

Killer Stories:

‘Globalizing’ the Grotesque in Alain Mabanckou’s *African Psycho* and Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson douce*

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There’s something that captures human attention, and that sells, when it comes to gruesome murders.¹

Je sais que les communiqués nécrologiques garantissent une audience.²

As of summer 2020, Alain Mabanckou and Leïla Slimani are arguably the most widely read Francophone authors originating from the African continent, more precisely from the Republic of the Congo and from Morocco respectively. Both have written novels that have been widely translated, made it onto national and international bestseller lists — Leïla Slimani was the most read author in France in 2016 — and been awarded prestigious literary prizes. In 2012, Mabanckou received the Grand Prix de Littérature Henri Gal, a prize bestowed by the Académie française for an author’s entire oeuvre, and was nominated twice for the Man Booker International Prize in recent years; meanwhile, Slimani won the Prix Goncourt in 2016.

This article traces a grotesque aesthetics in Leïla Slimani’s second novel, *Chanson douce* (2016), and Alain Mabanckou’s fourth novel, *African Psycho* (2003). Slimani’s text is based on the 2012 killing of Lucia and Leo Krim, aged six and two, in an apartment building on Manhattan’s affluent Upper West Side by their nanny Yoselyn Ortega, while Mabanckou’s

¹ Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D’haen, ‘Introduction: Crime Fiction as World Literature’, in *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, ed. by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D’haen (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 1–12 (p. 1).

² Alain Mabanckou, *African Psycho* (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 2003), p. 97, hereafter *AP* in the text.

novel stylizes itself as an intertext to Bret Easton Ellis's infamous *American Psycho*, published in 1991 and equally located in New York City.³ While the two differ vastly in their narrative style, content, and reception, I argue that these novels create a new 'globalized' grotesque, an aesthetics that draws on other globally circulated texts, such as North American crime fiction, the literary trope of the serial killer and the 'evil mother', as well as on the recognition value of the city of Paris to appeal to a global, and in particular Western readership. Slimani's and Mabanckou's works could be described as what Rebecca Walkowitz has termed 'born-translated novels' beginning, as they do, 'as world literature', even if the critical response to Slimani's novel has only been surprisingly slight so far.⁴ I show how their representations of the grotesque describe new forms of postcolonial power relations in the age of global capitalism. Finally, I briefly engage with Mabanckou's and Slimani's public performances of their identities as literary authors in order to better comprehend how their re-configuration of the grotesque as a 'globalized' aesthetic extends to a re-thinking of what African literature in French and its authors are today on the world literary market.

Towards a 'globalized' grotesque

In her reading of Mbembe's 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony',⁵ Cécile Bishop emphasizes the centrality of the body of the 'dominated' and the ways in which it is constantly used and

³ Mark Libin, 'History and Its Doubles in Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho*', *Research in African Literatures*, 47 (2016), 39–56.

⁴ Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 2. Lorenza Starace has already mentioned Walkowitz's concept in the context of *Chanson douce*, by noting how translation is 'the very condition of its production'. Starace's article mostly focuses on Slimani's 'post-identitarian' stance and the representation of ethnic and other forms of identity in the novel and connects this to broader questions of French versus Francophone literature in the aftermath of the *littérature-monde* debate. My article takes the reading of the novel in a different direction and discusses more specifically the (grotesque) aesthetics and tropes with which the text engages. See Lorenza Stanza, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*: Paradoxes of identity and visibility in the *littérature-monde* paradigm', *Francosphères*, 8.2 (2019), 143–165 (p. 151).

⁵ Achille Mbembe, 'Provisional Notes on the Postcolony', *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 62.1 (1992), 3–37, hereafter *PN* in the body of the text. I use the 1992 version of Mbembe's essay, in line with the other contributors to this issue. For further discussion of the genealogy of Mbembe's text, see the Introduction to this thematic issue.

abused by the postcolonial state and to what degree this treatment differs from European colonial rule:

According to Mbembe, this use of bodies by the postcolonial state differs from the violence of colonial governmentality, in that the colonial instrumentalization of bodies, despite its excess and arbitrariness, was usually justified in economic terms, as a means to increase the obedience and therefore the productivity of the colonized subject.⁶

The new grotesque aesthetics and the neoliberal, globalized power relations I describe here do not signal a return to these colonial or earlier postcolonial forms and logics: we will see that the state, represented by its judicial and executive powers, at least at first glance, seems to play only a marginal role in both novels. On the African continent (in *African Psycho*) and in Paris, the ex-imperial metropolis (in *Chanson douce*), Mbembe's 'commandement' is exercised by the far less tangible dynamics of transnational capitalism, class differentiation, gender stereotypes, and social marginalisation. The 'globalized grotesque', as represented in Slimani's and Mabanckou's novels, combines these different aesthetics of asymmetrical power relations and oppression, and locates literary production in what Derrida calls 'a geopolitical process of becoming-worldwide'.⁷

In the conclusion to their 2013 work *Grotesque*, entitled 'Global Grotesque', Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund question whether '[...] the rise of contemporary globalization, which has been accused of imposing homogeneity and erasing difference, [has] lead to the death of the grotesque'.⁸ Their subsequent argument — which, frustratingly, never clearly defines a 'global grotesque' — strongly draws on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's seminal

⁶ Cécile Bishop, *Postcolonial Criticism and Representations of African Dictatorship: The Aesthetics of Tyranny* (Oxford: Legenda, 2014), p. 83.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. by George Collins (London: Verso, 2000), p. 302.

⁸ Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 136–37.

study *Empire* (2001). Hardt and Negri develop their notion of ‘Empire’ as ‘a decentered and deterritorialized apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers’.⁹ They trace the way in which globalisation has changed, according to Jeb Sprague, to ‘move us toward considering the constitution of power *transnationally* (or how power can become functionally integrated in different ways across borders so as it cannot be reduced to processes bound to the nation state)’.¹⁰ While their work has been tremendously influential to historians and sociologists of globalization, their approach has also sparked criticism, for instance, as Sprague further notes, concerning the lack of consideration of the role of the state.¹¹ Nevertheless, the broad brushstrokes that describe this ‘new *global economy*’ help us to analyse these new forms of the grotesque:

The transformation of the modern imperialist geography of the globe and the realization of the world market signal a passage within the capitalist mode of production. [...] the spatial divisions of the three Worlds (First, Second, and Third) have been scrambled so that we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First and the Second World almost nowhere at all. Capital seems to be faced with a smooth world — or really, a world defined by new and complex regimes of differentiation and homogenization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization.¹²

What is striking in this passage, is their insistence on space and territory, which are equally fundamental to Mbembe’s articulation of the exercise of power in the postcolony, and thus to

⁹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. xii.

¹⁰ Jeb Sprague, ‘Empire, Global Capitalism, and Theory: Reconsidering Hardt and Negri’, *Current Perspectives in Social Theory*, 29 (2011), 187–207 (p. 193).

¹¹ Sprague, ‘Empire, Global Capitalism, and Theory’, p. 188.

