



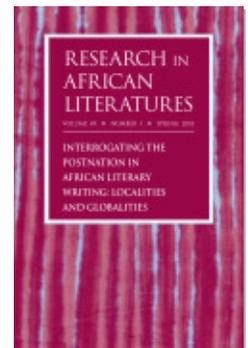
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Narrating the (Post)Nation? Aspects of the Local and the Global in Francophone Congolese Writing

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates postnational(ist) dimensions of late twentieth-century Congolese writing based on Sony Labou Tansi's novel *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* [*The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez*] (1985) and Pie Tshibanda's *Un fou noir au pays des blancs* [*A Black Fool in the Country of the White*] (1999). Adopting Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" and the grotesque, it explores the different approaches used to construct localities and globalities through their depictions of the dead and the dying body in these two novels. Widening the focus, this article argues that the ways in which the two novels narrate geographical space are fundamental to the visions of the postcolonial nation they express: their ongoing preoccupation with spatial politics of the former colonizer and the failed nationalist projects after the formal end of European colonialism testify to their call for a more complex perception of postnationalism than often assumed in existing scholarship.

"Postcolonial theorists may have sought to forget the nation in order to become global, but the nation has not forgotten them." (Simon Gikandi 639)

On August 2, 1999, Yaguine Koita and Fodé Tounkara, two teenage boys from Guinea, were found dead in the cargo hold of a Sabena Airlines Airbus A330 at Brussels International Airport. The two left behind a letter in which they clearly expressed their expectation that they would not survive their trip to Belgium and urged "les membres et responsables d'Europe" 'members and people in charge of Europe' to help Africa that is struggling with "la guerre, la maladie, le manque de nourriture" 'war, disease, malnutrition' (Kiesel and Delepierre 13).¹ In "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality" (2001), Simon Gikandi reads

this letter as a testimony to the postcolonial condition of Africa that has little to do with the optimistic perspectives on cultural globalization of postcolonial thinkers such as Homi Bhabha and Arjun Appadurai:

The boys were neither seeking cultural hybridity nor ontological difference. Their quest was for a modern life in the European sense of the world; their risky journey . . . was predicated on the belief that their salvation could only come from that Europe which, only two generations earlier, black nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta and Aimé Césaire had declared to be the major threat to the prosperity and well-being of Africa. (630–31)

Their demands echo the need, Gikandi argues, to “rethink modes of reading and analysis that are focused so much on the familiar tropes of postcolonial theory— . . . transgression and hybridity—that they fail to take notice of unfamiliar, but equally powerful, local scenes of being and belonging” (639). Moreover, his reference to Kenyatta’s anticolonial nationalism raises questions about the role of globalization, postnationalism, and postmodern issues, such as the rejection of what Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton call “totalities such as history, nation, gender, and their representative symbolologies” (15). I join Ali Erritouni, who argues that their categorization “place[s] too much emphasis on the formative influence of colonialism on first- and second generation African writers; thus, they elide the fact that many of them have been equally massively marked by the failures of independence” (145).

Adopting Achille Mbembe’s concepts of “necropolitics” and the grotesque, this article explores the ways in which localities and globalities are constructed through depictions of the dead and dying body in Pie Tshibanda’s *Un fou noir au pays des Blancs* [*A Black Fool in the Country of the White*] (1999) and Sony Labou Tansi’s 1985 novel *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* [*The Seven Solitudes of Lorsa Lopez*] in order to gain an understanding of these “failures of independence” and the apparent absence of postnationalist dimensions in late twentieth-century Congolese writing.² Extending the focus, this article argues that the centrality of the geographical space of the nation, the “local scenes of being and belonging” that Gikandi describes, is fundamental to the vision of the postcolonial nation and the global contexts that these two novels express. For the following analysis, I am basing my argument on the conceptual differentiation between the terms “postnational” and “postnationalist” that Keith Breen and Shane O’Neill offer:

The term “postnational” may be taken to suggest that the nation-state and national identities no longer matter, that they have no political significance. This is a very strong view to which few subscribe. By contrast, the term “postnationalist,” which best captures the nature of the debate, does not imply a denial of national identity or its endurance. Rather, the suggestion is that the nation-state and the forms of nationalism that underpinned it, while they have not been dissolved, are being empirically and normatively superseded. This claim of supersession rests on two key arguments which typify the postnationalist perspective: that the nation-state is being relegated as an effective political institution by processes of globalization, and that national identity is being outstripped and displaced by the rise of alternative forms of identity. (3)

I posit that this distinction proves fruitful to approach Tshibanda’s and Sony Labou Tansi’s texts in that their writings neither assume a “postnational” nor

a “postnationalist” perspective. Their ongoing preoccupation with the spatial politics of the former colonizer, such as the creation of territories demarcated by the borders that were drawn across the African continent at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, and with the failed nationalist projects after the formal end of European colonialism testify to more complex perceptions of postnationalism than often assumed in existing scholarship and challenge what Ayo A. Coly describes as “the celebratory obituary of postcolonial nationalism and the metaphorization of the postcolonial subject as an uprooted, deterritorialized, unfettered, and free-floating migrant” (xiii).

Breen and O’Neill’s distinction lends itself to a comparison between the notions of “post-colonial” (as a historical term) and “postcolonial” (as a theoretical concept): this article argues that the visions of the postcolonial nation and its subversion expressed in the two novels can be described as “post-nationalist” by narrating either the latest stages of the Mobutist dictatorship (in Tshibanda’s text) or as an almost dystopian parody of an unnamed dysfunctional state rather than “postnationalist” because the texts neither abandon the nation as a concept nor “empirically and normatively [superseded]” (Breen and O’Neill 3) it.³ While in 1960 both the Republic of the Congo and the DRC gained independence from France and Belgium, respectively, and while both decolonization processes brought about a (temporary) rearticulation of nationhood—powerfully expressed, for example in the case of the DRC, in Patrice Lumumba’s speech at the ceremony of the proclamation of Congolese independence on June 30, 1960—the prefix “post-” in “postnationalist” is, analogically to “postcolonial,” to be understood chronologically: it signifies the descent into dictatorship (in the DRC) and one-party rule (in the Republic of the Congo), the continuation of colonial politics and neo-imperial involvement, as well as new economic and political dependencies. The “post-” expresses the feeling of disappointment vis-à-vis the development of the postcolonial nation since independence and in particular a critical assessment of the ways in which nationalism has been instrumentalized in this context. I formulate this distinction in a certain analogy to Kwame Anthony Appiah’s powerful phrasing in his 1991 article “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?”:

