my heart, instead of hardening to the world, would dance in the mysterious light emanating from the books. But sometimes bubbles burst and that's what happened to mine one Saturday morning. While leaving the microfiche room, a familiar voice called out to me:

“You, here? What are you doing here?”

It was Mr. Dupire glaring at me, moustache twitching and eyes bulging. I composed myself and answered him calmly:

“Like you, Sir, I'm looking for some books.”

“But for who, why?” he asks.

“For me, Sir, to read them,” I say to him.

“But, are you a student?” he says.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Studying what?” he asked.

“Literature.”

“Yes, but what year,” he added, with a sudden need to evaluate me.

“First year of my doctorate.”

“But, but you never told me that...” he stammered.

“No,” I said cutting him off mid-sentence. “All you expect of the woman that comes to your house is to be a good cleaning lady, and that’s what I am, I think.”

He took in a deep breath and carried on:

“You should have told me...”

“...what?” I responded cheerfully. “That before washing dishes on the banks of the Propontis, Cunigund liked to listen to Dr. Pangloss’ lectures, or that a mop means clean floor, but not an empty brain?”

He shrugged his shoulders, his deformed features froze and his red face looked the color of all the bad wine that he had downed throughout his unsophisticated life. Embarrassment was written all over his face. I crucified him with my eyes for a few moments, then gave him my broadest housemaid’s smile before leaving with my books under my arm. His eyes watched me go without moving. This time, he did not size up my backside or cleavage, but took the measure of his own stupidity. Dupire just realized, even though he thought I was an empty-headed housemaid, that none of his rudeness had escaped me.

Sunday afternoon, my telephone rang.

“Hello,” says a female voice. “It’s Madam Dupire; I just wanted to let you know that for the weeks to come, we won’t be needing your services, but don’t worry, we will contact you again.”

“Very well, Madam,” I say. Then a second later I added: “Cunigund will always be at your service.”

The Dupires never called me back. I’m still waiting for their phone call and for the one hundred and sixty francs that they owe me for my last four hours of cleaning their apartment.

Dinner with the Professor

On the inlaid flooring there is a large, solid wooden table that seems to be made for hosting important people. It belongs to a great man, yes, a great man in the eyes of the society which defines its standards. He is a university professor, an expert in “various things”, with a PhD in something or other. This evening, I am his guest, like many other evenings before this one. The ritual hasn’t changed.

He made an organic salad in a glass salad bowl. He laid out organic cheese on a glass platter. In the oven, he had heated up a mushroom pie that was also organic.

After our brief greetings, he sits us down at the table and says to me.

“I hope you’re hungry because everything I made for you is good.”

“I’m not that hungry,” I say to him.

“What do you mean, you’re not hungry”, he says to me. “I hope I didn’t buy all of this for nothing.”

I don’t say anything. I tell myself that he would eat his organic meal even if I wasn’t there. A moment later, he serves me the organic salad and then helps himself. We start eating. When the salad is finished he brings the steaming pie, cuts me a piece and does the same for himself. We finish with the cheese. The dinner is constructed like a sentence: there is a subject, a verb and a complement. The Professor didn’t forget dessert, so our meal is punctuated with dried figs. Most likely organic.

The Professor is an expert on everything organic, like many people who are well-off. You don’t need to be a sociologist to know that only the elite can afford organic

products. First of all, you need to have plenty to eat before being concerned about what to do without. I was thinking about this when he showed me the latest CD that he had bought himself.

“You’ve heard of this one...?” he asks me.

“No,” I reply.

“What do you mean no,” he says in shock. “He’s a famous classical composer.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I tell him. “You’ll introduce me to him, I’ll let myself be enlightened today...”

It’s not that I didn’t care, but not knowing this illustrious composer did not make me ashamed intellectually, even if the Professor discerned my lack of knowledge. Music is like ice cream flavours or culinary specialties, we only remember the ones we like. So to ease my host’s disappointment I tell him how my love for the cello had almost cost me a job.

I was employed to do a few hours of cleaning each week by people who would go to the theatre and the opera. I never knew if they went because they liked culture or because it was a social obligation, as is often the case with people who have money, who after seeing *Cena furios*, simply say to you: Yesterday we went to see *Verdi*. But one day while cleaning their living room, I found a CD amongst a pile of junk. I brushed my hand over the case to wipe off the dust and read: *The Cello Suites of Johann Sebastian Bach*.

I couldn't help putting the CD into the player. The music was both happy and sad. Each note seemed to land in a specific spot in my heart then slowly fly away with a piece of the pain that the lyrics, even though they were powerful, always left deep inside me. Sitting on the floor, my back against the wall, my head pressed against the broom which I held between my legs, I listened. I listened while this peaceful moment cradled me in its arms. Suddenly a key turned and the door swung open. Madam entered. It was noon and I had fallen behind. She yelled:

“Hey! What a lovely job indeed! Is that what I pay you for? To listen to music in my home?”