¹² Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. xiii.

the grotesque and vulgarity of the *commandement*, as I have already argued elsewhere.¹³ In order to emphasize the mobility and trajectories of grotesque aesthetics that are born out of literary traditions that Mbembe draws on in his ‘Provisional Notes’, as well as to better understand the circulation of these new texts and the politics of their celebrity (and highly mobile) authors in the global literary marketplace, I depart from Edwards and Graulund’s idea of a ‘global grotesque’ and suggest instead the notion of a ‘globalized’ grotesque. Hardt and Negri’s ‘smooth world’, in which we can find ‘the First World in the Third, the Third in the First’, further complicates the old imperial binary of ‘the West and the rest’. In the same way, Slimani’s and Mabanckou’s texts develop their ‘killer stories’ into narratives of social marginalisation and (socio-)economic precarity in the urban spaces of Paris and a fictionalised Brazzaville, in both the postcolony and the former imperial metropolis.

A ‘globalized’ grotesque is at the same time a ‘privatized’ one. Mabanckou’s and Slimani’s novels represent a grotesque that takes place ‘off-stage’, away from the public eye and which focuses instead on interpersonal relationships, the nanny Louise and her employers, the Massé family, in *Chanson douce*, and Grégoire Nakobomayo and his partner Germaine in *African Psycho*. At the same time, this grotesque is put ‘on stage’ for sensationalist consumption and draws attention to the role of the audience/readership. Mbembe discusses the ‘necessary familiarity and domesticity’ in the relationship between *commandement* and subject (between ‘ruler’ and ruled’), which results, according to him, in their ‘mutual zombification’ (PN 4). However, in Mabanckou’s and Slimani’s novels, where state power as such remains largely ineffective, regimes of power are determined by global capital and the grotesque enters the text through the ‘monstrous’ bodies of the socially marginalized figures of the ‘killer’.

¹³ Sarah Arens, ‘Narrating the (Post-)Nation? Aspects of the Local and the Global in Francophone Congolese Writing’, *Research in African Literatures*, 49 (2018), 22–41.

The way in which power relationships between ‘subjects’ are represented in these two texts, together with the emphasis they place on the performance of graphic violence, describe a new form of ‘grotesque’ that dissolves boundaries of genres, geographies, and forms that allow for them to be successfully distributed in the global literary marketplace in both their original French and in translation.¹⁴ While not wanting to conflate textual representation and authorship, this article will conclude by connecting the novels’ depictions of the grotesque to the two authors’ broader activities in the public sphere: Mabanckou’s signing of the *littérature-monde* manifesto in 2007 and his more recent critique of French president Emmanuel Macron’s language politics, as well as Slimani’s role as the president’s personal representative to the *Organisation internationale de la Francophonie*. Highlighting the performance of their global celebrity, especially in the Anglophone world, helps us to understand the ways in which they place a new importance on, and instrumentalize the role of the audience — as readership — by making them a central element of their representation of the grotesque.

Shocking from the start: the making of a monster

¹⁴ While not referring to the grotesque *per se*, there are a number of critical works focusing on the way in which the media have promoted a certain genre of ‘realist’ writing about immigrant experiences in France and how literary works become conscious of a particularly ‘marketable’ aesthetic in the global market place: for a Francophone context, see in particular, Kathryn A. Kleppinger, *Branding the ‘Beur’ Author: Minority Writing and the Media in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Lydie Moudileno, ‘Fame, Celebrity, and the Conditions of Visibility of the Postcolonial Writer’, *Yale French Studies*, 120 (2011), 62–74; Chris Bongie, ‘Exiles on Mainstream: Valuing the Popularity of Postcolonial Literature’, *Postmodern Culture*, 14 (2003), 133–140. These themes have also been explored for an Anglophone context, including Graham Huggan’s seminal work *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (New York, Oxford: Routledge, 2001) and Sarah Brouillette’s *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (London: Palgrave, 2007), and more recently, Madhu Krishnan’s *Contingent Canons: African Literature and the Politics of Location* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For a discussion of the racialised dimensions of French versus Francophone literature, see Sarah Burnautzki, *Les Frontières racialisées de la littérature française: Contrôle au faciès et stratégies de passage* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2017) and Kaoutar Harchi, ‘Pour en finir avec la croyance en l’universalisme littéraire français’, 19 May 2018, *AOC*, <<https://aoc.media/opinion/2018/05/18/finir-croyance-luniversalisme-litteraire-francais>> [last accessed 26 July 2020]. For a critical analysis of the relationship between literary prizes and the framing of contemporary Francophone literature as world literature, see Madeline Bedecarré, ‘Prizing Francophonie into Existence: The Usurpation of World Literature by the Prix des Cinq Continents’, *Journal of World Literature*, 5.2 (2020), 298–319.

Slimani's novel, entitled *Lullaby* in its UK edition, has been adapted into a multi-episode series for BBC Radio 4.¹⁵ Each episode of the radio adaptation starts with the murder of the toddler, Adam Massé, and in the same way, almost every review of the novel emphasizes the shock value of its first sentence: 'Le bébé est mort'.¹⁶ In her review for *The New Yorker*, which currently is probably the novel's most frequently quoted analysis, Lauren Collins describes the opening line: 'It is hard to think of a more primal sentence. It out-Hemingways Hemingway, shearing sentimentality from the dread. Absolutely everything feels like hubris when you're working backward from that conclusion'.¹⁷ What follows is not any less shocking, namely the graphic description of Adam's sister Mila's eventually unsuccessful struggle for survival:

La petite, elle, était encore vivante quand les secours sont arrivés. Elle s'est battue comme un fauve. On a retrouvé des traces de lutte, des morceaux de peau sous ses ongles mous. Dans l'ambulance qui la transportait à l'hôpital, elle était agitée, secouée de convulsions. Les yeux exorbités, elle semblait chercher de l'air. Sa gorge s'était emplie de sang. Ses poumons étaient perforés et sa tête avait violemment heurté la commode bleue. (CD 13)

With the opening of the novel, the narrator immediately confronts the reader with the precise medical details of Mila's drawn-out death. At the same time, this style detaches the reader from the immediate horror of the scene through the third-person perspective, the absence of any names, as well as the short sentence structures. Mila's body is barely recognisable as that of a

¹⁵ Available in the UK via *Box of Broadcasts*: 'Reading Europe: Lullaby', 19:45, 20 June 2019, *BBC Radio 4*, <<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/13D22851?bcast=129478308>> [last accessed 24 Sep 2019]. The novel has also been adapted to the screen and has received rather unfavourable reviews: *Chanson douce*, dir. by Lucie Borleteau (2019), while the adaptation of the English translation will be directed by Paul Downs Colaizzo.

¹⁶ Leïla Slimani, *Chanson douce* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016), p. 13, hereafter CD in the body of the text.

¹⁷ Lauren Collins, 'The Killer-Nanny Novel that Conquered France', *The New Yorker*, 25 December 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/01/the-killer-nanny-novel-that-conquered-france>> [last accessed 1 September 2019].

child, only the description of 'la petite' signals that she is Adam's sister, while the comparison to 'un fauve' underlines the primitive simplicity of her struggle for life.