All aspects of contemporary African culture ... have been influenced, often powerfully, by the transition of African societies *through* colonialism, but they are not all in the relevant sense *postcolonial*. For the *post-* in postcolonial, like the *post-* in postmodern, is the *post-* of the space-clearing gesture ..., and many areas of contemporary African cultural life ... are not in this way concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality. (348)

Accordingly, the “post-” in “postnationalist” symbolizes an ongoing engagement with the nation as such. My understanding of the postcolonial nation-state is thereby informed by Dominic Thomas’s description of it being “in a constant dynamic process of transition, whether criticized by non-official texts for their failure to create appropriately inclusive structures or embraced and praised by official writers who subscribe to the efforts of the governing authorities” (*Nation-Building* 12). This unstable character Thomas identifies is important to understand the predicament post-independence Congolese writers like Tshibanda and Sony Labou Tansi are faced with: as Christopher L. Miller reminds us, “[t]he nation as a wholly and the truly autonomous state ... would not be realized. The ‘nation’

seemed to slip through the cracks of the old and the new regimes" (144). While he points to the large number of "francophone novels that question, subvert, or attack postcolonial state nationalism" (Ibid. 145), he makes the important observation that "the critique of the postcolonial state can wind up creating and supporting a national culture. By attacking particular regimes, these publications contribute to an emergent 'universe of discourse' that is *specific* to that nation-state" (Ibid. 147). While Miller's argument certainly constitutes an important part of the complex background against which these texts have to be considered—and further explains why any easy assignment of a postnational(ist) perspective to contemporary Congolese literature is problematic—I argue that although both texts reaffirm the institution of the state to a certain degree (via the process of asylum-seeking and the depiction of a dysfunctional state apparatus, as I will demonstrate), at the same time, they reimagine the postcolonial nation by expressing equally complex and unsettling visions of global modernity and migration as those described in Koita and Tounkara's letter.⁴

Tshibanda published his fourth novel, *Un fou noir au pays des Blancs* (1999), a few years after he exiled from former Zaire to Belgium. While the novel remains largely unknown outside Belgium, its homonymous adaptation to the theater stage has been successful in his adopted country and abroad.⁵ For Charles Djungu-Simba, Tshibanda's writing is a typical example of Congolese (DRC) diaspora literature that he describes as "dièse" writing:

"Dièse" signifie le récit personnel que tout demandeur d'asile est tenu de produire pour appuyer sa requête. Ce récit est censé modifier les faits, réels ou imaginés, les arranger afin de les rendre vraisemblables et crédibles. Le mot fait allusion à l'altération que provoque en musique le signe dit dièse sur la note. (154–55)

"Dièse" represents the personal statement every asylum seeker has to compose to promote their request. This account is meant to modify the facts, real or imagined, and to reassemble them or make them plausible and credible. The term refers to the musical alteration that a sharp note ("dièse" in French) brings about.

This notion of a shifting narrative key is significant insofar as it focuses on the constructed character of the biographical account and thus represents a model of the labor of memory. It assumes a central role in Tshibanda's third-person narrative that focuses on Masikini, a former journalist and psychologist who has fled President Mobutu Sese Seko's ethnic cleansing of the Kasai people in Tshibanda's home region of Shaba (present-day Katanga, the southernmost province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in order to seek asylum in Brussels: it allows him to tell not only his story, but to align it with the history of the Congolese nation, thus creating, in Frederic Jameson's words, a national allegory.⁶ This narrative strategy is further exemplified when an encounter with a deeply traumatized civil war refugee from Angola makes him recall painful memories of his friend Bukasa's death during a military raid. These representations of death and dying in the postcolony, caused by state violence and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, demonstrate how the narrative connects Mobutu's atrocities with the country's colonial history, which Masikini then (figuratively) takes back to Brussels, the metropolis of the former colonizer.

(POST)NATIONALISM AND THE CORPOREAL

The violent events in the southern Zairian province of Shaba, depicted in Tshibanda's novel as forcing the protagonist, Masikini, to flee and to claim asylum in Brussels, represented Mobutu's attempt to consolidate his fading political power by ordering the ethnic cleansing of the Kasai people in 1991. Under Belgian colonial rule, they were brought into the copper- and cobalt-rich region as laborers and administrators because they were "favored" by the colonizer and generally better educated than the "indigenous" Katangans (cf. Bakajika 7–9), a common characteristic of Belgian colonial administration policies. As Pierre-Philippe Fraiture has argued, these practices also represented an influential factor for the Hutu-Tutsi conflict in present-day Rwanda, where the

conflict was ... not only fuelled by the colonial ambition to secure Belgian control over territory but, more controversially, also by the linguistic (or ethnic) divide at the heart of Belgian society. This antagonism between irredentist and unitary factors constitutes, ultimately, the background against which Belgium and its former colonies have developed since decolonization. (10)

Mobutu managed to take advantage of these ethnic tensions between the two groups resident in the region by applying "in the name of territorial unity ... the *divide et impera* principle that had characterised the Belgian administration" (Ibid.) to fuel violent confrontations and the forced removal of the Kasai from Shaba/Katanga. Hence, this is just one example of the numerous ways in which Mobutu's nationalist policies can be considered a continuation of Belgian colonial regulations. At the same time, his particularly extensive measures of so-called "Zairianisation" or "Authenticité" formed an integral element of his political ideology by, for example, renaming the country Zaire and banning the use of Christian names in order to ostensibly reduce Western influence and to generate a new "African" awareness, similar to strategies of "Arabization" that were applied in postcolonial Algeria and Sudan (cf. Sharkey 427). All these measures represent a certain postcolonial "nostalgia," anachronistic attempts of recovering an imagined precolonial past, while contrasting sharply, especially in the case of Mobutu, with his adoption and instrumentalization of Belgian imperial methods of governance. Based on the narrator's account of these atrocities in Shaba/Katanga at the refugees' office in Brussels, I will demonstrate how the figure of the asylum seeker complicates any easy assumptions about postnationalism. It is indeed the marginalized sociopolitical status of both novels' protagonists in terms of their gender or ethnicity that plays a decisive role in their limited agency, which is most explicitly depicted through the representations of dead and dying bodies.

