Land and Landscape in Francographic Literature
Land and Landscape in Francographic Literature: Remapping Uncertain Territories

Edited by

Magali Compan and Katarzyna Pieprzak

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INTRODUCTION

REMAPPING UNCERTAIN TERRITORIES
TOWARDS A NEW FRANCOGRAPHIE
OF LANDSCAPE

MAGALI COMPAN AND KATARZYNA PIEPRZAK

As the dynamics of globalization continue to displace bodies around the world and deterritorialize its subjects, the relevance of land and landscape as a potent source for cultural identity, nationalist aspirations, and alternative post-nationalist subjectivities continues to grow. In La Francophonie, a region historically and politically defined through language, the importance of re-territorializing identity from a linguistic-colonial identity to a local or vernacular one is not new. In the wake of national independence movements, the celebration of the local as a source for post-colonial national identity provided a means for decolonizing culture while resisting a neo-colonial, regional or global identity that would challenge the legitimacy of the new nation-state. The local production of landscapes was crucial in the fabrication of new national spaces and narratives.

Traditionally defined as a portion of territory that can be viewed at one time from one place, the term landscape has long been tied to the inescapably solid, tangible, and material in the form of land. And yet in its distinction from the root term "land," landscape is also inextricably linked to the realm of perception and what one (or many) can see or imagine. Thus the etymology of the word landscape as “a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery” reveals the way it exists intrinsically not only as a representation but also a visual and subjective appropriation of land and space. As a representation, landscape can only be the object of one’s gaze, thus, giving agency to the proprietor of the gaze. Hence, in identifying its potential “to transform a part of terrestrial space into a place of historical life for people,” Homi Bhabha has acknowledged the power of landscape to embody the vision of the emergence of a nation. Bhabha writes that,
the recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression.3

In a post-colonial nationalist context, landscape and local environment thus work to exorcise the multi-faceted appropriation of land through territorial colonial aggression, and re-integrate the subsequent displaced, erased, or lost identity of the colonized within the post-colonial nation. In his work on the dialectic relationship between space and identity, Edouard Glissant in *L’Intention poétique* encourages the individual “to passionately live the landscape, to know what within us it signifies.”4 The negotiation of a post-colonial, or de-colonized identity thus begins by re-appropriating and re-mapping the land into an alternate landscape—a constructed visual, textual, political and social space—and performing through landscape a new body politic.

In her study *Landscapes of Power*, Sharon Zukin rightfully affirms that, “the concept of landscape has recently emerged from a long period of reification to become a potent tool of cultural analysis. It connotes a contentious, compromised product of society. It also embodies a point of view.”5 In Zukin’s study, which focuses on urban landscape, it is clear that the appropriation and transformation of landscape represents a re-ordering and contestation of visual, cultural, and political territories. Filip De Boeck, Marie-Françoise Plissart and Koen Van Synghel take this approach to landscape one step further by insisting that invisible and imaginary landscapes deserve equal critical attention. In their 2004 project “Kinshasa, The Imaginary City,” they argue that in a Third World context where many urban infrastructures are unstable and ephemeral at best, invisible landscapes are as important as visible landscapes, if not more:

The urban landscape of Kinshasa, its activities, its praxis and its spaces particularly charged with signification (the parcel of land, the bar, the church, the street) should be read not only as geographical urban realities that are visible and palpable, but also and foremost as a *mundus imaginalis*, a local and mental landscape, a topography and historiography of the Congolese imaginary that is no less real than its physical counterpart.6

By filming, photographing and collecting stories of invisible, imagined, but in-use city infrastructures, they start with material absence in order to reveal the cityscape as a mental space. In post-colonial literary studies, we tend to start with imaginary or imagined landscapes—the literary text—but too quickly reduce or flatten landscape to an illustration of what might be deemed anthropological reality or political symbolism and not the fundamentally contested and multidimensional literary construction that it is. As Réda Bensmaïa warns us, this type of post-colonial reading reduces literary works into “mere signifiers of
other signifiers, with total disregard for what makes them literary works in and of themselves.” Imaginary landscapes are not solely social and political terrains, but also contested literary sites.

“Kinshasa, The Imaginary City” shows us that the analysis of landscape is not only important in the treatment of post-colonial identity in its relationship to dynamics of nationalism and colonialism. As we move into “uncertain” times in the post-colonial world, with the nation-state failing many of its subjects and with new formations of globally contested and imagined spaces, the analysis of landscape becomes even more relevant. While some identities become more porous as borders are crossed and virtual worlds traversed, other identities become more firmly entrenched in lands and places they cannot leave. Whether writing from home, exile, or a global, mobile or trans-historical space, authors and their texts produce new landscapes and re-engage with the question of land and its boundaries. Bensmaïa refers to this type of writing as a “problematic that is attempting to redefine traditional boundaries of national, cultural, and ethnic belonging” as they refer to “what certain contemporary sociologists have called ‘global ethnoscapes,’ that is, those transnational spaces of identity.” In this book, we turn our attention from post-colonial nationalist landscapes to new configurations that attempt to redraw Francophonie into alternative relationships that destabilize both the centrality of French empire and the local nation-state. The essays in this collection examine the case of contemporary literature in French from and in multiple spaces around the world, and consider the ways the vernacular and the local—as well as the virtual and transnational—re-claim, re-map and re-fashion post-colonial, national, cultural and ethnic landscapes while also questioning both the limits and challenges to this imagination.