Her dramatic and violent death is juxtaposed with the description of the emotionless and seemingly absurd routine of the police securing evidence: 'On a photographié la scène de crime. La police a relevé des empreintes et mesuré la superficie de la salle de bain et de la chambre d'enfants' (CD 13). The work of the police functions as a kind of parenthesis to the plot, while not being the driving force behind the narrative: the text ends with an account of Nina Dorval, the police officer in charge of the case, as she tries to reconstitute the crime scene and repeatedly attempts to inhabit and understand Louise's character in order to uncover her motivation for killing the children. Any attempt to comprehend is ultimately unsuccessful, for both Dorval and the reader.

This investigative style is reminiscent of the account of the Clutter family murders by Richard 'Dick' Hickock and Perry Smith in Truman Capote's 1966 'nonfiction novel' *In Cold Blood* and other works of 'true crime' fiction. Thus, like in Capote's work, the narrative concentrates not so much on the act of killing, but on the perpetrators and focuses the reader's attention on an investigation of their characters, rather than the crime as such. The impenetrability of Louise's character is thereby announced right from the start: 'L'autre aussi, il a fallu la sauver. Avec autant de professionnalisme, avec objectivité. Elle n'a pas su mourir. La mort, elle n'a su que la donner' (CD 14). Not only is Louise immediately introduced as the 'other', 'l'autre', a status that will remain throughout the narrative, but the above description of her treatment by the paramedics and the police foreshadows the complexity of her character development as both victim and perpetrator of violence. Furthermore, and equally similar to Capote's representation of Perry Smith, *Chanson douce* contextualises Louise's crime within a framework of social milieu and marginalisation, which intersects race, class, and gender, and

within which the figure of the ‘killer’ is constructed, without, however, attempting to explain or rationalize their motives.

Alain Mabanckou’s fourth novel *African Psycho* — which is also his first translated into English — presents us with a very different ‘killer’ figure, yet opens in an equally abrupt way with the first-person narrator articulating his intention to murder his girlfriend:

J’ai décidé de tuer Germaine le 29 décembre. J’y songe depuis des semaines parce que, quoi qu’on dise, tuer une personne nécessite une préparation à la fois psychologique et matérielle. Je crois à présent être dans cet état d’esprit même si je n’ai pas encore choisi le moyen avec lequel j’accomplirai mon acte. (*AP* 11)

Despite the obvious differences — the already accomplished killing in *Chanson douce* versus Grégoire’s mere claim to murder his girlfriend, as well as the different narrative perspectives — a similar strategy underpins the opening of Mabanckou’s novel: both texts aim to immediately confront the reader with violence perpetrated against women and children, whether ‘real’ as in *Chanson douce* or simply imagined as in *African Psycho*. At the same time, both openings testify to a certain emotional detachment between the narrative voice (be it first or third) and this violence, which is necessary to put the reader into a morally and empathetically ambiguous position vis-à-vis the grotesque ‘killer figures’ of Louise and Grégoire. At the same time, this repositioning sheds light onto the crucial role of the readership in both texts.

While critics of both Slimani’s and Mabanckou’s texts have connected their depiction of brutality to broader histories of violence, I argue that analysing this grotesque aesthetics necessitates a stronger focus on the politics that both texts represent, as well as a more formal consideration of the intertextual quality of this violence. In his reading of Mabanckou’s novel,

Mark Libin concentrates on the numerous doubles that the narrative produces, such as its clear intertextual reference to *American Psycho* and its protagonist Patrick Bateman, the relationship between the two fictionalized Congo states (both Mabanckou's native Republic of the Congo, as well as its neighbouring country, the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and Grégoire's aspirations to imitate his idol, the serial killer Angoualima.¹⁸ Crucially, Libin identifies a less obvious double in the text, represented by the figure of Angoualima and argues:

The almost entirely concealed history of the Congo region, like the ghost of Angoualima, haunts this text precisely because it is almost completely erased from [...] the text, and this history derides the text's ability to reify the murderous powers of a single individual, situated as he is in a region where civil war and its consequences have murdered millions.¹⁹

However, this historicist reading runs the risk of locking the representation of the Congo region within Western stereotypes about 'Africa', emphasized through the problematic notion of 'haunting' in this context. Moreover, Libin's analysis remains surprisingly oblivious to the violence that Grégoire both imagines *and* perpetrates. Instead, I suggest that focusing on the grotesque bodies and spaces that the text produces enables us to come to a more comprehensive understanding of how the novel, while set in the post-independence Republic of the Congo and criticizing the exercise of state power, produces grotesque visions of the postcolony and its literary production that are far more complex than simply signalling a return of the past.

Grotesque bodies/marginalized spaces: the killer as 'other'

¹⁸ Libin, 'History and Its Doubles', pp. 39–40.

¹⁹ Libin, 'History and Its Doubles', p. 41.

Libin notes that ‘[t]he storyline that Grégoire attempts to construct is, of course, the Western narrative of the serial killer — a Freudian narrative of radical individualism and isolated psychosis as the cause of murder, mayhem, and societal panic,’²⁰ and he goes on to explain:

Patrick Bateman, as Mabanckou notes, is intended to represent the epitome of American capitalist success: he is handsome and intelligent, spectacularly wealthy, and boundlessly ambitious and materialistic. In contrast, Grégoire constitutes a failure even in his own self-appraisal. He describes himself as ugly, [...]. A product of the streets of Brazzaville, he remains an uneducated auto mechanic, impoverished and comically inept [...].²¹

African Psycho thereby describes the fairly common psychoanalytic narrative arch for which the experience of violence engenders new violence. For instance, Grégoire tries to justify his misogyny and desire to perform grotesque forms of violence against women because his mother had abandoned him as a child:

[...] si je pouvais tuer toutes les femmes de la Terre, je commencerais par ma mère, pour peu qu’on me la montre, même maintenant. Je lui arracherais son cœur de roc que je ferais cuire dans le fourneau de mon atelier et je le mangerais avec des patates douces en me léchant les doigts devant le reste de son corps en putréfaction ... (AP 21)

Grégoire’s fantasy of killing his mother and eating her ‘cœur de roc’ reverberates with both racist colonial imagery of the ‘savage’ as ‘cannibal’, as well as with iconic literary characters,

²⁰ Libin, ‘History and Its Doubles’, p. 54.

²¹ Libin, ‘History and Its Doubles’, p. 42.

such as the cannibalistic serial killer Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris's novels and famously portrayed by Anthony Hopkins for their screen adaptations.²² While Lecter is described as a 'sociopath', his violence depicted as a direct result of having been traumatized during his childhood in war-torn Lithuania, the first-person narrator of *African Psycho* describes being physically and emotionally abused in both his foster family and children's home (*AP* 26–29), as well as having suffered bullying at school (*AP* 22–23). While Grégoire's memories assume a cyclical character and suggest an inevitability of violence that repeats itself — an attempt to make sense of his later desire to rape and murder — I argue that the text foregrounds his social marginalisation and 'otherness' as a central dynamic to these pursuits, which we can also witness in *Chanson douce*. Both novels depict their 'killer' figures as isolated and leading an existence on the very fringes of the societies they live in. This is further illustrated by their homes and neighbourhoods at the peripheries of the cities they inhabit.