I will then compare Tshibanda's novel with *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* by Sony Labou Tansi, whom David Murphy has called "the most celebrated writer" in sub-Saharan Africa in the decades following independence due to his "experimental style [which] pushed the African novel in ever more innovative directions" (187).⁷ Born in the former Belgian Congo in 1947, Sony Labou Tansi reconnects the postcolonial histories of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, where he spent most of his life until his premature death in 1995.⁸ In *Les sept solitudes*, he caricatures an unnamed postcolonial nation, its newly established capital of Nsanga-Norda and recently "decapitalized" town of Valancia. The text

is a complex assemblage that brings together different genres (e.g., social realism and magic realism), different periods within the colonial and postcolonial history of the Republic of the Congo (e.g., Portuguese character and place names, the French national anthem, neocolonial economic dependencies), and spaces (both geographical and social). The female narrator, a resident of Valancia and leader of its outspoken female community, tells the story of Estina Benta's murder, which was committed by her husband, Lorsa Lopez, amid other grotesque crimes and injustices. The police of Nsanga-Norda never arrive to investigate the murder and a completely dysfunctional state apparatus is only preoccupied with consolidating its power instead of dealing with domestic and foreign affairs.

Both novels, while being quite different in narrative style, express their disappointment with the postcolonial nation and illustrate its struggle with dictatorship, corruption, and dependency on the West within a globalized capitalist economy through a strong focus on geographical space. In this context, I argue, both Sony Labou Tansi and Tshibanda move away from the national to explore rather localized identities in search of alternatives to the failed nationalist project, without, however, transcending these frameworks to explore a postnationalist vision. They testify to what Dominic Thomas describes as

[t]he fundamental problem that has confronted the postcolony has been political leadership and the models upon which it has sought to fulfill its aspirations of national integrity and unity. The national project has achieved little, with the exception of exacerbating ethnic rivalry and conflict, and the power mechanisms employed by governments to consolidate their power bases have been responsible for many of the difficulties that have come to characterize the postcolony today. ("Nationalism and Masculinity" 27–28)

The two novels demonstrate an on-going preoccupation with the nation—both as an ideological construct and as a framework for identity constructions—after the formal end of European colonial rule. Furthermore, Thomas argues that: "The fundamental axis of ... Tansi's work concerns the theme of power in the postcolony, and within this framework, the body presents a crucial site at which power is explored" ("Nationalism and Masculinity" 20), which is also consonant with Tshibanda's novel. The novels produce readings of dead and dying bodies, of power and death, that create connections between (post)nationalism and the corporeal and, by extension, remap the postcolonial nation across time and space without, however, abandoning the nation-state altogether. Extending Thomas's argument, this article concentrates on the ways in which the body serves as a projection screen for the discussion of local identities and conflicts in the postcolony.

MBEMBEAN "DEATH-WORLDS" IN MOBUTU'S ZAIRE

The memories of the ethnic cleansing in Shaba/Katanga return to Masikini once his asylum has been granted and when he is asked to meet a traumatized Angolan civil war refugee at a local community center (cf. Tshibanda 74–75), whose asylum request has been denied and who is now facing deportation. Masikini is immediately reminded of his friend Bukasa in Shaba/Katanga, who was equally distressed due to harrowing experiences of violence. These moments of remembering complicate the narrative by exposing an additional layer of memory and

provide a glimpse of the emotional distress that seems to lie below its surface. In Masikini's memories, death is a constant element in the representation of these violent events in the novel. Filip de Boeck has described the effects of violence and death on local history and memory in the postcolonial Congo (DRC). He retraces an ongoing crisis in the country,

which originated in the violent and alienating discrepancies and dislocations generated in and by the colonial project, and was further aggravated in the post-colony. . . . *Mboka ekufi*, "the country has died," was a frequently heard expression in Zaire, and it still is in the new Congo. . . . the growing sense of loss of a viable basis of social relations and of the shared epistemological truths on which it rests . . . seems to imperil people's ability to continue to construct and transmit a meaningful reality out of the social, political and economic paradoxes in which they are caught . . . the subjectivity of crisis— . . . is itself intimately tied to a generalised *memory crisis* and the breakdown of the production of history—is lined to an impossibility to place or *posit* death. (25, 26)

Death here appears as the ultimate caesura not only in a physical sense, but in its omnipresence it also disrupts collective memory and, by extension, threatens the establishment of a collective history. Similarly, Masikini's own narrative is severed when he recalls his deeply traumatized and injured friend Bukasa:

Air famélique, regard livide, teint de cadavre, Bukasa clopinait sur une route rongée par l'eau de pluie, indifférent à ses pieds mal chaussés. . . . Regard braqué vers l'horizon, il avait l'air d'un animal blessé, traqué, à la recherche d'un abri. (Tshibanda 75)

Starved-looking with a pallid gaze and cadaverous complexion, Bukasa hobbled along a road eroded by rain water, indifferent to his poorly shod feet. . . . With his gaze fixed on the horizon, he looked like an injured animal, pursued by a hunter and looking for shelter.