I stood up in shock and muttered a few apologies. Deep down I was really saying: When you feel happiness, the minutes don't matter.

The Professor's face lit up when I told him this story. He disdainfully explained to me this great composer whose CD he had previously showed me. The dinner ended in dark silence and all I could see was his lewd expression. To make conversation, he told me briefly about his day at the university. He still didn't know why I didn't have much of an appetite and didn't ask. His silence made me think that deep inside he was well aware: he knew that I cleaned for seven hours today before going to class and then coming to sit at his great table reeking of perfume intended to mask the smell of my Javex-soaked hands. His silence meant: it was not his concern, which also sometimes means he really doesn't care.

He knew, but chose not to acknowledge the downside of a life in which he only acknowledged the good. He is a man who likes laughs and smiles but who is unable to wipe someone's tears. He doesn't know that if you want to eat from a calabash, you can always smell yesterday's couscous. I was wondering how a man could love a woman and watch her drown without flinching, when he suggested:

“Let's sit down and listen to this great musician.”

He turned on the sound system, sat down on his tiniest chair and motioned for me to sit by his side. The flames from the fireplace consumed the last of my hopes of affection, whereas they combined with the music to get his blood flowing. Needless to say, his member was already standing at attention and tapping my left buttock. And before I knew it, the Professor removed his clothes. And in the time it took for a quick kiss that I hardly had the time to give, he had undressed me and his hand was nervously testing my degree of wetness to see if sliding in would already be possible. Seeing that it was not, he followed up with a few kisses accompanied by some rough caresses on my neck. I pulled my head back which he took as a ready signal and slid between my legs. As I was pressing my hand against the Persian rug to pull myself up a little and make it easier on one of my bruised legs, he thought that I was making him room to get comfortable. He threw himself on me and slid inside me, like a snake slithering through the millet fields of the Sahel. Now he was wriggling. I looked over his shoulder.

I could see in the bottom of his bookcase a book that's always in the same place. You could read on the jacket: *Sex and Dread*; you could also see the picture of a terrible

looking woman. From every corner in the living room, her eyes seemed to follow you. I had told the Professor that this look frightened me. But he had not moved it because he's a man who doesn't change anything for anyone.

Still holding on, he squirmed some more. Now he was grunting. It's interesting, no matter what the social, moral or physical dimensions of a man are, he always manages to fit between the legs of a woman. The female crotch is man's alpha and omega: he's born there and all of his life he continues to go back there. He was still wriggling and I realized that I was becoming moister without wanting to. He slid deeper and deeper, in and out, in and out – wait- I'm coming- I'm almost there- there you go- there- oh yes! He moaned louder. He was about to reach the peak of his passion.

I would have liked for him to tell me sweet words like: Oh, you are so beautiful, you drive me crazy. Words which mean nothing at that precise moment, but help you put your heart into it. He didn't say anything. For his next birthday I will give him an inflatable doll. That way he can keep all of those feelings for himself. So he finished all on his own and gave me a kiss like one you would give to your cat or dog when you think they're being cute. Then he got up, drank a glass of water and asked me if I wanted some. I muttered:

“No thank you.”

He looked at me and made a comment that I had given up hoping for.

“So, you don't seem well today.”

“No.”

Well? Definitely not. Now, he's someone who does nothing for anyone; he's deafened by the beating of his own heart by dint of listening to himself. He loves only himself and seeks his own happiness through his own freedom where his own ego is so full of selfishness that he doesn't lose a single morsel of himself. And it's only because he doesn't know what to do with his shit that he watches the toilet swallow it down. And when he was clinging on to me, he was really holding on to himself. He was probably afraid that I'd take off with that small part of him deep inside of me. I would have loved to have teeth in my vagina to snatch from him the only piece of his being which recognizes the need for a partner. Did he have any inkling of what I was thinking? That, I'll never know, but he didn't buy that meal for nothing. He went to look for it deep inside of me and verify the state of my insides for those products that he had selected in the way that a jeweler selects his precious stones.

When I got up, the woman on the cover of *Sex and Dread* was still staring at me. The terror written all over her face summarized all of Alfred Hitchcock's films. Was she a woman who refused to cry out during an orgasm to prevent her soul from escaping from her mouth? Or because her mouth was closed, was her soul, split in two by a man jostling from below, able to escape through her eyes and leave her with that harrowing look?

I had not cried out. I hadn't closed my mouth either. I often looked at her though I didn't want to see her. She looked thirsty there next to the fire. I asked the Professor for a glass of water.

The flames in the fireplace died down, a black hearth of desperation. And I dreamed that one day a man would be able to satisfy me, just by telling me *I love you*, even without a cooked meal. That way I can forget this cold, unfeeling heart. The worst part is not so much the *Sex and Dread*, but the cold, dreadful sex.