“WHEYTING BE DAT?” THE TREATMENT OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Chris Dunton

In an article published in Peoples Noirs, Peuples Africains in 1983, Daniel Vignal comments:

For the majority of [African writers], homophilia is exclusively a deviation introduced by colonialists or their descendants; by outsiders of all kinds: Arabs, French, English, métis, and so on. It is difficult for them to conceive that homophilia might be the act of a black African. (74–75)

A more comprehensive survey than Vignal’s confirms his findings: in texts dealing with colonial rule, or with the experience of African students living in Europe and the United States, or with conditions in South African prisons, homosexual practice is almost invariably attributed to the detrimental impact made on Africa by the West.

In most cases, even when the treatment of homosexuality is not crudely stereotypical, it remains monotheistic: the function that the subject plays in the text’s larger thematic and narrative design is restricted and predictable. In some texts, however, homosexual subject matter is utilized in a more complex, though not necessarily more sympathetic manner. Few, if any, of the writers here are known to be homosexual, and the primary concern of the present article is not the identification of texts that take a more liberal approach to the subject. To this extent I am not concerned with the pejorative judgment that African writers apply to homosexuality as being a problem in itself. Rather, I am interested in showing how the treatment of homosexuality provides a convenient reference point—a closely defined narrative element—which helps reveal the general thematic concerns and the larger narrative strategy of the text.

I shall first survey the range of the treatment and then focus on a few texts to illustrate my point. In analyzing novels like Maddy's No Past, No Present, No Future, Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy, Soyinka's The Interpreters, and Oluolugbem's Bound to Violence, I hope to clarify the bearing a homosexual subject matter has on the ideology of the text as a whole. In No Past, for example, the rather uncertain presentation of Joe Bengoh's homosexuality is a useful indicator of Maddy's general procedures: specifically, of his deliberate projection of moral priorities that differ radically from those of other African novelists. In The Interpreters the relevance of the American homosexual, Joe
Golder, is not just that he represents one of those characters in the novel who systematically impose demands on others, but that he constitutes another difficult, unplayable entity toward which others (the interpreters) must find a way to respond. The harshly unsympathetic but unusually detailed portrait of this homosexual character is complexly related to Soyinka’s romantic assertion of individual vision as a dynamic force in society. Bound to Violence projects a homosexual relationship in a way that is unique in the literature to date and does so in the interests of a wide-ranging critique of orthodox modes of articulating African social and historical realities. Oluologuem’s treatment of the relationship between Raymond and Lambert raises the whole question of irony and parody—of the assault on reader conventions—as being central to the novel’s strategy. In these three novels—and in a few other texts, like Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy—the subject of homosexuality becomes liberated, in the special sense that whether or not it is treated sympathetically, it is granted a greater capacity to disturb, to call questions, than in texts where it merely forms part of the data of a social typology.

It remains true that the great majority of texts in which the subject occurs stigmatize homosexual practice as a profoundly “un-African” activity: a perspective succinctly expressed by the grandmother in Maddy’s play Big Berin when she inquires: “Homosexuality? Wheyting be dat?” (16). Two rare cases where an exclusive identification of homosexuality with the West is withheld are Soyinka’s Season of Anomy and Mariama Bâ’s Scarlet Song. In the former the Zaki—the traditional head of a Muslim Court within an independent African state—presides over the trial of a suspect dissident, accompanied by a fancy-boy with “long lashes” who giggles at the terror of the accused and who minces out of the room with the Zaki at the end of the hearing (120–28).4 In Scarlet Song, Bâ records a traditional, highly specialized acceptance of homosexual behavior when Yaye Khady comments on one of her neighbor’s sons, who is spectacularly effeminate, that he has every prospect of turning into a gör djiguène, a courtesan’s pimp-cum-manservant, whose responsibilities may include the provisio of sexual favors for clients of a homosexual orientation (70).

Yet even if homosexual practice is acknowledged in these passages to have been allocated a specialized, legitimate role in traditional society, it still is stigmatized: the reference to the gör djiguène in Bâ’s novel comes as part of a diatribe by Yaye Khady on unsatisfactory sons (the other three she mentions are a school failure, a pickpocket, and a drug addict), while in Season of Anomy the Zaki’s liking for boys is marked as one more unsavory aspect of a repressive political system, the function of the Zaki’s court within the state being equivalent to that of a colonial power.