In this depiction, as he hobbles along a decrepit country road, Bukasa's "living dead" appearance mirrors the bad state of the road, giving rise to what Achille Mbembe has called "death-worlds": the "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" ("Necropolitics" 40). Mbembe describes Foucault's critique of sovereign power and biopower as insufficient to account for the dynamics in any situation that might be considered to be in a "state of exception" (cf. "Necropolitics" 16, 25). While he refers explicitly to colonial situations, both past and present, such as the Israeli occupation of Palestine, I argue that the Mobutist dictatorship depicted in *Un fou noir au pays des Blancs*, as well as the dysfunctional and corrupt state apparatus in *Les sept solitudes*, fall under a similar bracket. Indeed, the "death-worlds" of the colonial period are maintained in the postcolony, which Mbembe defines as "[identifying] specifically a given historical trajectory—that of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization and the violence which the colonial relationship involves" (*Postcolony* 102). Significant for the analysis here is primarily Mbembe's insistence on the importance of space (with recourse to Fanon) for the notion of colonial sovereignty:

The writing of new spatial relations (territorialization) was, ultimately, tantamount to the production of boundaries and hierarchies, zones and enclaves; the subversion of existing property arrangements; the classification of people according to different categories; resource extraction; and, finally, the manufacturing of a large reservoir of cultural imaginaries. These imaginaries gave meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing categories of people for different purposes within the same space; in brief, the exercise of sovereignty. *Space was therefore the raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it.* Sovereignty meant occupation, and occupation meant relegating the colonized into a third zone between subjecthood and objecthood. (“Necropolitics” 25–26; emphasis added)

Mobutu’s continuation of the spatial politics of the Belgian colonizer, particularly in terms of territorial unity, created a similar sense of sovereignty by enforcing a displacement of the Kasai ethnic minority through the employment of violence against them. The account of the military raid in Tshibanda’s novel is preceded by a depiction of Bukasa that is firmly rooted within geographical space and describes him crossing a cemetery in Lubumbashi, the regional capital of Shaba/Katanga:

Pour aller au quartier Bel-Air, il emprunta un raccourci passant par le cimetière. Sur une distance d’un kilomètre, il croisa avec indifférence trois cortèges funèbres. Fallait-il s’en étonner dans un pays où tous les paramètres de l’économie étaient au rouge sans que cela n’ébranle la conscience des hommes politiques? (76)

In order to get to the neighborhood of Bel Air, he took a shortcut across the cemetery. Within one kilometer, he encountered indifferently three funeral processions. This came as no surprise in a country where all economic metrics were in red, without, however, unsettling the politicians’ consciousness.

This cemetery barely allows mourning; due to the high number of deceased it has turned into a well-frequented public space. Instead of providing a place of tranquility and reflection, it has become rather one of transit and routine, illustrated by Bukasa’s use of it as a shortcut to another part of the city and the indifference with which he perceives the funeral processions he encounters. It is, however, not only the military threat that causes the dying, but also the HIV/AIDS epidemic⁹:

Bukasa s’approcha d’une tombe encore fraîche, s’inclina avant d’articuler d’une voix à peine audible: “Elle est morte, elle aussi. Nous l’avons enterrée à l’autre côté.” ... Il s’adressait à un ami, mort il y a pas longtemps, de la maladie de la décennie. (Tshibanda 77)

Bukasa approached a fresh tomb, bent over it and uttered, barely audible: “She, as well, is dead. We buried her on the other side.” ... He was talking to a friend, who had died recently, of the disease of the decade.

Death in the postcolony is thus determined on scales both transnational, through the HIV/AIDS epidemic (“the disease of the decade”) as a threat to life, and local, through military attacks, hence rendering the suffering more complex, turning the body into a site of global threats and of nationalist conflict and repression. This impression is further exemplified by the following description of the aftermath of a military attack, for which the narrator clearly identifies Mobutu as being

responsible (cf. Tshibanda 79) and during which Bukasa is hit by a stray bullet and dies:

Il était onze heures du matin. Un véhicule passa en trombe et éclaboussa le mourant. Bukasa souleva son regard et vit dans le ciel un nuage en forme de croix. . . . Un vent violent souffla, un oiseau lança à la cime d'un arbre un cri de détresse. . . . Un chien aboya au loin. (Tshibanda 81)

It was 11 o'clock in the morning. A vehicle shot by and splattered the dying with dirt. Bukasa lifted his gaze and saw in the sky a cloud in the form of a cross. . . . A violent wind blew, a bird produced a distressed cry from the crown of a tree. . . . A dog barked from afar.

Bukasa's gaze, which was fixated on the horizon before and thus, despite his hobbling, still indicating a certain progress, now turns toward the sky: the Christian imagery is uncanny and suggests a kind of martyrdom in his death. There is, however, neither a sense of transcendental consolation in his dying, nor the expression of heroism in the face of brutal state violence, the sovereignty that Mbembe identifies in the "right to kill" (cf. "Necropolitics" 12). Instead, there is a sudden silence after the chaos, only interrupted by the wind, a crying bird, and a barking dog. Similar to Sony Labou Tansi's novel, where the earth cries and the cliff rocks gurgles to announce the murder of Estina Benta by her husband Lors Lopez (cf. 13), the aftermath of which—particularly the futile waiting for the police—determines the narrative, it is nature that "heaves and groans, crying out in response to the official apathy in the face of needless human suffering" (Stone McNeece 129).

Strikingly, it is a white missionary priest—a figure rarely portrayed in a positive light in sub-Saharan literature—who tries to save his troubled friend and take him to the hospital before he is shot. However, his efforts are to no avail, Bukasa dies and the only thing the priest can do is close the dead man's eyes (Tshibanda 81). In this context, Katherine Verdery's study of the political lives of dead bodies in post-socialist contexts also applies to the analysis of their representations in the postcolony. She identifies numerous ways in which the study of dead bodies can function in order to "[attend] to political symbolism; . . . to the connections between the particular corpses being manipulated and the wider national and international contexts of their manipulations; and to reassessing or rewriting the past and creating or retrieving 'memory'" (3). Significantly, Bukasa's death happens at a central moment in the novel, namely after Masikini's asylum request in Brussels has been granted and as soon as he has started his political and social engagement in the rural Walloon province; it has been two years since he arrived in Belgium.