In *African Psycho*, Grégoire's biography and even his (grotesque) body are closely intertwined with and rooted in the neighbourhood of 'Celui-qui-boit-de-l'eau-est-un-idiot':

C'est mon territoire, un lieu que je défendrai jusqu'à la dernière pulsation. [...] Son image me tient à cœur. Je sais que les habitants de ce trou à rats sont mal vus dans le pays. Mais est-ce de leur faute? Est-ce que ce sont les habitants eux-mêmes qui souillent ce quartier. C'est facile de nous pointer du doigt, de nous prendre pour des boucs émissaires [...]. Ma vie, c'est ce petit coin sordide que les autorités regardent avec dépit et ne visitent qu'aux périodes des élections. C'est là que j'ai traîné avec bonheur mes jambes squelettiques et ma tête rectangulaire. (*AP* 36)

²² As well as, more recently, by Mads Mikkelsen in the television series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015).

Reminiscent of the city of Valancia in Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi's grotesque-absurdist novel *Les Sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* (1985), Grégoire's neighbourhood is equally characterized as neglected by authorities of the state. The economic deprivation of the area makes it utterly uninteresting and disposable for the authorities, for whom the neighbourhood's inhabitants only serve as voters who can otherwise be neglected. 'Territoire' thereby suggests a clear demarcation of the area, visibly separated from the neighbourhoods of the white customers of the sex workers and the generally wealthy, such as Grégoire's foster family: 'Je vivais dans le centre-ville, dans une famille de fonctionnaires très cultivés [...]' (AP 22).

Chanson douce offers similar dynamics between the urban centre and its margins: Louise lives in a run-down flat in Créteil, a suburb southeast of Paris along the line of the RER A, and owned by an abusive landlord (CD 30f; 87).²³ Her economically precarious situation is further accelerated by her failure to secure additional sources of income to deal with the debts she has inherited from her late husband, when she is turned away by Rose Grinberg, a neighbour of the Massé family, in response to asking her for extra work (CD 85). Louise's 'inherited precarity' is thereby presented as diametrically opposed to the Massé family owning their flat in the rapidly gentrifying tenth arrondissement of Paris, which they would have only been able to afford through inheritance.²⁴

In both novels, the urban spaces with their stark contrasts between affluent and deprived neighbourhoods are recognisable to readers around the world and in particular to those in the West. While *African Psycho*'s intertext, *American Psycho*, presents a similarly strong

²³ The disorderliness of Louise's flat, as well as the sense of 'un-homeliness' we perceive from the narrator's descriptions are reminiscent of the connection Maria Barrett draws between the grotesque and a 'dark space': 'The grotesque is etymologically linked to the underground space of "caves" or the "grotto-esque". [...] The bodily metaphor that the grotesque came to embrace tells us that it can be connected to a vulgar image of the feminine, as associated with all things animal-like, primitive and fallen and which metaphorically casts the feminine down into a dark space, underground into a cave of abjection'. Maria Barrett, 'Introduction', in *Grotesque Femininities: Evil, Women and the Feminine* (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2010), vii–xix (p. ix).

²⁴ In his seminal work *Le Capital au XXI^e siècle*, based on data from France, Thomas Piketty predicts a return to nineteenth-century levels of wealth inequality with inheritance as a crucial factor. Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2013), p. 18.

connection between a distinctive urban space and the economics of depravity by documenting New York City's 1980s yuppie capitalism and Reaganite politics, Paris has become a symbol for inequality in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. The deprived neighbourhoods and neglected social housing estates of the Parisian banlieue, have been broadcasted to the world through the commercial success of literature and films, such as Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995), and through the mediatization of the 2005 nation-wide uprisings. The imagery of Paris, as it is employed in both Slimani's and Mabanckou's novels, thus exploits the globally circulated 'recognition value' of the French capital as an urban space of social inequality, violence, and poverty.²⁵

While, in *Chanson douce*, the wealth of central Paris is displayed to emphasize Louise's poverty and (material) aspirations and as a stark contrast to her one-bedroom studio in Créteil, in *African Psycho*, a different, yet no less stereotypical image of Paris is mobilized. Grégoire remembers how the new mayor of his hometown has renamed the river that runs through it the 'Seine' and thus employs the cultural currency of the imperial European metropolis left over from the colonial period:

Il nous avait fait comprendre que c'était plus qu'un honneur pour nous de nous identifier à cette ville de rêve, de sorte que nous nous sentirions comme à Paris, et ce n'était pas donné à n'importe quel pays du tiers-monde de posséder un cours d'eau qui coupe une de ses agglomérations en deux. (*AP* 110–11)

For Mbembe, space is a fundamental element of colonial sovereignty: in 'Necropolitics', he notes that '[t]hese imaginaries gave meaning to the enactment of differential rights to differing

²⁵ For instance, in his literary essay 'London's Overthrow', China Miéville describes the growing housing inequality and the steadily increasing lack of social housing in London as the 'banlieuefication' of the British capital. China Miéville, *London's Overthrow* (London: The Westbourne Press, 2012), p. 68.

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'.²⁶ Space and spatial demarcation retain this function in the post-colonial spheres of both Mabanckou's and Slimani's novels. Here, 'the same space' is transformed into something reminiscent of Hardt and Negri's 'smooth world': cities become microcosms of globalization and late capitalism, in which it is purchasing power that divides the urban space. For instance, when the narrator assumes Louise's perspective to describe her desire for upward social mobility in materialistic terms:

Paris est à ses yeux une vitrine géante. Elle aime surtout se promener dans le quartier de l'Opéra [...]. Elle marche lentement, observe les passantes et les vitrines. Elle veut tout. [...] Elle s'imagine alors une vie où elle aurait les moyens de tout avoir. (*CD* 89)

The grotesque here is presented neither through what Mbembe calls the 'dramatising' of the dictator-president (*PN* 4), nor as a factor in bringing about the 'mutual zombification' between ruler and subject. Rather, it describes a characteristic of those at the very fringes of society. In his own reading of Bakhtin, Mbembe states:

Bakhtin 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 which undermine officialdom by showing how arbitrary and vulnerable is officialdom and turning it all into an object of ridicule. (*PN* 4; Mbembe's italics)

²⁶ Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, 15 (2003), 11–40 (pp. 25–26).