These instances apart, the fact that homosexuality is projected as a phenomenon alien to African societies enables it to play a special function in
pornographic fiction. In Edia Apolo's short story collection *Lagos Na Waa I Swear*, an anecdote on a lesbian relationship provides exotic relief from the succession of heterosexual liaisons that occupies the remainder of the book: here Apolo simultaneously exploits the erotic possibilities of a homosexual relationship and stigmatizes it as "grossly repulsive, un-African and most unlikely" (44). In Dillibe Onyeama's novel *Sex Is a Nigger's Game*, the stereotypical identification of homosexuality with the West is compounded with a bizarre regurgitation of Western racist myths of black sexual superiority. When Chidi, a male prostitute, is taken up by a voyeuristic homosexual, Sir Brian, the erotic effect of the episode is predicated on an enhanced, specialized emphasis on Chidi's value as sexual commodity (Onyeama refers repeatedly to Chidi's virility and to the size of his organ), while at the same time Sir Brian himself absolves Africa of the stigma of sexual inversion, commenting that this was "'largely imported by the early colonists and by Westernized Africans'" (76).

The exclusive attribution of homosexual activity to the West is equally commonplace in more substantial African literature. In J. P. Clark's play *The Raft*, for example, Kenide and Ibobbo comment that white men are "beastly," indulging in sodomy to "keep sane" in their barracks and boarding schools (127). There is a clear projection here of the alienating effect that the notion of homosexuality is assumed to have on an African society: an effect which is related consistently in other texts to the general experience of alienation faced by Africans living under colonial rule—or when in contact with the West in some other context. Further, if the engagement of the West with the African continent is generally identified as being exploitative, then homosexual activity is seen as being a particularly repugnant aspect of this. In a number of different contexts—the colonial situation; the neo-colonial state ruled through collusion with Western advisers; the prison system under apartheid; the situation of the African student living in the West—homosexual activity is identified with exploitation, being enabled by money or power relations, and understood to be all the more disturbing because alien to African society.

In Armah's *Two Thousand Sessions*, the Arab colonization of Africa is characterized by sexual as well as economic exploitation. The Arab "predator" Faisal is, typically, homosexual. Guilty, too, however, is the *askari* employed to sodomize Faisal; Armah's intention here is not only to expose the predatory nature of the colonialists but to emphasize the betrayal of Africa by those who collaborate with them and, in so doing, exploit their own people. Consequently, when the woman Azania assassinates Faisal, enacting a more elaborate symbolic execution than that in Marlowe's *Edward II*, she skewers the Arab through the back of his *askari* (23). Later, Armah emphasizes the central point, that Africa fell in part through its collaborators, as he comments on the African monarch Jonto, "[he] came among us
with a spirit caught straight from the white predators from the desert" (64). Like his Arab mentors, Jonto is homosexual, and his oppression of his people is imaged in his brutal violation of young boys (65).

Under Western, as under Arab, colonization, homosexual activity is identified as one facet of a broader process of exploitation. In Sassine's Wirriyanu, set in Mozambique under Portuguese rule, the brutal landowner Amigo regularly orders his servant Malick to find him boys as sexual partners (38–39). In Awoonor's This Earth, My Brother, the houseboy Yaro has left his white master "because he wanted to turn him into a woman" (24), while in both Caya Makhele's L'homme au Landau and Sarif Easmon's short story "For Love of Thérèse," the degeneration of expatriates is marked by their turning away from their wives and developing sexual relationships with boys. Easmon, especially, emphasizes the alien nature of homosexuality in an African context, commenting how the pederast Jacques Lublin’s behavior makes him "an object of contempt and ridicule in Susu society" (125). That idea is foregrounded, too, in Beti's Remember Ruben, in a discussion between two Cameroonian freedom fighters on the alleged sexual relationship between the European Sandrinelli and the country's future dictator and protégé of the colonial power, Baba Toura (195–96). Here, homosexuality is a weapon in the armory by which Beti discredits Sandrinelli and by which he emphasizes the symbiotic link between indigenous and Western interests in exploiting the African people. This is similar to the technique used by Sony Labou Tansi in satirizing the neocolonial state in L'état honteux, when he notes that the European security adviser to the dictator Lopez suffers from the idiotic trait of preferring men to women; it is clear that for Lopez the European’s political usefulness far outweighs any importance that might be attached to his deviancy (81; 44).