Part of Masikini's (not always unproblematic) political agenda is to educate white Belgians about their country's colonial history and its aftermath. Rendering the story of the young Angolan man, whose asylum request had been pending for four years and then denied (cf. 82), the narrator attempts to show similarities between conflicts that cause people to flee their home regions and countries, thereby occasionally making sweeping generalizations and platitudes, such as "Le jour où les Africains sauront relativiser les liens de sang, ils cesseront de se référer à leur groupe d'origine et ils se préoccuperont plus des problèmes de développement"

'The day when Africans learn to relativize their blood relations, they will stop identifying with their ethnic group and rather tackle the problems of development' (Tshibanda 26). However, at other points in the novel, he renders these views more complex. For example, at the *bureau d'accueil* (local authorities offices where asylum seekers in Belgium have to register upon arrival), the first stop on his long journey through Brussels' bureaucratic institutions, Masikini has to question his fixed ideas on this matter. In contrast to those from African or Asian countries, the white asylum seekers from Eastern Europe face greater opposition from the bureaucratic apparatus since they do not speak French or English (cf. Tshibanda 9). The narrator describes a law enforcement officer's incomprehension of how non-white people from formerly colonized regions of the world can possibly be "culturally closer," less "different," than white asylum seekers from the post-socialist countries of Eastern Europe (Ibid.). Demonstrating this relativity and arbitrariness of difference and spatial distance plays a crucial role in the text: hence, it is not in the symbolically much more potent capital, but in the Belgian province that Masikini's encounter with a civil war refugee from Angola brings back the painful memories of his friend Bukasa's death, "Comme dans un film, les souvenirs des événements vécus en Afrique lui revenaient à la mémoire avec une netteté proportionnelle aux traces qu'ils avaient creusées dans sa mémoire" 'Like in a movie, the memories of the events experienced in Africa crept back into his consciousness with a sharpness proportional to the traces they had left in his memory' (75).

ASYLUM AND NATIONALISM

The memories Masikini thought he had left behind close around him and force him to face this traumatic experience. In this context, Michael O'Riley has pointed to the problematic aspects of using the notion of haunting in postcolonial theory:

Haunting is pervasive in postcolonial thought precisely because of its affective dimension, a dimension that creates a sense of the imminently important, present, and disruptive. This disruptive quality of postcolonial haunting is frequently portrayed as the Freudian *unheimlich* of history and is figured as an interruptive or affective moment in the course of Western consciousness where the repressed colonial scene returns. These moments of commemoration represent discontinuities in the narrative and give an idea of the trauma that lies underneath its surface. (1)

Tshibanda's novel addresses these ideas on two levels. On the level of the narrative, by interrupting it with moments of memory, and also on a larger scale, these moments can be read as an attempt not only to disrupt *his story*, but also *history*. At the same time, his memories connect the space of the postcolony with his new environment in the metropolis of the former colonizer. When he has to tell his story for his asylum application at the refugee office in Brussels, he recounts the inception of Belgian colonialism in the Congo: "je viens de ce grand pays que vos ancêtres ont appelé 'Congo belge.' Mon histoire commence en 1885 à la conférence de Berlin" (Tshibanda 23). 'I come from this great country that your ancestors called the "Belgian Congo." My story begins in 1885 at the Berlin Conference.' Despite the caseworker's request to focus on "his own story," Masikini continues and traces the roots of the ethnic conflict in his home region of Shabe/Katanga back to

Belgium's colonial involvement and the ways in which Mobutu's government has continued it. His personal narrative, his "dièse," is that of a nation. In the context of the Mbembean "death-worlds" of the postcolony, Masikini's position in relation to a sovereignty that relies on death, as someone who has survived those structures, lets us read him telling his story, and particularly the alignment of his story as the story of the nation, as a claim to agency, which is further emphasized by the constructed character of "dièse." However, this claim is problematized by the very fact that he is seeking asylum in the country of the former colonizer. Indeed, as David Farrier and Patricia Tuitt have argued, asylum seekers are "deterritorialized subjects defined by an appeal to a territorial sovereign"; in other words, "[to] claim asylum is to speak simultaneously 'the language of adherence to authority and the language of resistance' ... that is to say, asylum challenges both the tenets of nationalism and the trans- or even anti-national sentiment of postcolonial criticism" (254–55).¹⁰

In positing the figure of the asylum seekers as a conceptual dilemma for the celebratory accounts of cultural globalization in postcolonial studies, Masikini's claim of agency—making the story of a nation his personal, heavily localized (hi)story and, by traveling to Brussels, reinserting this narrative into a larger framework of global displacement—cannot be read as an act of resistance driven by a postnationalist vision. The local "death-world" of the postcolony keeps haunting him, illustrating what de Boeck describes as the manner in which "History 'deals with death as an object of knowledge and, in doing so, causes the production of an exchange among living souls,'" while "the living continuously live in the disturbing company of severed restless souls wandering around, of dead unable to 'liberate the apartment for the living'" (47, 101). Masikini's asylum narrative serves as testimony to the local "death-worlds" of a late Mobutian Zaire and thus does not express a "postnationalist" approach: if anything, it constitutes a "postnationalist" vision in its attempt to subvert the late stages of Mobutist nationalism by revealing the dictator's continuation of colonial politics.

Masikini provides instead an alternative national narrative that remembers those whom the nation-state has attempted to erase from history, exemplified by the ethnic cleansing of Kasai in Shaba/Katanga. In doing so, Tshibanda seems to ascribe a role to storytelling and, by extension, to literature similar to that described by Sony Labou Tansi in the foreword ("avertissement") of *Les sept solitudes*:

... parce que être poète, de nos jours, c'est vouloir de toutes ses forces de toute son âme et de toute sa chair, face aux fusils, face à l'argent ... , et surtout face à la vérité reçue sur laquelle nous, poètes, avons une autorisation de pisser, qu'aucun visage de la réalité humaine ne soit poussé sous le silence de l'Histoire. (n.p.)

... because to be a poet nowadays is to want to ensure, with all one's strength, with all one's body and with all one's soul, that in the face of guns, in the face of money ... , and above all in the face of received wisdom, upon which we poets have the authority to piss that, no aspect of human reality is swept into the silence of history. (*Seven* n.p.)