This collection thus performs the task of examining landscapes and re-drawing terrains into a new form of Francographie by focusing on the representation of land and the work of landscape in a variety of literary texts from the French-writing world. As Roger Little argues, Francographie is a potent term for re-articulating relationships of power in Francophonie from the polarized and exclusionary dynamics of metropole and post-colony. We take up his term as a concept that allows us to talk about the literary relationships between multiple lands and landscapes and how they are drawn upon, marked up, deformed and given new shape. In providing an eclectic array of case studies, the book reflects the heterogeneity and complexity that a political label such as “Francophone” implies while also questioning the label’s literary limits. Simultaneously this collection also gestures toward intersections and points of confluence within the concept of post-colonial Francophonie by focusing on the recurrence in Francographic literature of the will to disrupt hegemonic and dominant narratives of history through a contestation of landscape, space and nature.
The following essays define landscape as an imaginary, constructed and negotiated literary space rather than an unproblematic transcription of an external geographic reality, and they shed light on how landscape functions as a (re)appropriation of personal, local, regional, and national or post-national spaces. Contributors explore images of dispossession, resistance and re-appropriation through the prism of landscape, and as a collection, the essays illuminate what can best be described as an unstable aesthetic: a Francographie that traces in multiple hands tenuous if not altogether uncertain geographies and unfinished maps. Some essays link the literary conquest of nature to the process of writing/righting a history of imperialism and neocolonialism. Others locate in nature the rhythms of everyday survival and point towards the creation of a material identity and metaphysical reality beyond urban and industrial capitalism. Occupying a conceptual space between these two perspectives are essays that use landscape to explore the psychic disturbances of displacement and call for a reinvention of places of memory.

Part One, entitled “Tracing the Self: Spatial Identities,” consists of three essays that examine the use of landscape in the reconfiguration of national or regional identity and the politics of gender and sexuality. The first essay, “Anthills Touch the Sky: Sembène’s Topographical Aesthetic” by V. Natasha E. Copeland, shows how a reading of formalistic aesthetics in the work of Ousmane Sembène reveals the creation of natural spaces that function as metaphysical landscapes in Sahelian identity. Copeland argues that Sembène situates identity and transformative possibilities at the intersections of liminal spaces: between sky and treetops, between treetops and dust, and between dust and sand. In their work on *Race, Nature and the Politics of Difference*, Donald Moore, Anand Pandian and Jake Kosek, discuss the function of natural landscapes as naturalized terrains of power and identity negotiation. They argue that, “Thinking through landscape invites us to reconsider the relationship between an assumed objective ecology of natural processes and the human, all too human, world of ideology, discourse and history.” Copeland’s essay suggestively points us in this direction by arguing that literary analysis that reads nature solely as a decorative or as a symbolic illustration of various disasters facing Sahelian culture misses the multidimensionality of nature as it functions in Sahelian metaphysics and discourse.

The second essay entitled “Landscape, Identity and Sexuality: Tituba as Candide in Maryse Condé’s *Moi, Tituba, sorcière... Noire de Salem*” by Mary Poteau-Tralie examines how one twentieth-century naturalized landscape, the Creole garden, converses with, challenges, and refashions a French eighteenth-century other. By exploring the dialectic between Condé’s and Voltaire’s gardens as constructed and enclosed places of paradise, Poteau-Tralie reveals the distinct ways both Tituba and Candide get dislocated through sexual
awakening. Her essay demonstrates how Condé’s tale, which constructs the garden as a creole, feminized space, results in an alternative to, or at least a denunciation of, Voltaire’s Eurocentric view of history. Poteau-Tralie’s judicious analysis of the multiplicity of Moi, Tituba’s intertexts, its irony, and parodic elements adds up to a general rejection of metanarrative and ultimately reveals that the textual space is perhaps the only landscape where those who have been excluded from History can have a voice. As Poteau-Tralie argues, Tituba’s hanging, while being tragic, leads to her resurrection in the spirit, where empowered, she is free to wander the landscape and becomes one with it. “And then there is my island,” exclaims Tituba, “we have become one and the same.”

This relationship between woman and the island celebrated as an unstable creole space is also explored in the final essay of this section, “Cette terre qui me ressemble: Re-writing the Island, Re-writing the Self in Ananda Devi’s Pagli.” In this essay, Magali Compan examines the relationship between island and identity in the novel Pagli by Mauritian writer Ananda Devi. While challenging more traditionally constructed relationships between bodies and spaces, Compan argues that the novel constructs the insular space as a feminine space and celebrates the fluidity and un-map-ability of both. The essay concludes that the woman, the island, and the text itself all overflow their assigned borders to remind us of the decidedly unstable, dynamic, and provisional nature of space and identity.

Part Two, entitled “Mobile Landscapes and Spatial Displacements,” includes three essays that examine natural and urban landscapes in relationship to migration, memory and war as mobile spaces of commemoration and imagination. The first essay in this section, “Land and Cityscape in Lise Gauvin’s and Jacques Poulin’s Narratives: Between Cultural Memory and L’Invention du Quotidien” by Beatrice Guenther, examines how Québecois writers Gauvin and Poulain make use of travel and displacement in order to explore the coexistence of rural and urban spaces in Québecois cultural memory after the much mythologized urbanizing Révolution Tranquille. However, the larger question posed by such narratives, Gunther argues, is the writing of Québec itself. Whether within a Canadian federal context (the failure of the “sovereignty myth” to lead to Québec’s territorial autonomy, and the recent status change of the province to a “nation within a united Canada”), a North American landscape where the United States and Canada seem to merge, or a shifting Francophone literary cityscape, the essay shows how the representation of “national” space functions in conflicting accounts of Québécois identity.

The second essay, “Landscapes of War: Traumascapes in the Works of Kim Lefèvre and Phan Huy Duong” by Nathalie Nguyen examines the relationship between land, memory and identity through the idea of the traumascape–a place
wounded and haunted by violence, war, and terror—in two Vietnamese Francophone works. In both works, Nguyen shows how a traumascape becomes mobile: how it is carried and shared with others. In Kim Lefèvre’s *Métisse*, the narrative moves the landscape of war from personal isolation and suffering to collective memory as land itself merges symbolically with women’s bodies. Through Phan Huy Duong’s short story, Nguyen shows how the Vietnamese landscape becomes the “amalgam of all modern wars and genocides” and hence functions as a mobile “extended traumascape” that surpasses physical and national boundaries.