While Mbembe goes on to locate the grotesque and the obscene in the realm of the ruler, I argue that the grotesque, as presented in the post-colonial worlds of Mabanckou and Slimani's novels, is 'globalized' in that it is recognisable to a wide, yet predominantly Western readership. It is generated by power relations that are determined by forces beyond the postcolonial nation-state, which are by no means new. For instance, Sony Labou Tansi's *Les sept solitudes de Lorsa Lopez* presents a whole array of foreign involvement and investment in the postcolony. However, what is new about Mabanckou's and Slimani's different approaches is, firstly, the way in which they present the very consequences of postcolonialism and global capitalism on the individual in both the formerly colonized territory, as well as the former imperial metropole. Secondly, this caters for the global literary marketplace and for a broad readership that can access their texts in either the original French or their English translations and grasp their inter- and extra-textual references. The grotesque becomes Bakhtin's 'province of ordinary people' again, yet making it a brutal performance of violence, whether real or imagined: in *African Psycho* and *Chanson douce*, sovereignty is less a matter of exercising state power than of the individual's purchasing power. Accordingly, 'otherness', in both novels, becomes a question of social class and societal participation, which still runs along lines of race and ethnicity but not exclusively anymore, as the characters of Louise and Myriam illustrate.

While Myriam mostly turns a blind eye to the precarity of her nanny's living situation, her husband Paul not only refuses to face his own privilege, but, at times, resorts to outright class-based hatred, for instance, when he learns that Louise cannot swim during their holidays in Greece, 'il en veut à Louise d'avoir traîné jusqu'ici son indigence, ses fragilités' (CD 73). More broadly, in *Chanson douce*, the white woman Louise is presented as an exception in the highly gendered and racialized world of domestic labour. Although problematically reversing the racial aspect of the power dynamic between employer and domestic labourer (also in

comparison to the ‘true’ story), the relationship between Louise and the family is further complicated by the parents’ absolute dependency on her, of which the mother, Myriam, is very much aware:

La nounou est comme ces silhouettes qui, au théâtre, déplacent dans le noir le décor sur la scène. [...] Elle est la louve à la mamelle de qui ils viennent boire, la source infaillible de leur bonheur familial. On la regarde et on ne la voit pas. Elle est une présence intime mais jamais familière. (CD 59)

The narrator’s insistence on the impenetrability of her character constructs Louise as the unknown ‘other’, both outside in the public sphere, within the microcosm of the park and playground, and inside the home of the Massé family, and makes it more difficult for us as readers to empathize with her, or at least, challenges our willingness to do so. This impression is further encouraged by accounts of Louise’s own history of violence, which suggests that she might be unable to form affective relationships to those close her — a similar strategy to the superficially Freudian narrative in *African Psycho*, which, I argue, paradoxically serves only to emphasize the unexplained motivations of the respective ‘killer’ characters.

Although we learn that Louise has been a victim of violence perpetrated by men, at the hands of her late husband Jacques, and an abusive previous employer, Monsieur Franck (CD 97f., 108), she is also presented as a perpetrator of (domestic) violence. It is the explicitness with which this grotesque violence is rendered that complicates any affective connection to her character on the part of the reader. This becomes particularly apparent when, in a flashback, Louise is described beating up her own teenage daughter Stéphanie, following a meeting at Stéphanie’s secondary school in the affluent fifteenth arrondissement of Paris, far away from their home in the working-class suburb of Bobigny (CD 178). Stéphanie had been able to attend

this school due to the advocacy of Louise's then employer, a certain Madame Perrin. The meeting with the teachers that both Louise and her daughter attend results in Stéphanie's suspension, on the grounds of her continuous misbehaviour in class:

Elle [Louise] aurait voulu lui faire comprendre ce que ça lui coûtait d'humiliations et d'efforts que d'élever une fille comme elle. Elle aurait voulu lui mettre le nez dans sa sueur et ses angoisses, lui arracher de la poitrine sa stupide insouciance. Mettre en miettes ce qui lui restait d'enfance. (CD 181)

While Louise seems to share her daughter's feelings of class-based humiliation, she identifies Stéphanie as the sole source of her shame. Just before she attacks her own daughter, the narrator assumes Louise's perspective and describes her disgust when looking at Stéphanie, whose physical appearance seems to emphasize her 'out-of-placeness' in the well-to-do environment of the school: 'Elle était trop ronde, trop grande, ridicule avec sa queue-de-cheval sur le haut du crâne. Elle portait un caleçon imprimé qui lui faisait des cuisses énormes' (CD 180). This, together with Stéphanie's seemingly apathetic attitude towards her *échec scolaire*, does not correspond to her mother's aspirations towards middle-class respectability. As a result, Louise reacts violently:

Elle a ouvert le petit portail de l'entrée et à peine l'a-t-elle eu refermé derrière elles qu'elle s'est mise à rouer Stéphanie de coups. Elle l'a frappée sur le dos d'abord, de grands coups de poing qui ont projeté sa fille à terre. L'adolescente, recroquevillée, criait. Louise a continué de frapper. Toute sa force de colosse s'est déployée et ses mains minuscules couvraient le visage de Stéphanie de gifles cinglantes. Elle lui tirait les cheveux, écartait les bras dont sa fille entourait sa tête pour se défendre. Elle la tapait

sur les yeux, elle l'insultait, elle la griffait jusqu'au sang. Quand Stéphanie n'a plus bougé, Louise lui crache au visage. (CD 182–83)

Louise's violent assault on her daughter is presented as resulting from an inability to articulate and to verbally communicate her feelings: 'elle aurait voulu lui faire comprendre'. On the level of the narrative, her attack serves to contextualize her killing of the Massé children and brings together several important themes of the text. In his review of the novel for the Swiss daily *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Roman Bucheli describes the development of Louise's character across the text as 'die allmähliche Verfertigung eines Monsters' [the gradual/careful making of a monster] and indeed, the above scene seems to foreshadow the murder of Mila and illustrates the complex narrative strategies employed to 'other' and dehumanize Louise's character.²⁷ These are closely connected to her gender and physical appearance and coupled with her gaining agency — problematically so, as I will demonstrate below — as well as her increasingly unsustainable living situation.

Interestingly, while the grotesque imagery of earlier works of Francophone African fiction mainly focused on the figure of the dictator-president, like those that informed Mbembe's articulation of the grotesque, the 'killers' in *Chanson douce* and *African Psycho* are working-class characters with grotesque bodies. In her article on working-class aesthetics and the female grotesque in photography, Frances Hatherley notes:

Historically, 'femininity' is a concept formed by structures of class and racial difference: to be 'feminine' is to fit into an idealised higher-class position. Working-

²⁷ Roman Bucheli, 'Leïla Slimanis Roman über die allmähliche Verfertigung eines Monsters', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 7 November 2017, <<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/leila-slimanis-roman-ueber-die-allmaehliche-verfertigung-eines-monsters-ld.1326427>> [accessed 1 September 2019].

class women without the financial resources to successfully perform femininity [...] are regularly cast down into the realms of the grotesque.²⁸

The ‘globalized’ grotesque then brings together these different aesthetics of the exercise of power. In Hatherley’s reading, referring to a British/Western context, the grotesque is weaponized by the socially more powerful against the less affluent, while emphasizing its particularly gendered dimension. In *Chanson douce*, this is highlighted by Paul, who is not only presented as being annoyed at Louise’s lower-class background, as mentioned above, and who, at the same time, does not perceive her as sexually desirable (CD 76).