The use of History with a capital "h" in the French original underlines its hegemonic perspective; as Thomas notes, Sony Labou Tansi "insists on acting as a true witness to his age" (*Nation-Building* 59). In *Les sept solitudes*, the testimonial work

against “the silence of [H]istory” is done by those who are politically relegated to society’s margins: the murder of Estina Benta at the beginning of the novel immediately focuses on the female community of Valancia and the female body. While Julin Everett observes that existing scholarship on themes of violence and power in Sony Labou Tansi’s oeuvre, such as Eileen Julien’s and Roger Ravet’s respective works on sexual violence in his 1979 novel *La vie et demie* [*Life and a Half*] and Dominic Thomas’s article on nationalism and masculinity (“Sony Labou Tansi”), “already [acknowledge] the position of women as objects of sexual abuse in Labou Tansi’s work” (2), Flora Veit-Wild focuses on representations of the grotesque body of the male dictator and concludes that “Sony links power relations in political discourse to violence in gender discourse” (236). Other recent studies, such as Xavier Garnier’s, have highlighted the importance of a “geocritical approach” (cf. 10, 233), in the sense of Bertrand Westphal’s use of the term, to consider representations of space and (post)colonial spatiality in Sony Labou Tansi’s work. More specifically, as Thomas argues, it is the “relationship between the body and nationalist discourse, along with the tenuous associations between gender and nationalist identities, [that] provide important sides at which power is explored and in turn the elaboration and articulation of protest and resistance located” (*Nation-Building* 61).¹¹

As mentioned before, *Les sept solitudes* provides the reader with an assemblage of the localized and globalized and often gendered histories of (male) domination and (female) resistance of the present-day Republic of the Congo: most characters and places in the text have Lusophone names, reminiscent of the country’s history of fifteenth-century Portuguese colonialism; the character of Estina Bronzario, the leader of Valancia’s female community, resembles Kimpa Vita, the female head of an anticolonial Christian movement in the early eighteenth-century Kongo Empire; a judge is described as being “fanatical about the ‘Marseillaise’” (Sony Labou Tansi, *Seven* 31); and the enormous presence of Western science (especially anthropology) and economy permeates the text (e.g., *Ibid.* 17–18). In this context, the connection between the character of Estina Bronzario and Kimpa Vita is particularly interesting. Carina Yervasi has pointed out that while religious leaders, such as Vita,

did not directly link social and economic emancipation to political freedom, the insurrections they led were in regions most permeated by European economic and social programmes, and their beliefs were founded on the idea of a new social order promising that the departure of the white colonists would bring about equal distribution of wealth and social equity. (15)

This historical parallel supports a reading of Estina Bronzario and her female companions as the only voices of dissidence denouncing the dysfunctional and corrupt state apparatus and its entanglement with both European colonial oppression and global economic dependencies, all of which are represented as predominantly masculine in the novel. At the same time, Sony Labou Tansi’s reassembling of space and time into a new anachronistic patchwork of history ridicules a French imperial conceptualization of history, according to which, as Stephen Tyre points out,

the colonies did not have pre-colonial pasts worthy of historians’ attention; the period before French rule had been one of stagnation or even regression, and if “progress” had been achieved under French control, then the history of recent

changes in the lives of the colonial subjects was essentially the same as the history of French colonial rule. (152)

Sony Labou Tansi voices his disappointment of the postcolonial nation-state not only by depicting its malfunctioning authorities, but also the vast range of global capitalist involvement: the general atmosphere of lawlessness and corruption that characterizes the dysfunctional postcolonial state is further emphasized by the suspension of the causality between colonial occupation and neoimperial dependencies and instead happening simultaneously. At the same time, his depictions of everyday life in the postcolony are marked by a peculiar amnesic indifference.

GENDER AND SOVEREIGNTY IN THE POSTCOLONY

In *On the Postcolony*, Mbembe identifies “the grotesque and the obscene [as the] two essential characteristics that identify postcolonial regimes of domination” based on his case study of postcolonial Cameroon (*Postcolony* 103). He refers to Mikhail Bakhtin, who

claims that the grotesque and the obscene are, above all, the province of ordinary people (*la plèbe*). He maintains that as a means of resistance to the dominant culture, and as a refuge from it, obscenity and the grotesque are parodies that undermine officialdom by showing how arbitrary and vulnerable is officialdom and by turning it all into an object of ridicule. (103–04)

However, he calls for a “shift in perspective” (104) to explain the specific relationship between the postcolonial state and its subjects, which can be applied to the representation of postcolonial social life in *Les sept solitudes* by understanding this relationship

[n]ot primarily [as] a relationship of resistance or collaboration but ... as convivial, a relationship fraught by the fact of the *commandement* and its “subjects” having to share the same living space.... this logic has resulted in the mutual “zombification” of both the dominant and those apparently dominated. (Ibid.)

The narrative exemplifies this dilemma by beginning and ending with accounts of dead and dying female bodies: every time the municipal authorities of Valancia think that the police from the capital finally arrive to investigate the murder of Estina Benta by her husband Lorsa Lopez,

[o]n déterra à toute vitesse [ses] os ... on les racla, les lava, on les remit à leur ancienne place, à côté de la hache du crime, la bêche cassée, la pioche, les fourches, les couteaux de boucherie, les machettes; on remplaça soigneusement les morceaux de drap et les crocs, le fusil à piston qui avait servi à dissuader les éventuels intervenants le jour du crime. (56–57)

[Her] bones were hastily dug up, scraped and washed, and placed in their former place, beside the axe used in the crime, the broken spade, the pick, the forks, the butcher’s knives and the machetes. The pieces of sheet and the meat hooks were carefully replaced, as, too, was the piston gun which had been used to warn off anyone who might to intervene on the day of the crime. (*Seven* 30)

The way in which Estina Benta's fragmented body is presented mirrors both the fragmented (and reassembled) historical framework of the narrative and the fragmented body politic, highlighting its ethnic divisions between the people of the coast and the people of the Nsanga-Norda (cf. Labou Tansi 14) and the failures of the postcolonial nationalist project in general.¹²

However, her skeleton is not only a metaphor for the demise of the post-independent nation, but also assumes a similar function to the dead body of Martial in Tansi's earlier novel *La Vie et demie* (1979), as described by Thomas:

The authorities have no respect for the sacredness of the body ... and are prepared to do anything to maintain their power base. The *public* body may be able to do whatever it chooses to the *private* body, but it cannot control or eliminate the mind and thought processes that challenge the leadership. (*Nation-Building* 70; emphasis added)