Under the internal colonization maintained by apartheid in South Africa, dissident blacks may find themselves in prison, where the severity of constraint generates homosexual activity. Again, in the literature on the subject, homosexuality is stigmatized as being alien to traditional mores: its prevalence in South African jails metaphorically stands for the extreme distortions in social organization established by the regime. In South African writing on prison life, then, homosexual activity has a more specialized function than in equivalent writing from Europe or the United States, since it images a rupture—and subsequent alienation—fundamental to the organization of South African society. In Gibson Kente's play Too Late, the young man Saduva is arrested after a sequence of episodes that illustrate in graphic detail the appalling constraints under which blacks live; Saduva's life outside is mirrored by his experience inside the prison when the cell boss Matric—rendered an exploiter under an exploitative system—seizes his food and then calls him over to his side of the cell for sex (117). In Dennis Brutus's poem "Letter to Martha: 6," an inmate's need for cigarettes
is so great he has to force himself not to think of smoking, knowing that otherwise he may end up by buying them with sex (7). The emphasis on the disfigurement of accepted norms brought about under apartheid is foregrounded again in James Matthews’s story “A Case of Guilt,” in which a relatively privileged colored man is arrested on a false charge of nonpayment of taxes. The story revolves round his shock at discovering the brutality of prison conditions, which begins with his witnessing the sodomization of one of the prisoners in the toilet block. When he leaves prison, with the charge withdrawn, the narrator comments: “he felt it receding, the nightmare of men turned into beasts, where abnormality was the norm” (164). But the irony here is that the nightmare has only receded in the subjective sense (from the man’s immediate consciousness): the system which has spawned the prison remains as inflexible, as damaging, as before. The episode has not opened a window into a world radically distinct from that of daily life under apartheid; it has cast that world in a clearer, harder, light. That world is depicted with intensified vividness in Bessie Head’s A Question of Power, where homosexuality is identified as part of a pattern of systematic disintegration, cognate to other violations of normal behavior (in a significant parallel, the narrator points to the South African slums as places where small girls are raped and where homosexuals are “laughingly accepted,”” 117). Here, as in Kente, Brutus, and Matthews, homosexuality is seen as reflecting the larger identity disorder created by apartheid: after a passage on colored homosexuals—“a disease one had to live with”—the narrator quotes this explanation for the prevalence of deviance:

“How can a man be a man when he is called boy? I can barely retain my own manhood. I was walking down the road the other day with my girl, and the Boer policeman said to be: ‘Hey, boy, where’s your pass?’ Am I a man to my girl or a boy? Another man addressing me as boy. How do you think that I feel?” (45)

Finally, the prevalence of homosexuality is regarded as presenting a dilemma for African students living in the West. In Laye’s A Dream of Africa (Dramous), Fatoum is propositioned by an old man in a bar in the Latin Quarter; at first he does not understand what is happening and when the girl Liliane explains the incident to him, he protests angrily that nothing like that could happen in his own country (53–54). In Abdoul Doukouré’s Le Débouloulé, the student Kaydot observes with consternation his employer’s affair with a young black American (36 passim), while the student-narrator of Bernard Nanga’s La trahison de Marianne is himself given the chance (which he refuses) of offering his services to a Parisian man who has “a weakness for the boys” (190). Again, the treatment of the subject tends to be monothematic; as in the
literature on colonial Africa, the emphasis is placed on the theme of exploitation and on the idea that homosexual activity is rare in traditional African society and, therefore, especially alienating in its impact. A more obviously didactic and schematic equivalent to these episodes occurs in Kole Omotoso’s *The Edifice*, where a continuum is drawn between the hero, Dele’s, experience of sexual exploitation in a colonial mission school and the aspirations that later persuade him to study in the West. When Dele’s excellence in English is used by a homosexual teacher at the school as the pretext for an attempted seduction, Omotoso’s ironic recounting of the episode makes the point that Dele’s absorption in the West is responsible for this entanglement, that it is his just reward for aspiring to be an *ojinbo* (38–40). Those later sections of the book set in Britain are designed to confirm that Dele’s years there are as misconceived as is the nature of his relationship with his English teacher; the one is emblematic of the other.