The final piece in this section continues the focus on mobility, landscape and death. In “Bodies on the Beach: Youssef Elalamy and Moroccan Landscapes of the Clandestine,” Katarzyna Pieprzak examines the construction of beachscapes in both official tourist discourse and Moroccan clandestine migration stories. Through a reading of Youssef Elalamy’s *Les Clandestins*, Pieprzak examines how national landscapes of inclusion intersect with clandestine landscapes of alienation, and how the beach itself holds disenfranchised bodies in existential parentheses as they attempt to imagine and articulate landscapes of hope elsewhere. She demonstrates that while exposing state desire to maintain clandestine narratives invisible, Elalamy’s novel participates in this struggle as well, writing against its own artifice to bring the invisibility of humans within national borders to light.

In conclusion to the volume, we shift discussion from landscape as it functions in literary texts to the question of literary and ideological landscapes in Francophone, or rather, Francographic theory. In their essay, “Frantz Fanon in Malaysia: Reconfiguring the Ideological Landscape of Négritude in Sepet,” Frieda Ekotto and Adeline Koh discuss the relevance of Fanon to understanding post-colonial relations outside of the Francophone (French-speaking politically-defined) world. As it engages in Fanonian theory, the essay offers a reconsideration of this landscape through the prism of its legacy to French Republicanism and French *mission civilisatrice*. While questioning the ideological premises at the base of French Republicanism, Ekotto and Koh argue that Fanon’s work has allowed the Francophone diaspora to “rise up against the topographies of the colonial archive.” In its treatment of the Malaysian film *Sepet* and the central character’s reading and misreading of Fanon, the essay enlarges the landscape of the Francophone and the Francographic, by showing the dissemination and appropriation of Fanon’s thought in the Asian post-colonial world.

It is our hope that this collection will inspire students and scholars to return to the Francographic literary works that they hold dear and reflect upon the construction of land and landscape in the French-writing world, whether that be in, near or beyond Montréal, Bamako or Paris.


3 Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 143.


8 Ibid, 125.

9 In his essay, “World Literature in French; or Is Francophonie Frankly Phoney?,” *European Review*, 9 No. 4 (2001): 421-436, Little argues that the term Francographie breaks down the problematic French/Francophone relationship by including all literature written in French. The term thus allows us “to recognize that lines of communication within the French-speaking world are not all tied at one end in a great knot somewhere in the heart of Paris,” (432) acknowledging that, “it is time to move on from the linear oppositional notion whereby [...] the French empire writes back to the centre” (433). For further reading on this terminology by Little, see “‘La Francographie’: A New Model for ‘La Francophonie,’” *ALA Bulletin* 25 No. 4 (1999): 28-36.

10 We continue the use of the term Francophonie when referring to the politically defined community of nations. However, Francographie is used when referring to a body of literature and cultural production in French.


Part One
Tracing the Self: Spatial Identities
Ousmane Sembène rarely speaks, or is asked, about nature and landscape in his work. But he says that it had to be the village with the termite mound. For the Senegalese director and novelist’s latest film, landscape mattered when choosing the right location in the Sahel. He came upon a “hedgehog-like mosque” in Djerisso, Burkina Faso; this village would become the setting for his highly acclaimed film, *Moolaadé*. Rather than to any traditional Islamic architectural style, he attributes the mosque’s inspiration to “the termite ants, to the anthills.” Indeed, in front of the unusual mosque itself sits a prominent anthill, both a symbolic and concrete landscape feature of the film, offering a focal point for dramatic village events. Sembène’s attention to the landscape and its mimicry in village architecture should come as no surprise: the intersection of landscape and literary expression thrives not only in the content of Sembène’s novels and films, but also in their form.

The interwoven relationship of natural landscape and oral expression from the most mundane to the most charged of circumstances characterizes Sahelian indigenous traditions, affecting writers of Sembène’s generation in particular. Across sub-Saharan savannah cultures and traditions, powerful words, nature and humans form an inextricable trio in Sahelian metaphysics. Jacques Derrida’s study of Rousseau’s *Emile* and his ensuing discussion of the *supplement* highlights relevant complexities in the relationship between speech, nature and written expression. Derrida suggests that the further one removes oneself from pure (oral) speech, the further one removes oneself from nature. In a resounding endictment of the written sign supplementing and substituting for speech, a lost product of nature, Derrida asserts that “[n]ature does not supplement itself at all; nature’s supplement does not proceed from nature, it is not only inferior to but other than nature.” Writing, the written expression of speech, “is the addition of a technique, a sort of artificial and artful ruse to make speech present when it is actually absent[...]” or “a violence done to the natural destiny of the language[...].” Challenging Derrida’s pessimism regarding the
loss of nature in written expression, Ousmane Sembène’s *œuvre* pushes beyond nature merely as content. His narrative moves methodically even as his form, powered by the Sahelian metaphysics of nature and landscape, explodes with vibrant movement.

What happens to the dynamism of indigenous oral expression and its partnering with nature when such a cultural legacy is transformed into written or cinematic expression? Further, in what form does nature appear in the hands of a Francophone author like Ousmane Sembène, whose understanding of Sahelian cultures is profound? In his chapter aptly called “from experience to fiction” in the Sahelian Songhay world, Jean-Marie Gibbal describes the difficulty: “. . . the poet of experience faces the unnameable, which she or he tries to bring over to the side of the speakable, thus enlarging our perception of the real through a founding word.” Many study the presence of orality in contemporary written African literature. Yet the omnipresent dynamism between language and nature, inseparable in indigenous Sahelian metaphysics and oral tradition, has been overlooked in Francophone literary criticism. This liveliness, distinctive for the very relevance of nature, has yet to find its way into literary analysis. A tired cliché associating African culture with nature has remained mired at the level of content. Observations on the subject operate within the clarity of narrative, ignoring the more opaque and creative realm of literary form. And yet linguistic and literary dynamism related to nature assert themselves over and over again in the work of the Senegalese novelist and father of African cinema, Ousmane Sembène.