The relationship between the private and the public is shattered: the public interest is focused on the almost Beckettian waiting for the police, not on what happened to Estina Benta (e.g., cf. 30–31). This scene is mirrored when, at the very end of the novel, another notable member of Valancia's female communities dies: "Nous écoutions tous Lorsa Lopez qui parlait de l'île des Solitudes et personne ne vit mourir Fartamio Andra do Nguélo Ndalo. Elle a dû mourir comme une ombre pour éviter de nous déranger" (201) 'We were all listening to Lorsa Lopez talking about the Island of Solitudes and no one saw Fartamio Andra do Nguélo Ndalo die. She must have died like a shadow to avoid disturbing us' (*Seven* 129). Sovereignty, in the Mbembean sense, remains with those who already represent hegemonic state power by depicting the masculine—represented by Lorsa Lopez—as invading her space and drawing the attention away from her dying. While Thomas argues that "masculinist identity is inextricably linked to the exercise of political power" (*Nation-Building* 23) in Sony Labou Tansi's work, this sovereign power embodied by Lorsa Lopez, who murdered his wife, does not only consist in the "right to kill," but even extends beyond death by denying the dead female body any recognition as such. The women's attempts to subvert the postcolonial nation-state and those who govern it—both in the public and in the private sphere—do not result in a successful claim to agency.

While Tshibanda reflects on the failures of the postcolonial nation by remembering it from afar, Sony Labou Tansi turns to the female community of Valancia, who do not allow the town to forget the deceased Estina Benta and perform a reburial each time her body is excavated. Male rebel figures such as Martial in *La Vie et demie*, who, according to Lydie Moudileno, represents physical and ideological resistance in the text but has raped his own daughter Chaïdana (cf. *Parades* 68–69), whose body, as Moudileno aptly notes, becomes "assimilated to both the national and textual space constitutes one of the sites where the demiurgic battle between the masculine figures take place" ("Tortuous" 29).¹³ In contrast to this, the women of Valancia are the only veritable, if temporary, opposition to state-imposed injustice and prevent Estina Benta from what Sony Labou Tansi calls in the preface to the novel "being swept into the silence of history." Their measures of commemoration, such as the performative reburials of Estina Benta's skeleton and the embalment of Fartamio Andra do Nguélo's body (cf. 197), together

with naming the town square where she was murdered after her when no one in Valancia can remember the deceased's maiden name anymore (cf. *Ibid.* 42–43) and Estina Bronzario's proclamation of a "sex strike" (cf. *Ibid.* 76), represent acts of resistance against what de Boeck describes as "[t]he dismembering of collective remembering, the fragmentation of a collective consensus concerning the representations of historical 'truth' [, which] is itself a symptom of the breaking up of the social interweave as harmonious memory environment" (33).

Again, the discussion of public and private spaces is strongly connected to the "local scenes of being and belonging." Fartamio Andra do Nguélo's announcement of her own death can be read as a stocktaking of the political situation of the postcolonial state, while her focus is very much on her immediate living environment: "Il n'y a plus qu'une chose qui fonctionne dans cette ville: la mort" (196) 'Only one thing still works in this town: death' (*Seven* 126). Through her illustrious ancestry—she is a "Member of the Founders Line," "[e]lle est de la Lignée: on ne l'enverra pas avec de l'huile de l'agave. Il y a pour elle l'eau de bronze et les essences de sesbania" (197). 'She is of the Line. You can't send her off with agave oil. She must have bronze-water and essences of sesban' (*Seven* 127)—her own story is thus, like Masikini's, inextricably connected to that of the nation. In this context, I am taking a lead from Ellie D. Hernández, who argues that "gender and sexuality offer more varied responses to the idea of the dissolution of the nation than any other identity process" and emphasizes that "gender and sexuality are categories that arose in response to exclusion from the nation" (1). It is important to note, however, that in Sony Labou Tansi's novel, gender as an identity and group signifier does not translate into a postnationalist vision in the sense of not achieving subverting the nation-state; like in Tshibanda's novel, the problem of sovereignty (and agency) lies in the politically marginalized position of those who attempt to claim agency.

POSTNATIONALISM AND HISTORY

Like Jessica Whyte (cf. 37), David Farrier and Patricia Tuitt have identified what both Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben consider the "decisive factor" of modernity, "the biopolitical structuring of power relations around a zone of indistinction between what is inside and outside the political order" (255). Indeed, in *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben describes how "the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (12). This collapsing of the separate spheres of the private/personal and the public, together with depictions of the "bare life at the margins," is strongly connected to the visions of the global and local expressed in Pie Tshibanda's and Sony Labou Tansi's novels. According to Farrier and Tuitt, Agamben's "analysis offers a vital paradigm for reading the mechanisms that reinforce nation state sovereignty via the reproduction of the asylum seeker as criminal" (255). Pie Tshibanda's *Un fou noir au pays des Blancs*, however, also allows the investigation of the relation of the asylum seeker to the nation-state he has left behind and the connection between the two states through their shared colonial history.

In Sony Labou Tansi's work, where, as Stone McNeece describes, "images of a distorted moral order flicker erratically from the recesses of the colonial and postcolonial past—shadows of events that mark a traumatic break with History" (129), the focus is on a different sociopolitically marginalized group, the female community of Valancia, that challenges the postcolonial nation by not allowing a male-dominated society and state apparatus to forget about the deceased female citizens.