In one other novel of student life, Saidou Bokoun’s *Chaïne*, homosexual activity plays a more elaborate, more sophisticated narrative function. Ideologically, however, the treatment of homosexuality in *Chaïne* is not far removed from its treatment by Omotoso or Laye. At the beginning of the novel, Kanaan reveals how he has found himself increasingly alienated from Parisian society, abandoning his studies, breaking off his relationship with his girlfriend and gradually withdrawing from all contact with women. First masturbation, then homosexual activity, provides him with the stimulus he requires.

The marked emphasis Bokoun places on Kanaan’s progressive degeneration as he discovers first one, then another means of degrading himself is reminiscent of the gradual descent to perdition of a morality tale. More centrally, however, this narrative strategy is designed to suggest the self-consciousness with which Kanaan engages in his descent. The thrill for Kanaan here lies in the apprehension of his own degradation, as he gradually installs himself “in the morbid universe of damnation” (63).

Exciting himself first by reading and writing homosexual graffiti in urinals, Kanaan then attempts an abortive rendezvous. Later, an erotic dream leaves him with an obscure, remembered phrase, *Saint Jean Po*, which he adopts as the name of a new persona.10

The idea of self-apprehension now becomes more central, and, for the first time, Kanaan begins to project for himself the identity of passive, homosexual *black*. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his essay “Orphée Noir,” describes a poem by Césaire as constantly exploding and turning on itself and then comments on the process by which the negritude poets assert their identity as blacks: “It isn’t a matter of coming together again in the calm unity of contraries, but of making stiffen like a sex one of the contraries in the pair ‘black-white’ in its opposition to the other” (xxvi–xxvii). Kanaan’s crisis, however, requires just the opposite of this: he needs to see himself not as
assertive but as a black abused, affirming the denigratory view of him sustained by the West. Pushing a padded knife into his anus, he announces the act with the words "SAINT JEAN PO violated by . . . " (typically, the headline style of the announcement projects the experience of being sodomized, so Kanaan can apprehend this with an enhanced sense of his degradation). Again, the question of race enters as a major substantiating element: when Kanaan fantasizes about being sodomized by another man, he questions himself what color is the penis that will violate him (63).

It is only after Kanaan is brutally sodomized by four youths that he is able to reclaim a true sense of himself and to escape from denigratory fantasy. Barely able to stumble away after the assault, he comments: "The eunuch miraculously escaped from butchery walks like this. Osiris walked like this searching for a member cut into pieces" (75). The reference to the god Osiris, dismembered, reborn, again recalls Sartre, commenting: "It is a matter . . . of the black dying at the hands of white culture in order to be reborn into the black spirit" (xxiii). Kanaan realizes that the period of degradation was the product of a crisis in which he was unable to confront the West's dismissal of his value as a black as something external to himself. That recognition constitutes the first step in a process of reclamation, during which he will come to acknowledge his actual condition and to find a way to negotiate this.

From the beginning of the homosexual episode, Kanaan drives himself, stage by stage, into more candid and unambiguous sexual contacts in order to bring himself up against himself in increasingly marked terms: apprehending himself as outcast, as (in the romantic sense) the man depraved, and as black. Illustrating, as it does, the playing out of Kanaan's existential crisis, the role played by homosexual activity in the thematic development of this text is more specialized than in other texts, where it tends to be seen simply, objectively, as part of a pattern of exploitation. As elsewhere, however, homosexuality is conceived as part of the arena of African/Western relations. Further, Bokoum sustains his theme by describing homosexual contacts of a kind that are consistently degrading; another sort of contact—mutual, loving, and not dependent on Kanaan's projection of his own role—would, after all, render Kanaan's neurotic program much more tenuous. In the end, then, the subject of homosexuality is treated as pejoratively in this novel as in most African writing: it is singled out as the worst possible course, adopted by Kanaan when he has rejected all other forms of human contact.

In the texts discussed above, homosexuality is treated as an aspect of the degenerate transformation wrought on Africa through its contact with the West. In a number of other texts, however, the subject is treated nonpejoratively and, in some cases, plays an elaborate and central thematic function.
A Few Nights and Days; Why Are We So Bled?