**Sembène’s Landskape**

Indigenous Sahelian metaphysical notions of space, and the role of nature in that space, dominate the literary form of Sembène’s writing and cinematography. Diaw Falla, the main character and himself a writer in Sembène’s first semi-autobiographical novel, *Black Docker*, resents any limiting literary conventions:

Mais il savait maintenant que la vie était une lutte de tous les jours; il apprit à détester les poètes et les peintres qui ne montraient que ce qui est beau, qui chantaient la gloire du printemps, oubliant l’aigreur du froid. Les oiseaux ne sont pas là seulement pour embellir, les fleurs non plus.

He learned to loathe the poets and painters who depicted only beauty, who celebrated the glory of spring, forgetting the bitterness of the cold. The birds aren’t just decorative, neither are the flowers.
Falla alludes to Western traditions in which static, circumscribed and stylistically-rendered vistas characterize Western “landscape,” enhanced with bird and flower details. The narrator in O Pays, mon beau peuple! assesses Faye, the main character, in a way that might well characterize Sembène’s own approach:

Faye, sur de nombreux points, avait parfaitement assimilé les modes de pensée, les réactions des blancs, tout en ayant conservé au plus profond de lui l’héritage de son peuple.

Faye, in a number of areas, had perfectly assimilated white reactions and ways of thinking, all the while holding on deep inside to his people’s heritage.

Unlike those poets for whom landscape is cosmetic or descriptive, Sembène’s texts eschew Westernized approaches to nature, demonstrating, rather, a complex understanding of integrated life in a Sahelian metaphysical realm. Sembène’s work never underestimates the power of the landscape; his œuvre follows human Sahelian characters who harness that same power for their own self-actualization. Sembène’s work showcases an alternative landscape, largely an outdoors phenomenon (which can become all-pervasive), a landskape. This Sembenien topographical aesthetic or landskape comprises three parts: the land (along with the water on it), the air or sky (along with meteorological and celestial events associated with it), and nature connecting the two in the middle in the “sylvan realm.” This sylvan realm contains trees, humans, dunes, anthills, grass and other vertically-oriented natural or man-made features. Sembène’s literary expression of this total Sahelian space, his landskape, innovates a tripartite topographical literary aesthetic.

Prose surging among these three spaces reveals a vertical dynamism to the landscape, defining and integrating these three realms. Sembène’s prose draws the reader fluidly from one area to another, lingering at the defining borders, yet never explicitly drawing attention to the linguistic craft in the narrative itself. Language or camera shots, which appear at first glance to be landscape description or backdrop to the provocative stories he tells, in fact consistently journey vertically upwards and downwards across landskape components, unifying a larger space even as the three parts remain distinct. Sembène’s language and camera linger at the liminal places between land, the sylvan realm and the sky. The text celebrates the overlapping moments of each of the three spaces, affirming their connections while simultaneously distinguishing between them. Dust rolls along the ground, floating into the sylvan realm. Tree roots reach back into the land from the sylvan realm. Treetops dance between the sylvan realm and the sky. Sembène’s three topographical realms support, share and even sustain the dynamism of his characters’ actions in the story lines.
His characters often act courageously for social change, seemingly sustained by the natural elements around them, in a modern literary interpretation of indigenous Sahelian metaphysics. Through visual association with a baobab, the revered Sahelian tree, camera movement implies moral support of the maverick Madior, the male hero of the film *Ceddo*. Sembène’s cinematography uniquely privileges El Hadji’s dignified first wife in *Xala*, creating auditory and visual intimacy between dangling trees tops and her character at a compelling moment in the story. In the novel *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, Fa Keïta, an elderly railroad crew chief abused by a sadistic French commander, looks out to the liminary space between realms, [...]

The contact point between the sylvan realm (where humans reside) and the land accentuates the power imbued within the land itself. Young N’Deye Touti’s resolve in the face of heartbreak finds power in the sand under her feet: “—No, Aunt, I made it this far, I’ll go the rest of the way! and pressing her feet into the sand, she pushed a large cask into the courtyard.”

**Representations of Landscape**

Joseph Paré, Salaka Sanou and Christopher Wise initiated discussion of “littératures du Sahel” at the inception of their 1998 eponymous journal. Debra Boyd-Buggs and Joyce Hope Scott have taken steps to classify the Sahel as a unique region with potentially unique literary styles in *Camel Tracks: Critical Perspectives on Sahelian Literature*. Both of these ventures, however, where focused on nature and landscape, dwell largely on the misery inflicted on Sahelians by a series of tragic droughts, locust invasions and the decades-long encroachment of the Sahara desert into the savannah belt. Pierre N’Da writes “Du sec et de l’humide dans le discours du roman sahelien” in the aforementioned “Littératures du Sahel.” While highly relevant, some literary multidimensionality to the Sahelian cultural experience and its literary relationship to landscape may be lost in a largely disaster-focused approach.

To the extent that literary analysis has considered the intersection of Sahelian (or indeed, French West African) landscape and literature, it has been largely to explore landscape through the lens of the French colonizers’ language rather than that of the colonized. The European literary tradition tends to portray its own landscape or nature as a simple decorative framework, a trope that anticipates events in the plot, a cliché or an expression of human sentiments in
the Romantic tradition. Yet landscape reinforced colorful popular French perceptions of their colonies well before the beginning of the 20th century. As of the beginnings of the French colonial enterprise, Africans and their landscape have variously been infantilized, romanticized, demonized and eroticized. Both the desert and the tropics have been seen as deadly sources of evil and savagery, bringing unspeakable suffering to colonists in the form of disease, brutality, spiritual debasement and libidinous behavior. Both landscapes have likewise also been seen as quiet places of deep contemplation or unspoiled virgin lands ripe for agricultural perfection. Many of these images were perpetuated by colonial exhibitions held in France, propaganda to justify to the French public a costly colonial enterprise. They were the elaborate equivalent of modern day theme parks, populated by real natives imported for the show, displayed in recreated “African” landscapes and architecture. These images were also sustained and renewed by the travels of French authors to the colonies, by a thriving colonial literature (written by French colonists themselves) and by political world war propaganda. The latter was designed to endear the French public to their loyal colonial soldiers (“the noble savage”) and simultaneously to terrify the German enemy of their natural ferocity (“the savage”) during both world wars.