In this context, the visions of the postcolonial nation and its subversion expressed in Sony Labou Tansi's and Tshibanda's texts cannot be described as "postnationalist," but rather as "post-nationalist": The characters' limited claim to agency (by surviving the Mbembean "death-worlds" of the postcolony), due to their marginalized status as women or members of an ethnic minority, does eventually not enable them to effectively subvert nation-state sovereignty in order to assume a vision that would move beyond its borders. These processes are narrated through scenes of death and dying, with a particular focus on colonial history and historiography, as well as on the very locations in which sovereignty is exercised in the postcolonial nation-state. While *Un fou noir au pays des Blancs* depicts Mobutu's continuation of the spatial politics and ethnic violence of the Belgian colonizer, the narrative of *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* begins and ends with representations of the dead and dying female body. Lorsa Lopez kills Estina Benta and is responsible for distracting attention from the death of Fartamio Andra do Nguélo Ndalo; while the women's burial rituals serve as memory practices against "official" historical amnesia, his character illustrates what Mbembe has described as "[m]ale domination [deriving] in large measure from the power and the spectacle of the phallus—not so much from the threat to life during war as from the individual male's ability . . . to obtain its validation from the subjugated woman herself" (*Postcolony* 13). Thus, both novels represent different ways in which nation-state sovereignty extends to collective memory and the attempts of sociopolitically marginalized groups to challenge this by providing the reader with alternative histories of the nation, such as Masikini's asylum report, his "dièse," at the refugees' office in Brussels. In doing so, they do not abandon the nation as a conceptual framework; even Sony Labou Tansi's reassemblage of time and space does not challenge the arbitrary borders colonialism has drawn across the African continent or the nation as an identity signifier. The postnationalist visions expressed in *Un fou noir au Pays des Blancs* and *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* set out to subvert the postcolonial nation-state *as it is* and voice their disappointment with its development since the formal end of Belgian and French colonial rule of the two Congo states. Indeed, Tshibanda's and Sony Labou Tansi's texts require us to look at representations of postnationalism in Congolese literature in a different light, with regard to how the impossibility of assigning a postnationalist perspective to the novels challenges what Gikandi terms the all too "familiar tropes of postcolonial theory" (639). The texts draw attention to the level of privilege that is required in order to claim agency that would successfully subvert nation-state sovereignty. In doing so, they demonstrate how, both in the postcolony and from afar, in the territory of the former colonizer, those in marginalized social positions cannot assume a vision that could move beyond the limits of the postcolonial nation.

NOTES

1. The letter has also been included in Alain Mabanckou's collection of essays entitled *Le Sanglot de l'homme noir* [*The Sobbing of the Black Man*] (Paris: Fayard, 2012).

2. *Les sept solitudes* was translated into English by Clive Wake in 1995. If not indicated otherwise, the English quotes from Sony Labou Tansi's novel in this article are based on Wake's translation. All other translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated. I will be referring to both Congo states in this context, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and thus pursue a similar approach to Dominic Thomas, who, in his discussion of Sony Labou Tansi's *L'état honteux*, argues that "the interconnectedness of the respective colonial and postcolonial histories of the two Congos are close enough for the criticism to apply to both spheres" (*Nation-Building* 60).

3. This lack of direct reference is of course deliberate to avoid censorship. As Dominic Thomas has demonstrated with *L'état honteux*, which is set in an "imaginary African nation" (*Nation-Building* 59) that bears clear similarity to Mobutu's Zaire, renaming and recontextualization allows Sony Labou Tansi to "attack authoritarianism without actually naming the People's Republic of the Congo ... [and] enables him to at least attempt to bypass censorship" (*Ibid.* 60).

4. This tension is particularly reflected by Sony Labou Tansi's oeuvre, however, an in-depth analysis of his ambiguous relationship to the Congolese state authorities, which Lydie Moudileno (cf. *Parades* 58) and Dominic Thomas (cf. *Nation-Building* 53, 56) refer to, is beyond the scope of this article.

5. Including performances in Edinburgh and Glasgow in 2012 and, according to Djungu-Simba, also in Switzerland, France, Canada, Martinique, Burkina-Faso, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (cf. 192).

6. In his essay on Jameson's notion of "national allegory," Imre Szeman revisits the debate surrounding the term and points to prominent critics, such as Aijaz Ahmad, who have taken issue with "[t]he presumption that it is possible to produce a theory that would explain African, Asian, and Latin American literary production ... has been (inevitably) read as nothing more than a patronizing, theoretical orientalism, or as yet another example of a troubling appropriation of Otherness with the aim of exploring the West rather than the Other" (803). However, he demonstrates how "criticisms of Jameson's views ... have nevertheless tended to obscure and misconstrue a sophisticated attempt to make sense of the relationship of literature to politics in the decolonizing world" and how Jameson's "broader aim ... is not to pass aesthetic judgment on third world texts, but to develop a system by which it might be possible to consider these texts *within* the global economic and political system that produces the third world as the third world" (804, 806–07).

7. Analyses of Sony Labou Tansi's oeuvre have often tended to focus on *La Vie et demie* [*Life and a Half*] (1979), *L'état honteux* [*The State of Shame*] (1981; Flora Veit-Wild's translation [229]), and *L'anté-peuple* [*The Antipeople*] (1983), the first two of which might also be relevant to the themes discussed here but in focusing on *Les sept solitudes*, this article makes a case for its centrality to Sony Labou Tansi's work. The renewed interest in the latter novel is further demonstrated by its inclusion in Xavier Garnier's recent study *Sony Labou Tansi: Une écriture de la décomposition impériale* (2015).

8. According to Dominic Thomas, Sony Labou Tansi's father originated from what is today the DRC, while his mother was from what is today the Republic of the Congo; Sony Labou Tansi himself was a citizen of the Republic of the Congo (cf. Thomas, *Nation-Building* 52).

9. Providing a rather somber parallel to Sony Labou Tansi, who died of complications of HIV/AIDS in 1995.

10. Farrier and Tuitt remark, however, that to “cast the asylum seeker as only emblematic of disciplinary traction risks replicating the essentialism that has dogged some postcolonial discourse on migration. It is critical, therefore, to establish methods of reading that can move between paradigm and person without the former absorbing the latter” (255).

11. The depiction of the female body as a site of nationalist discourse and struggle is a common trope in sub-Saharan post-independence fiction, earlier examples include the character of Salimata in Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Les Soleils des indépendances* [*The Suns of Independence*] (1968) or Margaret Cadmore in Bessie Head’s novel *Maru* (1971). For a detailed discussion of the latter, see Boehmer. For a comparative approach to the grotesque body in postcolonial sub-Saharan literature and, in particular, in Sony Labou Tansi’s 1981 novel *L’état honteux*, see Veit-Wild.

12. In her reading of Sony Labou Tansi’s *La Vie et demie*, Lydie Moudileno claims that the “dismembered body” can be considered a “new novelistic paradigm” in his work (“Tortuous” 351).

13. Which tellingly starts with him being tortured to death (cf. Sony Labou Tansi, *La Vie* 11–16).

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