Dipoko’s treatment of the subject in A Few Nights and Days is deliberately neutral in tone. Here the homosexual relationship—which precedes the narrative action—is conducted between two whites; the Cameroonian narrator, Doumbe, is not involved. What is significant is the way in which Doumbe’s nonpejorative account of the affair helps establish the adequacy of his overview, his sophisticated ability to register the facts of the relationship and not to be troubled by these. Dipoko’s priority is to build up the idea that Doumbe has assumed a cosmopolitan personality and is able to negotiate the Parisian environment with as much ease as a European. At the same time, however different it appears from the pejorative approach of The Edifice, Dipoko’s treatment of a homosexual relationship still is seen as other, in order to establish the fact (equally a marked term) of Doumbe’s liberalism. The treatment of homosexuality is still decidedly schematic.

By contrast with the texts discussed above, however, the treatment of homosexuality in A Few Nights and Days is not used to signify the exploitation of Africa by the West. This is the case also in Armah’s Why Are We so Bled?, where, during the testing of pain thresholds in a university laboratory experiment, the homosexual researcher Joel is momentarily paired with the African Modin—both as potential victims of the female student Aimée’s aggression. The characterization of Joel is sympathetic; as Modin recognizes he and Joel have “something vulnerably precious in common” (171), the portrait even verges on being an empathetic one, with the oppression Joel confronts as a homosexual implicitly aligned with that Modin confronts as a black. Joel is characterized as (to stretch a point) a sort of proto-Modin—and this despite his color and sexual orientation. This is not to say that Armah’s procedure here denotes benign liberalism. Rather, his abstention from an orthodox homophobia actually strengthens his hand in establishing a monolithic case against Aimée, whose characterization throughout the novel is rigidly schematic. But at least as far as his treatment of Joel is concerned, Armah’s procedure marks a bold inversion of that found in other African novels.

No Past, No Present, No Future

Maddy’s novel is one of a number that trace the problems of African students living in the West. Here, though, Maddy’s preoccupation is to compare the experience of three students rather than to focus on the alienation suffered by a solitary hero. Of the three, Santigie undergoes the most damaging transformation. Shocked by his failure in Britain, he descends into a self-substantiating racism, which is expressed through an extreme, programmatic cruelty toward white women. Ade develops into a ruthlessly
self-seeking elitist, who, like Santigie, systematically exploits women. Joe Bengoh, however, achieves a gradual maturation in sensitivity and in his ability to form selfless, loving relationships, that renders him, by contrast with Ade and Santigie, morally elect. The fact that Joe is a homosexual is used by Maddy—in an inversion of the common practice of African writing—to privilege his (moral) superiority over the other two male characters.

Joe’s first homosexual experience is with the priest, Father O’Don, in his mission school. Maddy’s approach seems not very far removed from Omotoso’s account of the mission school episode in *The Edifice*. O’Don is presented as predatory, as having initiated a relationship in which Joe participates at least partly against his own will. There is, for example, a hint when Joe is punished without pretext that O’Don uses his authority in the school to force a rapprochement with Joe, to enable him to continue using the boy for sex (25).