The absolute violence and degradation that Louise inflicts upon her daughter is thereby juxtaposed with the asymmetric power relation she finds herself in vis-à-vis her employers. To better understand this development across the text, it is important to recognize the degree to which Myriam and Paul are incapable of engaging with Louise on equal terms and instead constantly infantilize her:

Myriam admire chez Louise cette capacité à jouer vraiment. Elle joue, animée de cette toute-puissance que seuls les enfants possèdent. [...] Elle observe Louise qui se tord, qui pousse des cris sauvages et elle en est affreusement gênée. [...] Peut-être, se rassure Myriam, que Louise est une enfant elle aussi. Elle prend très au sérieux les jeux qu’elle lance avec Mila. (CD 49)

Louise’s incapacity to communicate with adolescents and adults seems to be opposed by her apparent ability to connect with children — early on in the novel, we learn how she is even

²⁸ Frances Hatherley, ‘A working-class Anti-Pygmalion aesthetics of the female grotesque in the photographs of Richard Billingham’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 25 (2018), 355–70 (pp. 357–58).

able to ‘tame’ the ‘cunning’ Mila. Narrated from Myriam’s perspective, we learn that this is due to Louise’s ability to play, to integrate herself fully into the children’s world, something which Myriam experiences as difficult and which represents a cause of tension and jealousy throughout the novel. For her, this can only be explained by a certain intellectual inferiority that relegates her nanny to the status of a child or even a ‘petite poupée’, a mere commodity in the already overstuffed family apartment. While the overriding dynamic and sense of separation between Myriam and Louise is determined by their employer-labourer relation and by their different social classes, their relationship also suggests a rather complex postcolonial power imbalance. Myriam, due to her North African origins, experiences racism (for instance at the nanny agency or through flippant remarks made by her friend Emma), but at the same time, her infantilizing of Louise and her embarrassment at her ‘cris sauvages’ reverberate with colonial stereotypes of infantilizing the ‘savage’, which, while not grotesque *per se*, is dehumanizing and ultimately employs a similar imaginary.²⁹

Aesthetically, this central and shifting power relation within the text, between working mother and working nanny, between employer and labourer, is signalled through the gaze. At the very end of the narrative, in the penultimate chapter, the Massé family are driving back to Paris after having visited Paul’s friend in the countryside.³⁰ While stuck in a suburban traffic jam, Myriam, who has largely failed to understand Louise’s poverty, recognises the nanny from the car window:

²⁹ Interestingly enough, the colonial undertones of Louise’s ‘cris sauvages’ foreshadow the way in which the Massé family’s neighbour, Rose Grinberg, via the third-person narrator, will refer to Myriam’s own cries upon finding the children: ‘La plupart des gens vivent sans jamais avoir entendu des cris pareils. Ce sont des cris qu’on pousse à la guerre, dans les tranchées, dans d’autres mondes, sur d’autres continents. Ce ne sont pas des cris d’ici’ (CD 85).

³⁰ This visit is strongly characterized by both Myriam’s and Paul’s optimistic visions of the future — ‘Paul regarde sa femme et ses enfants. Il se dit que le plus dur est accompli, que le meilleur reste à venir’ (CD 216) — that are diametrically opposed to Louise’s aggravated precarity.

Elle se demande où Louise va, [...] et ce qu'elle faisait là. Elle aurait voulu l'observer encore à travers cette vitre, *la regarder vivre*. Le fait de la voir sur ce trottoir, par hasard, dans un lieu si éloigné de leurs habitudes, suscite en elle une curiosité violente. Pour la première fois, elle tente d'imaginer, charnellement, tout ce qu'est Louise quand elle n'est pas avec eux. (CD 218; my emphasis)

While the novel avoids presenting the killing of the children as a punishment of the working mother, the question of guilt is presented in a much more complex way and the fact that Myriam utterly fails to engage with Louise meaningfully beyond the exchange of domestic labour for money, forms part of it. But even in this unique moment of recognition, Myriam is unable (and, indeed, unwilling) to get any closer, physically and empathically, but simply wants to 'watch her live', from the safe distance of the car window.

Our image of Louise is thus constructed through the different narrative perspectives of her, which, together with her aforementioned inability to communicate and the description of her run-down flat relegate her to an almost less-than-human status. However, it is this inferior status that reveals her agency based on and constructed through violence. As mentioned before, Louise's character is determined by the gaze of others, however, there are also moments where the narrator describes Louise as the one who is watching:

Myriam ne le sait pas mais ce que Louise préfère, c'est jouer à cache-cache. Sauf que personne ne compte et qu'il n'y a pas de règles. Le jeu repose d'abord sur l'effet de surprise. Sans prévenir, Louise disparaît. [...] Elle choisit souvent des endroits où, cachée, elle peut continuer à les observer. [...] Louise ne dit rien. Elle ne sort pas de sa cachette, même quand ils hurlent, qu'ils pleurent, qu'ils se désespèrent. [...] Elle les regarde comme on étudie l'agonie du poisson à peine pêché, les ouïes en sang, le corps

secoué de convulsions. Le poisson qui frétille sur le sol du bateau, qui tète l'air de sa bouche épuisée, le poisson qui n'a aucune chance de s'en sortir. (CD 50–51)

This unsettling scene reminds the reader of Mila's struggle for survival at the very opening of the novel and, quite problematically, presents Louise as a predator: at other moments in the text, the reader's impression of Louise is filtered through other characters' perspectives (like the other nannies', Paul's or Myriam's). At this point, however, Louise's violence is not merely portrayed as resulting from her inability to communicate but as an inherently cruel streak of her personality. It functions as an element of what is represented as Louise's almost pathological need to kill the children to secure her future and which presents a cycle of domestic labour that relies on an absolute triangular dependency that can only result in death. As soon as the children and their parents are not entirely dependent on the nanny's work anymore, because Mila and Adam have grown older and more independent, Louise's employment and, by extension, her very existence is threatened. Louise is caught up in a downward spiral which is further accelerated by her precarious living conditions.

From Louise's perspective, her existence can thus only be saved by creating a new dependency through reproduction, both in a biological, as well as in a temporal sense. Following this logic, if Myriam and Paul had a new baby, they would again be dependent on her, and thus assure her survival: a reproductive vision of the future. After having identified Mila and Adam as the main reason that Myriam and Paul are *not* having another baby, Louise spends the last of her money to take the children out for dinner so that their parents can have an evening together to, she hopes, procreate. However, when this logic inevitably fails, Louise kills the children.