**Epistemological Influences**

Arguably, most recognized Francophone literary scholars today have been deeply schooled in Western literature, philosophy or culture. V. Y. Mudimbe refers to an “episteme,” as an “intellectual discourse” in a “system of knowledge” absorbed by such scholars. Theorists often see Eurocentrism as just such an episteme which, being a “hegemonic mode of conceptualisation,” thus obfuscates. Indeed, the interpretation of natural landscape and nature in a text or film demonstrates the extent to which writer, critic and reader epistemes can profoundly alter the character of, or even the awareness of, the actual qualities of a literary landscape. Given the significant influence of Western epistemes on contemporary writers and critics alike, the role of landscape in Western literature must be considered. Understanding a Western perspective as well as a Sahelian view of nature effectively unveils Sembène’s unique literary contribution in this area, lost to the more overt documentation of the author’s strong social conscience.

When two cultures meet over one text, or the author and reader come from different cultural backgrounds, the reader will be selective about what s/he takes from the text. Jean-Marie Gibbal rightfully cautions us to “be conscious of the limits that each person’s subjectivity imposes on any attempt at reconstructing a reality always perceived partially.” If s/he is most accustomed to reading
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landscape as mood-setting poetic description, for example, then the reader might
skim over apparently descriptive scenes of nature in favor of the “meat” of the
plot. Alternatively, if lyrical and poetic textual interpretations of nature move or
offer solace to the reader, s/he might linger on this element of a text, less
inspired by the sequence of narrative events, the plot. These reader choices may
suggest individual ideology at play. A closer look, however, reveals that
generally speaking, a Westernized audience exhibits a predictable and rather
fixed set of possible landscape interpretations. These arise from the West’s own
literary traditions. Cultural norms shape these tendencies from which the
individual reader inadvertently draws.

Historically as well as today, a conflicted relationship between nature and
landscape exists in Western society. As discussions about levees demonstrate
following the tragic 2005 flooding of New Orleans, people may seek to
overcome nature for fear of being dominated themselves. Other times people
feel a responsibility to protect and nurture what they perceive to be an ailing,
voiceless, natural environment. Some savor individual spiritual growth or
psychological relief within nature; this concept was often expressed in the
Romantic movement. In each of these perspectives, however, nature and humans
remain in a hierarchical relationship, one being superior or stronger than the
other at any given moment. Typically, Westerners have tended to assert
themselves at the top of that hierarchy, guided by a Judeo-Christian biblical
tradition in which humans are charged with governance over nature. Augustin
Berque, in his 1999 “Ontologie des milieux humains” offers a modern version of
this perspective since “to lower humans to a status that is not theirs: that of
simple being” in nature, he argues, overlooks our superior subjectivity: “we are
both living beings, and something more.”24 Once finally muscled and contained
on a page, Western literary nature tends to be decorative, symbolic or a mirror
of the soul.25 Such a Westernized lens perpetuates Western literary expectations
regarding nature despite other powerful and subtle alternatives.

Whereas Judeo-Christian Western traditions typically posit humans as
distinct from and even reigning over nature, African indigenous traditions
generally assume an intimacy of spirit between nature and humans, particularly
since indigenous spirituality has long been tied to nature. A unique Sahelian
milieu and the traditional partnership between its people and their surroundings
thus inform Ousmane Sembène’s literary fluidity, the prose of his native
landscape. Indeed, his use of the natural environment does not expressly draw
attention to itself. On the surface Sembène’s nature hardly seems exotic, weird
or unfamiliar, the sophistication of literary craft demands that nature mesh
harmoniously with language and plot. While Sembène’s nature permeates the
content of his work, we discover, in fact, that nature defines itself at a structural
level even more than it announces itself on a storytelling level. His
topographical aesthetic turns out to be neither purely symbolic nor decorative. Rather, dynamism between nature and expression draws from indigenous Sahelian cultural reverence for symbiotic bonds between humans and the rest of nature.

**Land and Sky in the Sahel**

The value of the land and sky for the people of the Sahel cannot be exaggerated. Indeed, Africans are guilty of an “obsessive geocentrism”\(^{26}\) even as, 

[...]

the African never thinks of the earth as being sufficient in itself. He always conceptualizes it as a point of reference, and, as such, it is in opposition sometimes to the sky, sometimes to water.\(^{27}\)

Zahan continues: “[e]arth, sky and water are, in fact, the notions which presided over the creation of a philosophy and a religion of matter in Africa.\(^{28}\) The Songhai Ghimbala followers share their space “with béne, which means ‘sky’ but also ‘above,’ and ganda, ‘below,’” which includes the river and land.\(^{29}\) “[B]éné begins where the floods end, with all the lands that never flood: the dry bush; the spots the villages attach themselves to, sheltered from the high waters; the dunes[...].”\(^{30}\)

Amadou Hampâté Bâ underlines the gendered symbolism of two topographical spaces, the sky and the land, for the Peul and Bambara peoples. The sky is male, paternal, covering the earth as the main generator of strong meteorological events such as water (“ji”), light (“yeelen”) and darkness (“dibi”).\(^{31}\) The sun is both the ultimate (though not exclusive) symbol and reality of the power of the sky: the heat in the Sahel can kill. In contrast to the sky, the Sahelian land is female, maternal and receptive of the sky’s behaviors, representing love and forgiveness.\(^{32}\) She complements the sky. The first scene of *Les bouts de bois de Dieu*, set in Bamako, takes the reader from afternoon to night: “Telle un couvercle sur sa marmite, la nuit recouvrit la terre. Mais la chaleur demeura” (28); “Like the closing of the lid on a kettle, night covered the earth, but the heat remained” (45).\(^{33}\) In this first mention of the night sky in this novel, the verb “to cover” resonates with the tradition suggested by Hampâté Bâ. In other words, the sky, here represented in its nocturnal state, plays its masculine role vis-à-vis the receptive earth. Indeed, “[r]ecouvrir signifie d’ailleurs encore de nos jours, chez les Peuls, ‘épouser.’”\(^{34}\) At the end of this chapter in Bamako, the night presence, even without sun rays, once again appears aggressive, even phallic, in relation to the land: “La nuit s’était enfoncée tout autour de la cité soudanaise” (30); “Night had plunged all around the
As we shall see, the overlap of sky and land realms through vegetation and dunes informs Sembène’s topographical aesthetic.