Maddy’s account of the Joe/O’Don affair is similar to the monoesthetic accounts of homosexual relationships in the novels discussed in the first part of this article. Joe’s subsequent shift in sexual orientation from practicing heterosexual to unequivocal homosexual is not very convincingly recounted (three traumatic experiences with women are stated to have alienated Joe from women for life; Maddy’s treatment of this process is highly schematic and leads to a less than credible account of Joe’s sexual psychology). Joe’s eventual immersion in homosexual activity is, however, presented with a bald straightforwardness. Before joining Ade and Santigie in England, Joe spends two months in Paris with a French boy he had previously met in Bauya. Maddy comments: “Now [Joe] knew what gaiety and laughter and perversion and moral complexity were all about in the world of the whites. It was his first taste of the white scene and what he experienced with the French boy proved that better friendships lay in wait somewhere for him” (77). At first, there is little apparent shift in Maddy’s approach: Joe’s relationship with the French boy is projected in pejorative terms, and, significantly, the encounter is placed as belonging to the world of the whites. Generally, Maddy’s handling of the subject continues to suggest an emphasis on the abnormality of homosexuality. Nonetheless, during the latter part of the novel, Maddy’s approach does differ considerably from the pejorative treatment of the subject in most African writing. Despite the insecurity of his technique, in the end he chooses to project homosexuality as a humane norm, not by way of making any claims for its inherent characteristics. It is because, of the three central characters on whose contrasting experience and personalities the book’s thematic development is based, Joe is the only one who appears morally admirable and socially well adjusted. It is not, then, that Maddy simply softens up on the subject; rather, the sympathetic treatment of homosexuality is deliberately designed to help carry the novel’s radical morality.
This first becomes clear in the party scene, when the conduct of the three friends is contrasted graphically. Santigie is bent on revenging himself on whites—his behavior is a barely controlled hysteria—while Ade, who normally uses women for what they can offer, makes exceptional efforts to endear himself to Bodil, whom he will end by exploiting shamelessly. Joe, meanwhile, wishes his lover Michael was with him, since with Michael there, "He would not have felt so lonely and empty and without courage." Seeing Joe's unhappiness, Santigie comments: "'Everything about your feelings for dear Michael shines in your face. Your sincere feelings for each other!'" (101-02). These comments—through which homophobia is clearly linked to male sexism—violate Joe's feelings, but at the same time, by contrast with Santigie's vindictiveness, they validate Joe's sensibility. That Joe has achieved a greater maturity than the others is confirmed by the fact that, of all the relationships that the three conduct, that between Joe and Michael is the only one founded on mutual love and respect and which, as the narrative ends, is stated to be still strong and on-going.

It is worth asking what would be the effect if Maddy did not present Joe as being homosexual, but as having the same kind of relationship with a women as he does with Michael—that is, one that is stable and caring and which would still contrast, therefore, with the experience of Ade and Santigie. Such an alteration would not affect the basic structure of contrasts that is established between Joe and the other two. It would, however, alter the intensity of that contrast by rendering Joe's achievement less controversial.

Maddy, then, challenges the conventional morality expressed in most African texts, by offering us a sympathetic assessment of homosexuality. But this challenge is a strategic one. Maddy is not really concerned here with the question of sexual orientation; rather, it is the totality of Joe's behavior that sets him apart from Ade and Santigie. The fact, for example, that at the end of the novel he is able to respond more caringly to Bodil than does Bodil's lover, Ade (see 162), suggests how much more adequate he is than the others. What is significant is the idea that Joe is a more successful and admirable social personality despite his homosexuality: an idea Maddy proposes not for its own sake but as a means of provoking a reassessment of a broader sexual morality.

Our Sister Killjoy

Aidoo's novel, like Maddy's, traces the experience of Sissie, an African student in Europe. Her realization of the damage the West has inflicted on her culture is foregrounded in the text. At the end of the novel, Sissie returns from Europe to Ghana, confident in her anti-Western nationalism,
although she is stigmatized for her stance by her own peer group, who belong to a culturally disaffected, Westernized elite.

The second part of the novel is dominated by Aidoo's account of the friendship between Sissie and the German lesbian Marija. Although when Sissie first meets Marija it is immediately apparent that the German woman is married and has a child, it is also clear that Marija's approach to Sissie is neither casual nor disinterested. As their first conversation develops, Aidoo takes trouble to emphasize how Marija has "planned out the meeting and even drafted the introductory remarks." Significantly, too, Marija insists on describing her earlier friendship with two other non-European women, leaving Sissie to speculate: "It cannot be normal / for a young / Hausfrau to / Like / Two Indians / Who work in / Supermarkets" (20–23). Aidoo maintains this simultaneous signaling and withholding of information regarding Marija throughout the greater part of the section. It is a heavy-handed technique, whose effect is pejorative: it creates a context in which the identification of Marija's lesbianism, when it finally comes, seems likely to alienate Sissie and to vindicate her distrust of the West.

This technique is, however, oddly mismatched to what proves to be a very different kind of thematic development. In the end, Aidoo's treatment of homosexuality is not unsympathetic. Sissie is able to empathize with Marija, and the friendship throws light on her experience of the West through the parallels she perceives between Marija's situation and her own, rather than through stigmatizing Marija as another phenomenon of a degenerate and oppressive culture.