Just as the urban space of Paris becomes a globally circulated symbol of social inequality and abject poverty, so does the 'evil mother' become another fetishized literary trope

of the ‘globalized’ grotesque, that is equally recognisable to a Western audience. In this context, Barrett states:

Culture can clearly be seen to orchestrate, typify and condone a zero tolerance [*sic*] approach toward women perceived as evil, meanwhile clearly a globalisation and exploitation of the ‘evil woman’ also suggests itself through for example internationally successful Hollywood films with women cast as the *really* bad or *really* mad lead protagonist.³¹

Both *African Psycho* and *Chanson douce* capitalize on this figure. As discussed above, Grégoire’s memory of being abandoned by his own mother serves as an (admittedly) superficial trigger for his fantasies of violating women. At the same time, Louise’s character brings together grotesque female characters of Ancient Greek mythology, such as Medea and Medusa, women who turn into ‘monsters’ as a result of male (and often sexual) violence and, in turn, perpetrate violence against their own families, with the contemporary, sensationalist news stories in which the ancient myth is ‘updated’ and where the ‘murderous mother’ is replaced with the ‘murderous nanny’, such as Yoselyn Ortega and Louise Woodward.³²

In lieu of a conclusion: a grotesque for global consumption and cultural capital?

A third and final feature that distinguishes the ‘globalized’ grotesque from its earlier forms, is the emphasis it places on the audience/readership and with it, the role that sensationalism plays as an extra- and inter-textual theme, for both the creation of the novel and as a theme within the narrative. In her otherwise celebratory review, Lauren Collins notes, regarding Slimani’s

³¹ Barrett, ‘Introduction’, p. vii, Barrett’s italics.

³² One might also think of the 1992 trial of the Swiss *au pair* Olivia Riner, following the death of the baby Kristie Fischer in a house fire in Thornwood, New York, which coincided with the release of Curtis Hanson’s feature film *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, the narrative of which focuses on an ill-minded nanny.

inspiration to write the novel based on the news stories that documented the Krim murders, that she ‘was both beguiled and a little shocked by Slimani’s audacity in laying claim to it’.³³ Hinting at, yet not exploring, the problematic ethics behind Slimani’s appropriation and re-casting of the case, Collins’ remarks echo what I have initially called the morally and empathically ambiguous position of the reader towards the text.³⁴ This ambiguity, however, operates at different levels within the novel: firstly, Collins recounts an interview with John Siciliano, Slimani’s American editor at Penguin, and his decision to market the text to ‘a big commercial readership’ through major supermarket chains like Target and Walmart, similar to best-selling thriller novels, such as Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012) and Paula Hawkins’s *The Girl on the Train* (2015).³⁵ This marketing strategy extends to the decision to change the title of the English translation for the U.S.-American market from *Lullaby* to *The Perfect Nanny*, which signals a clear reference to the Krim and Woodward cases. In doing so, it also capitalizes on the success of true-crime documentaries (especially those produced by Netflix) and podcasts of recent years, such as *Jeffrey Epstein*, *Tiger King*, *Serial*, and *Making a Murderer*. This illustrates what Walkowitz identifies as the ‘salutary effect of tipping the balance of literary history from writers to readers’ and how a focus on circulation, in turn, enables us to think ‘about overlapping literary histories [...] to consider how reception alters the work’.³⁶ What is more, this effectively turns Slimani’s and Mabanckou’s texts into what Walkowitz calls the “‘world-shaped novel,” a work of fiction that attributes its aesthetic and spatial origins to

³³ Collins, ‘The Killer-Nanny’.

³⁴ Starace also mentions Slimani’s ethnic ‘reversal’ of Louise’s character and her engagement with the news stories about the Krim case. However, Starace takes a different stance on the ethics of this problematic authorial decision — despite acknowledging the complex intersections of race and class — and describes it as an act of ‘reclaim[ing] creative autonomy’, locating Slimani’s novel within the existentialist tradition. See Starace, ‘Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson douce*’, pp. 150, 154.

³⁵ Collins, ‘The Killer-Nanny’.

³⁶ Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, pp. 23, 24. The parameters of this article do not allow for a full-scale evaluation of this, but analyzing the ways in which the commercial success of the true-crime genre has started to influence writing of ‘crime fiction as world literature’ would be another interesting avenue of investigation and comparison. The quotation refers to the title of Nilsson’s, Damrosch’s, and D’haen’s edited collection (2017).

planetary circulation rather than to national, regional, or urban geographies associated with one language'.³⁷

Secondly, there is, however, a critical engagement with the unethical exploitation of 'real-life' tragedies in the text, via the character of Madame Grinberg, the Massé family's neighbour and last person to have seen Louise and the children before the killing:

Les policiers s'agaceront qu'elle se donne tant d'importance et ses larmes redoubleront quand ils diront sèchement: 'De toute façon, vous n'auriez rien pu faire.' Elle racontera tout aux journalistes qui suivront le procès. Elle en parlera à l'avocate de l'accusée, qu'elle trouvera hautaine et négligée, et le répétera à la barre, quand on l'appellera à témoigner. (CD 82)

Having rejected Louise when she tells her about her precarious situation, as mentioned above, Madame Grinberg is, like Myriam, unable to empathize with her. Instead she appropriates the narrative and makes herself the centre of it, to then recount the story to the journalists and through them to a wider public. In *African Psycho* as well, there is a similar sense of engagement with and performance for a wider audience, which consumes these stories with their gruesome details and of which narrator-protagonist Grégoire is very well aware:

Je ne comprends toujours pas que le dernier de mes actes, qui date pourtant d'il y a trois mois seulement, n'ait pas eu d'écho dans la presse nationale et celle du pays d'en face. [...] Après cet acte, je vous assure que, le lendemain, je suis resté une journée entière à écouter Radio Rive Droite [...]. (AP 16 ; 17)

³⁷ Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 47.

Fame and celebrity, and even the mere promise of it, not only constitute an important aspect of Grégoire's motivation to imitate the notorious serial killer Angoualima, they further push the representatives of the state into the background:

Bien entendu, à cette époque, il n'y en eut que pour lui dans la presse nationale et dans celle du pays d'en face. Mon idole était plus célèbre que notre président de la République et nos musiciens réunis. C'était pourtant l'année du Parti unique où l'on voyait le portrait du chef de l'État à toutes les intersections du pays. [...] Il n'y avait plus de place pour d'autres faits divers, et même, les journalistes durent réduire les sacro-saintes pages politiques consacrées au président pour avoir plus d'espace et relater avec minutie l'ascension fulgurante du Grand Maître. (*AP* 65)

Even the omnipresence of the postcolonial dictator-president's image, a representation that Mbembe identifies as 'officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or challenge' (*PN* 4), is side-lined by the interest of the public in Angoualima, whom Grégoire calls 'le Grand Maître'. What is more, this interest moves beyond the geographical borders of the state, emphasized by the narrator's insistence on 'il n'y en eut que pour lui dans la presse nationale et dans celle du pays d'en face'. This spectacle for the consumption of the masses is another characteristic of the 'globalized' grotesque and the way in which it is symptomatic of power relations 'after' the era of dictatorships and what this means in both the postcolony on the African continent and in the European ex-imperial metropolis. In an increasingly globalized world, where economic power, influence, and fame are determined by forces that disregard geographical borders or contexts, the postcolonial 'commandement' is struggling for relevance. The grotesque can thereby assume different functions. In *Chanson douce*, Rose Grinberg, who would have been in a

position of power to help Louise but refuses to and who subsequently exploits and appropriates the nanny's story for her own benefit and for sensationalist consumption, stands paradigmatically for Louise's social marginalization and voicelessness. In *African Psycho*, the reporting about Angoualima's spectacular murders assumes a similar function to Mbembe's grotesque, employed to implicitly ridicule state power — here, by its total disregard. Instead, the image of the 'commandement' is replaced by transnational news stories about a serial killer and is reminiscent of Pim Higginson's assessment of African crime writers' use of absurdity and of how they 'connect these criminal activities back to parallel economies and neocolonial enterprises broadly implicating the West'.³⁸