**Les bouts de bois de Dieu: the sky, the land and the sylvan realm in between**

While a Sahelian topographical aesthetic characterizes Sembène’s writing and cinematography overall, *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* nicely introduces his *landscape* best. The pattern of marking daybreaks and nightfalls in *Les bouts* draws attention to itself for its curiously insistent repetition. Many authors might settle for a simple “The next day...” Yet in Sembène’s writing, the sun does not merely mark days and nights to signal the passage of time for the novel’s characters in each location described (Bamako, Thiès, Dakar) although this is surely its role within the plot. The repeating vertical movement of the sun moving from below the horizon up to the zenith and then back to the horizon, zig-zagging a path between savannah land and sky, also highlights the conceptual boundaries of Sembène’s *landscape*. In fact, the very first sentence of the novel draws the reader’s attention directly to the sky, the metaphysical space with which the text begins:

Les derniers rayons du soleil filtraient entre les dentelures des nuages. Au couchant, des vagues de vapeurs se délayaient lentement tandis qu’au centre même de la voûte céleste -- vaste lac indigo cerné de mauve -- une tache rousse grandissait. Les toits, les mosquées hérisées de leur minaret, les grands arbres -- flamboyants, fromagers, calcédrats -- les murs, le sol ocré, tout flamboit. Brutallement lancé à travers le rideau de nuées, tel le trait d’un projecteur céleste, un rayon vint frapper de plein fouet la résidence du gouverneur dressée comme un pain de sucre blanc au sommet du Koulouba.

C’était un après-midi de mi-octobre, à la fin de la saison des pluies. (13)

The last rays of the sun filtered through a shredded lacework of clouds. To the west, waves of mist spun slowly away, and at the very center [of the sky’s dome - - vast indigo lake trimmed in mauve --] the great crimson orb grew steadily larger. The roofs, the thorny minarets of the mosques, the [high] trees -- silk-cotton, flame, and mahogany -- the walls, the ochered ground; all [on] fire. Striking brutally through the cloud curtain, like the beam from some celestial projector, a single ray of light lashed at the Koulouba, the governor’s residence, poised like a sugar castle on the heights that bore its name.
At the center of the belt of hills [the compounds of homes, the termite mounds like squat obelisks] and the dry grass, still scorched by the heat of noon, now swam in the red waters of the setting sun. A dry breeze from the northeast [licked faces. Sweat still dribbled a little.]

It was an afternoon in mid-October, at the end of [the rainy season.]  

The next reference to the sun in the chapter closes the afternoon, as well as the solar sketch of the *milieu*: “À l’horizon, le soleil achevait sa course, mais la chaleur demeurait” (17); [“On the horizon, the sun was completing its path, but the heat remained.”]37

Starting from within a metaphorical roof over nature ("indigo arch of sky"), the sun’s pen draws downwards from the sky, past the roofs to the ground of the city of Bamako.38 Fiery ink pulls the reader across the sky over roofs and minarets, through trees and over walls, to at last touch the red ground. The script’s precision and detail accentuates the intensity of the sun’s beam since each feature mentioned overlaps slightly with, or connects to, the subsequent feature. The seamless density of the prose (trees are even honored by individual name) allows for no pause in, or deviation from, the downward trajectory. The trees immediately precede the other vertical structures (walls) syntactically; no comma separates the trees from the walls though hyphens do announce the former’s identities. Identification of tall features that reach upwards, standing vertically side by side, enhance the vertical movement in the prose. These examples present a topographical aesthetic in which a sustained and reinforced verticality built into the prose propels the reader along. Element followed by element introduce a Sahelian metaphysical worldview.

Trees, often baobabs, frequently serve as shaded meeting places for social gatherings of all kinds; their presence has vital practical and cultural resonance for Sahelians. Soaring tree heights share in the Sacred since

Le ‘Koro-ta’–ou le fait ‘d’être élevé’ ou ‘d’être haut’ (montagne, arbre, ou position royale)–est également un signe de présence de la ‘Sé,’ force sacrée, d’où, par extension, présence de la divinité.39

[the ‘Koro-ta’–or the fact of ‘being raised up’ or ‘being high’ (mountain, tree, or royal status)–is also a sign of the presence of the ‘Sé,’ sacred force, from which, by extension, there is divine presence.]

Among the Ghimbala practitioners of the Malian Songhai, some great spirits of the water prefer to reside in dry, high places, “like the great trees along the river [...] especially those sacred to them (tamarinds, bastard mahogany)...” (Gibbal 47, 76). In Sembène’s language, tree crowns fill the liminary space on the horizon of sky merging thus into the intermediary space just below where the trees stand rooted. The sky and the middle space meet with the treetops serving
as poetic bridges in Sembène’s landscape. Termite mounds, made of soil, likewise hold special meaning in the Sahel. The Songhai Ghimbala followers of Eastern Mali hold anthills and termite hills to be sacred places, high and dry like trees where Moussa, one of their spirits, might even hide gold. Anthills spiritually demarcate the sylvan realm: a ceremony harmonizes the landscape during which a sorcerer puts food into an anthill, nourishing “the earth at the point where it meets the sky.” Similarly, another Ghimbala spirit, Mama Kyria, “[...] and his followers haunt the dry places: the heights of dunes[...].” The trees, dunes, termite mounds and even grass all play essential roles defining the space between the ground and the sky. As we have seen in the opening paragraph of Les bouts, at times even the grass bathes in the sky, dramatically shortening the sylvan realm.