As the friendship grows, Aidoo indicates the comfort it offers Sissie, who is otherwise socially isolated in the West. In Marija's house Sissie talks about Africa, or each sits with their own thoughts. Marija gives Sissie plums from her garden, and Aidoo invests this gift with symbolic resonance. The physical appearance of the fruit is stressed, with their feminine shape and smoothness and skin color "almost like [Sissie's] own." They reflect Sissie: they owe their attractiveness "to other qualities that she herself possessed at that material time: / Youthfulness / Peace of mind / Feeling free: / Knowing you are a rare article, / Being / Loved" (40). For Marija, the plums are a way of reaching Sissie, of touching her sensibility, and in their physical appearance, they are a homage. For Sissie the gift represents what the friendship gives more generally, a validation of female qualities in which she can find comfort and self-substantiation.

Aidoo lays increasing emphasis on the question of what comfort Sissie finds in their relationship. That she is able to come closer to Marija is clear, and relatively early on Aidoo introduces the idea that their loneliness is in some sense a shared one. The question remains, on what precise grounds is Sissie able to empathize with Marija.

At one point Sissie fantasizes about how satisfying a sexual relationship
she might have had with Marija had she been "one of these black boys in one of these involvements with white girls in Europe" (61). Recoiling, however, at the prospect of miscegenation, she aborts this empathetic fantasy, and—momentarily, at least—Marija represents the white, antipathetic to Sissie’s black.

The next stage in her apprehension of the relationship with Marija involves a more profound conflict of empathy with objectification. After embracing Sissie and finding herself repulsed—more roughly than Sissie intended—Marija drops a single tear. Aidoo comments that Sissie sees that the tear is communal, that it signifies a deep loneliness that hangs over Europe (65). There is a compelling realization of empathy, based on the recognition of a shared loneliness. As, however, with her earlier, shallow fantasy of a sexual relationship, Sissie immediately acknowledges a compromising reality, remembering that Marija is from a race of slave traders, missionaries, and adventurers. She asks herself why weep for her, "why the entire world has had to pay so much and is still paying so much for some folks' unhappiness" (66).

A final incident again reveals this polarity of response: an unavoidable matrix of contradictions, given the complex set of common and dividing characteristics the women embrace (gender, color, sexual orientation). At their final meeting (71–78), Sissie tells Marija she must go to North Germany on the last stage of her program. Marija’s distress at the news—and her arguing against the inevitable—leaves Sissie feeling "cornered." When she tries to defend herself by responding harshly, Sissie realizes the excitement—the "exhilarating" and "masculine delight"—she can derive from hurting someone (76). As with her earlier sexual fantasy, Sissie attempts self-substantiation not through sustaining empathy but through a crude role imposition. She no longer sees herself and Marija as isolated females, vulnerable to male aggression, but achieves closure through projecting herself as male, and through stigmatizing Marija alone in the vulnerable, female position. Sissie does, however, swiftly realize how much she will damage herself if she persists in this. As the episode ends, she reaffirms her ability to empathize with the German woman, however compromised this ability may be.

Aidoo’s account of a homosexual relationship differs from that in many African novels because it is so detailed and avoids a monothematic, pejorative treatment. It is closely related to the novel’s primary thematic development, in that it shows Sissie—black and heterosexual—still able to maintain sympathy for Marija and to perceive common ground between Marija’s position and her own.

Given Aidoo’s refusal of a crude, didactic treatment of this relationship, the axis of identification between Sissie and Marija is bound to be complex, based on several partial correspondences and with its ground shifting accord-
ing to the pressures and perceptions of the moment. While empathy for Marija is endangered by the gulf in sexual orientation, Sissie finds reflected in Marija's social isolation both her own loneliness as a woman and the stigma that is placed on her as a black living in the West. In places these two elements are inextricable. For example, in the passage on Sissie’s reaction to Marija's gift of fruit, the plums simultaneously (1) reflect Sissie's femininity in their physical appearance; (2) point, as a gift from Marija, to a feminine act of caring; (3) reflect Sissie’s blackness in their physical appearance; (4) point to the comfort the relationship with Marija offers her in an alien, difficult environment.