Finally, I am not suggesting that this new 'globalized' grotesque, which draws on particularly Western literary tropes, displaces the texts' 'African' references and connections or that Mabanckou and Slimani are *not* concerned with the postcolonial state anymore or are embracing what Madhu Krishnan calls 'the notion of postnationalism in its purely celebratory guise'.³⁹ Instead, the postcolonial state is present in its very absence in Mabanckou's and Slimani's texts, as I have demonstrated above. To understand how their re-thinking of the grotesque as a globalized aesthetic extends to a re-thinking of what Francophone African literature and its authors are today, it is important to, at least briefly, take the wider contexts of the two novels into consideration. This includes their writers' demonstrative gestures of authorial positioning and the media-effective performance of their identities.

Mabanckou presents himself in the attire of a Congolese *sapeur* and his novels, such as *Verre cassé* (2005) and *Black Bazaar* (2009), are routinely located in the urban spaces of his native Republic of the Congo and include a vast array of intertextual references. As Ayo A. Coly underlines, 'the profusion of eclectic and unexpected literary allusions and artistic

³⁸ Pim Higginson, *The Noir Atlantic: Chester Himes and the Birth of the African Francophone Crime Novel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), p. 24.

³⁹ Madhu Krishnan, 'Introduction: Interrogating the Postnation in African Literary Writing: Localities and Globalities', *Research in African Literatures*, 49 (2018), vii–xv (p. x).

influences builds new and nonconforming filiations and territories in which the significations of Africa are constantly in flux'.⁴⁰ This assessment also reverberates with his performance as an internationally mobile author of the Congolese diaspora — professor at the University of California in Los Angeles and 'nommé au Collège de France' in 2016. While Slimani has published works of non-fiction dealing with social issues in Morocco, her two novels both feature female protagonists in Paris, who either struggle with their North-African heritage (Adèle in *Dans le jardin de l'Ogre*) or whose origins are obscured, yet crucially not entirely absent from the text (Myriam in *Chanson douce*, as mentioned above).⁴¹ Interestingly, this is a much more complex vision of identity than she repeatedly performs in media interviews.⁴²

What differentiates these writers from other contemporary authors writing in French is the extent to which they are present in the Anglophone cultural sphere. Their immediate access to an even wider audience that adds to their celebrity status is not only determined by the awarding of literary prizes and translations. Their popularity among an Anglophone readership also seems to have been engendered (or vice versa) by a stronger orientation towards the North American literary market, i.e. through the choice of locations (the implicit references to New York City through *American Psycho* and the Krim murders), news stories, and the titles of the English translations (*The Perfect Nanny* vs *Lullaby*, while *African Psycho* is already an English-language title for a text written in French). Yet, their performances as 'écrivain.e.s engagé.e.s' is firmly rooted in France and the French-speaking world, expressed, for example,

⁴⁰ Ayo A. Coly, 'Afropean Masculinities as bricolage', in *Francophone Afropean Literatures*, ed. by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), pp. 155–172 (p. 160).

⁴¹ Leïla Slimani, *Sexe et Mensonges: La Vie Sexuelle au Maroc* (Paris: Editions Les Arènes, 2017). Last autumn, Slimani also took a stance in the 'Affaire Hajar Raissouni', regarding the conviction of a Moroccan woman for abortion and premarital sex. See Leïla Slimani, 'S'il y a bien une chose dont on a le droit de disposer, c'est de son corps', *Tel Quel*, 30 September 2019, <https://telquel.ma/2019/09/30/leila-slimani-sil-y-a-bien-une-chose-dont-on-a-le-droit-de-disposer-cest-de-son-corps_1652354/?utm_source=tq&utm_medium=normal_post> [last accessed 1 October 2019].

⁴² For instance, in her interview with Jon Snow on the British television Channel 4, where she claims that it is 'important' to not always present yourself as a victim and describes herself as a 'happy Moroccan-French woman'. See 'Leïla Slimani: "Macron knows I'm always going to say what I think"', 17 January 2018, <<https://www.channel4.com/news/leila-slimani-macron-knows-im-always-going-to-say-what-i-think>> [last accessed 1 September 2019].

by Slimani acting as Macron's personal representative to the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie and Mabanckou's critique of the French president's language politics and the controversy caused by his 2012 essay 'Le sanglot de l'homme noir'.⁴³ Despite their equally privileged access to and validation by the 'sacrosanct' institutions of the French cultural sphere — the Collège de France, the Prix Goncourt, their prestigious Parisian publishing houses — their different politics and relations to the postcolonial French state testify to what Krishnan calls the plurality of African literature in the asymmetrical world literary system.⁴⁴

In other words, works like theirs require more comprehensive modes of analysis that neither lock them into historicist readings, nor regard them as simply detached and 'free-floating' accounts of an affluent African diaspora. What is more, their celebrity status as literary authors, as well as their visible presence and political positioning in the Francophone and Anglophone public spheres works 'in tandem' with their re-working of the grotesque as a globalized aesthetic. The presence of the audience and the (relative) absence of the state in the text, emphasises a shift in the representation of power relations since the 'heyday' of the dictator figures portrayed in earlier novels by the likes of Henri Lopes and Sony Labou Tansi. This is a shift away from the focus on the exercise of power by the *state* and towards the decentralized forces of globalisation and global capitalism. Referencing elements of the Mbembian grotesque, their novels play up to what is being 'recognized' as African literature by the global market, only to destabilize this recognition again through intertextual references and tropes of Western fiction. This is connected to a similar shift that is taking place beyond the text, namely in the multiple ways in which writers like Mabanckou and Slimani perform

⁴³ See Valérie Marin La Meslée, 'Le grand rire d'Alain Mabanckou', *Slate Afrique*, 31 January 2012, <<http://www.slateafrique.com/81639/grand-rire-alain-mabanckou>> [last accessed 1 September 2019]; Alain Mabanckou and Achille Mbembe, 'Francophonie, langue française: lettre ouverte à Emmanuel Macron', *BibliObs/Nouvel Observateur*, 15 January 2018, <<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20180115.OBS0631/francophonie-langue-francaise-lettre-ouverte-a-emmanuel-macron.html>> [last accessed 1 September 2019]. In the interests of keeping a close focus here, this article unfortunately does not allow for a further exploration of the authors' politics regarding the French language, which would undoubtedly represent another interesting avenue of enquiry.

⁴⁴ See Krishnan, p. ix.

their identities as Franco-African literary authors and interact with their (predominantly Western) audiences.

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