In a striking demonstration of how landscape can be treated as superfluous or merely decorative in the Western tradition, the published English translation of Les bouts alters Sembène’s original text both stylistically and substantively. Let us consider the aforementioned passage. In the gradual vertical movement afforded by tall and then increasingly shorter elements of the sylvan realm (trees, termite mounds, grass), the anthill has been discarded in translation. The English version reads:

At the center of the belt of hills the groups of mud-walled houses and the dry grass, still scorched by the heat of noon, now swam in the red waters of the setting sun. (33).

Not only is the anthill (“the termite mounds like squat obelisks”) not mentioned, but the added description of it (“like squat obelisks”), increasing its relative value within the text, disappears as well (13). This omission highlights the extent to which the translation overlooks this natural landscape feature’s cultural resonance within the text. Ogotemméli, Marcel Griaule’s primary source, recounts the origins of landscape at the beginning of Dogon creation, further revealing the dramatic importance of the anthill. In order to achieve intercourse, God’s desire for the horizontal female earth led him to excise her clitoris, a termite mound rising up and preventing the union. God and earth thus produced the twin water spirits, offspring of their subsequent compliant intercourse. The literary excision of the termite mound in Les bouts’ English translation also indicates the extent to which Sembène’s formal literary topographical aesthetic went unnoticed. The clear distinction between the horizontal realm of the earth and the vertical extension of the anthill participates in the movement from land through the sylvan realm towards the sky. For the English-speaking audience, tragically, the literary dynamism of natural features integrated into a metaphysically relevant literary form thus vanish.
In *Normes linguistiques et écriture africaine chez Ousmane Sembène*, Anthère Nzabatsinda suggests in passing that Sembène’s work reflects Roland Barthes’ notion of an “effet de réel” or “the reality effect” noted in Flaubert or Michelet’s writing. In doing so, he refers to Barthes’ premise that apparently insignificant description has, in the Western tradition, provided beauty or “truth.” Indeed, the act of expressing the “real” has been enough to justify the presence of potentially superfluous description. This “reality effect” has therefore become “the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity.” Nzabatsinda surely intends his own comment as a compliment to Sembène’s literary contribution, despite the observation’s inherent problem. Yet as Barthes rightly suggests, making such description “the pure encounter of an object and its expression” in effect disintegrates the sign itself, thus emptying it. Nzabatsinda too hastily attributes this “reality” to Sembène’s work when in fact, Sembène’s form, the signs, overflow with richness not of a representation style that we already know. His *landskape*, rather, develops a potent dynamic association between Sahelian metaphysical realms and nature. Yet we Westernized readers search for a style that we recognize, a familiar label to identify such a scene, often “realism,” sometimes “African realism” or here *effet de réel*. What is “real” in a cultural context of the Sahel may not be “realism” in the sense of Western literary tradition but rather “real” only in Sahelian metaphysical terms, represented differently on the literary page.

**Rewriting on the Ground**

When postcolonial literature seems now more than ever a reflection of the search for societal or individual identity, we cannot ignore the apprehension of space and place. The place where ancestors’ lives unfolded resonates loudly in some cultures. Ralph Ellison points out that:

> [i]f we don’t know where we are, we have little chance of knowing who we are . . . if we confuse the time, we confuse the place; and . . . when we confuse these we endanger our humanity, both physically and morally.

In her work on Hardy, Margaret Faurot considers the reappropriation of space by its rewriting. Melvin Dixon analyzes the process of “making figures of the landscape into setting for the performance of identity.” Ousmane Sembène’s “figures of the landscape” go one step further as they themselves perform alongside the human characters in his literary and cinematic expression of identity.
The women in *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* actually redraw the landscape as they march for social justice: a group flows inexhorably towards the sea and Dakar. This river of human characters arrive at the ocean to fulfill the community’s goal: economic and political justice under French colonial power. They find the strength to do so as the characters inscribe themselves into the landscape. To suit their own needs they trace a new line across a small Western portion of the Sahel; the entire novel sweeps across a still larger portion of the Sahel, following the railroad path from Mali to Sénégal. In the process, the Sahel itself is reappropriated, redrawn, and reclaimed; the destiny of this portion of French West Africa is being rewritten by its rightful inhabitants. One of Sembène’s novellas, *White Genesis*, makes explicit such a literary project by identifying a particular place and then reappropriating its writing. Sembène’s *landscape*, defined by land, sylvan realm and sky, reappears again in the italicized portion, reaffirming the interwoven vertical lines and horizontal realms of his topographical aesthetic. The very first two words introduce a unique subset of Sahelian topography painstakingly defined over three pages:

Le niaye est au singulier en volof. Les colonialistes l’écrivaient au pluriel. Il n’est ni savane, ni delta, ni steppe, ni brousse, ni forêt: une zone très singulière qui borde l’océan Atlantique dans sa sphère occidentale, et qui s’étend de Yoff à Ndar, et au-delà... d’où surgissaient des hameaux, des agglomérations aussi éphémères que les gouttes d’eau recueillies sur des cils. Dès Pikine, ce fameux champ de bataille que ressuscitent de temps en temps les griots, surgit le niaye, vaste étendue sans fin avec ses molles collines revêtues selon les saisons de toute une gamme de végétation: herbes courtes d’un vert boutevin nées d’une saison: le navet (saison des pluies); baobabs nains, massifs aux fruits d’un goût savoureux: le lalo, feuilles de baobab séchées, pilées, tamisées qui, assaisonnées au couscous, donnent à cet aliment sa saveur, le rendent léger au palais; oasis de cocotiers, palmiers poussant à-la-va-où-je-veux, élancés, aux longues palmes mal nattées, folles; rôniers solitaires d’une rigueur ascétique, rudes de maintien, défiant la voûte de leur long fût, coiffés de feuilles en éventail, se mesurant à l’horizon du jour naissant, comme à celui du jour finissant; vergers d’acajoutiers touffus, aux branches tombantes en forme de case de pulard, peuplés de cruelles fourmis; nérés, cades, autres arbres aux noms inconnus de moi, étalaient--selon la saison--leurs branchages aux ombres généreuses, où, fatigués, venaient se reposer les oiseaux minuscules du niaye... (Emphasis mine.)

The Niaye is the singular in Wolof. The colonialists wrote it in the plural. It is neither savannah, nor delta, nor steppe, neither bush nor forest. It is a very strange zone bordering the Atlantic Ocean in the west and stretching from Yoff to Ndar, and beyond. Villages and clusters of dwellings sprang up from it, as ephemeral as drops of water on the eyelashes. It begins at Pikine, the famous battleground recalled from time to time by the griots: a vast expanse without end, its soft hills clad, according to the season, with every variety of vegetation: short,
bottle-green grass, growing in one season only, the navet, the rainy season; massive dwarf baobabs with their delicious fruit (the leaves of the baobab, known as lalo, are dried, pounded and strained, and used to season couscous, giving this dish its flavour and making it light to the palate); oases of coconut trees; tall palm trees growing at random, with long, clumsily plaited, waving leaves; rhun palms, gaunt and rough of aspect, defying the sky with their tall trunks and fan-shaped crests of leaves, measuring themselves, first against the dawn, then against the sunset; groves of mahogany trees dense with leaves, their branches falling to the ground like Fula huts and inhabited by cruel ants. Nere, kada and other trees whose names I do not know spread their branches, providing generous shade according to the season, and a resting place for the minute birds of the niaye when they are exhausted.52 (Emphasis mine.)

The first sentence addresses the question of language use (either Wolof or the French distortion of it) as well as how that language should be used correctly as defined by those who really know, the Sahelians. The second sentence addresses the fact that the landscape was erroneously defined by those who did so illegitimately: the colonials. We then learn what the niaye is not, before learning in great detail what it is. Finally, the narrator himself confesses to not knowing some of the names; they are perhaps lost to younger generations. Uncertainty and challenges remain for this generation recapturing itself and its landscape. This text is first a corrective measure, and then an uncompromising assertion of identity through the rewriting of landscape in relentlessly accurate and carefully detailed literary form.

Conclusion

Ousmane Sembène’s novels and films offer an innovative literary approach to landscape striking for its formal dynamism at a structural level. Sembène’s topographical aesthetic or landskape provides a literary interpretation of Sahelian natural space. This literary form defines three realms: the land, the sky, and the intervening sylvan realm in which reside humans, vegetation and topographical features including the anthill. The communication of energy across this landskape from land to sky and back, through the human experience, evokes indigenous Sahelian spiritual beliefs. The literary form of Sembène’s treatment of nature and landscape expresses invisible life energy permeating the Sahelian human and natural worlds. Fusing both the energy of the environment with the energy traditionally ascribed to verbal expression in the Sahel, the text supports Sembène’s compelling storylines and the aspirations of his human characters. With this quality, Sembène’s texts may have thus overcome the loss in spontaneity and dynamic expression that Jacques Derrida argued to be inherent in written language.
Sembène claims no explicit agenda regarding nature but nevertheless through it offers a sense of place and identity, the Sahel. The landscape becomes the lively fabric of his writing, even when expressed in French rather than in his native language, Wolof. He does not surrender the presence of Sahelian nature and landscape to the language of another culture; French literary tradition does not hijack the indigenous Sahel he renders though English translation has severely disrupted it. Sembène relishes his intellectual independence:

[...] my texts are to be taken as is or left alone. There are publishing houses where linguistic virtuosity ranks above everything else. This may do for writers like Senghor. As for me, I find it impossible to be the perfect product of the colonial system.53

In this sense, the form of his œuvre remains faithful to indigenous cultural metaphysics even as Sembène’s narrative demands progressive social activism from Sahelians themselves.

3 Ousmane Sembène was born in Ziguinchor, Senegal in 1923.
4 For extensive discussion of these cultural traditions, see Copeland, V. Natasha E. “Ousmane Sembène's Topographical Aesthetic: Bringing Sahelian Nature to Literary Life.” Diss. U of Virginia, 2006.
6 Ibid., 144.
8 For more extensive discussion of his topographical aesthetic in Sembène’s prose as well as his films, see Copeland, V. Natasha E. “Ousmane Sembène's Topographical Aesthetic: Bringing Sahelian Nature to Literary Life.” Diss. U of Virginia, 2006.
11 Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines landscape as follows: “a picture representing a view of natural inland scenery,” “the art of depicting such scenery,” “the landforms of a region in the aggregate,” “a portion of territory that can be viewed at one time from one place” and “a particular area of activity” (654).
13 My translation.
14 The terms sylvan realm, landskape and topographical aesthetic are my own.
For more extensive discussion of Sembène’s cinematographic landscape, extended further in his use of objects made from primary materials, see Copeland, V. Natasha E. “Ousmane Sembène's Topographical Aesthetic: Bringing Sahelian Nature to Literary Life.” Diss. U of Virginia, 2006.


The 1816 French shipwreck off of the coast of West Africa inspired horrendous accounts of depraved human behavior as a result of terrible circumstances, both on the part of Europeans and Africans. Eugène Géricault’s depiction of the event can still be found at the Louvre: “The Raft of the Méduse.”

See J.-B. Henry Savigny and Alexander Corréard, Narrative of a Voyage to Senegal in 1816 (1816, Marlboro: Marlboro, 1986) for an early travel narrative that demonstrates these dual tendencies in telling the dramatic story of the raft called “Méduse.”


My translation of “[...] rebaisser l’humain à un statut qui n’est pas le sien: celui de simple vivant [...] Or nous sommes et vivants, et quelque chose de plus.” Augustin Berqué, “Ontologie des milieux humains,” Mots pluriels, no. 11, (September 1999), 2.

For elaboration of this idea, see Copeland, V. Natasha E. “Ousmane Sembène’s Topographical Aesthetic: Bringing Sahelian Nature to Literary Life.” Diss. U of Virginia, 2006.


Ibid., 8.

Gibbal, Genii of the River Niger, 45.

Ibid.


Ibid., 7.

From this point, unless otherwise noted, page numbers for all citations from Sembène, Les bouts de bois de Dieu and for Price, God’s Bits of Wood are placed parenthetically after the citation.