There are, then, two elements here: Sissie empathizing with Marija as female; Sissie seeing her own stigmatization reflected in Marija’s. The relationship between these two factors is made clearer in the last section of the novel. Having been abandoned in London by a man she loves—and who loves her, but is alienated by her “anti-Western neurosis”—Sissie comments:

I shall be lonely again. O yes, everyone gets lonely some time or other. After all, if we look closer into ourselves, shall we not admit that the warmth from other people comes so sweet to us when it comes, because, we always carry with us the knowledge of the cold loneliness of death? (119)

That “warmth from other people” has come, notably, from Marija. In the end Sissie’s loneliness derives from her stigmatization not only by the West but, more damagingly, by her peers in her own society. Marija’s loneliness, meanwhile, is that of a lesbian, who must seek relationships with other women outside the margins of her community. While Aidoo’s approach is nonpejorative, it is predicated on the assumption that Marija’s condition is a marked term, that it is defined by what, in the context of African literature, must be read as highly nonrepresentative characteristics. As for Sissie, the disadvantage she faces is more acute than that faced by a black man or even by a more representative black woman. She is a black woman isolated from her community because of her political convictions. Her loneliness is similar to Marija’s, then, in having a double origin, the result of a very narrowly determined condition.

Bound to Violence

In the first chapter of his novel, Ouoluguem’s approach is similar to Armah’s in Two Thousand Seasons: he identifies homosexual activity as one of the vices of the autocratic Saifs, pederasts, whose deaths are as ironically fitting as those of Armah’s “predators” (16). Later, however, Ouoluguem intro-
roduces a more extensive homosexual episode, the impact of which is far more ambiguous.

Ouologuem charts the metamorphosis of Raymond Kassoumi from son of a serf in the French colony of Nakem to student in Paris: a project initiated by the father ("intent on steeping his children in white culture," 124) and eagerly adopted by Raymond, for whom study becomes "the instrument of his emancipation" (125). Ouologuem describes the political relationships that overdetermine son's and father's aspirations, noting that Saif sees an educated, Westernized Raymond as "an instrument of his own future policy" in accommodating the French colonial authority (135). He shows how the adoption of a cosmopolitan personality alienates Raymond from his own society, to such an extent that, as a student in Paris, divorced from the realities of life in Nakem, he is no longer able to determine how dominant an influence is "the white man" in him (137).

Then comes the crisis, provoked by Raymond's unwitting incest with his sister, by the news that his father has been sold into slavery and by the death of his sister a few days later. Failing his exams, sinking into poverty, his life is dominated by incessant visits to a café, to drink and smoke, to find company in order "to forget himself" (149). It is while in the café that he is approached by Lambert, a wealthy homosexual.

Ouologuem's account of this episode proceeds in three fairly distinct stages. When Raymond realizes Lambert wants to pick him up, his first reaction is a realistic assessment of his own situation—"what can you hope for if you're a nigger?"—and a recognition that if he goes with the man he will be paid, and that, after all, he has to live (152). Then there is a shift in consciousness as a deeper disturbance strikes him, signaling his realization that the relationship might have more to offer him than his keep. Lambert might constitute, at least temporarily, a paradoxically free context for him to satisfy his previously unfulfilled capacity for tenderness.

Acknowledging that he is about to submit to Lambert, Raymond sees his action neither as pragmatic nor as an act of self-consciously apprehended degradation (as with Kanaan in Chainé), but as a kind of apotheosis, a realization of his brotherhood with "the world's unhappiness in the face of its gigantic hunger for self-destruction." Lambert's seduction speech, which now follows, imposes an idealist interpretation on their meeting ("I've been looking for you for a long time, in every boy I've ever encountered") and then—superrealistically—makes a direct appeal to Raymond's desolation:

"Don't be afraid. I know what it is to be without a woman, what it is to believe in a woman, to belong to a woman and not to possess her, to suffer long silences, not to be a man with a woman, and then, instead of love, to know the silent cry of a thirst together." (152-53)
As the two leave, then, and walk to Lambert’s flat, their apprehension of the significance of the union is identical, with both absorbed in “a dream of peace and solitude” (153).

Ouologuem’s description of their lovemaking does nothing to disrupt this sense of harmony. It differs markedly not only from any other passage in this novel but from nearly every other evocation of homosexual activity in African literature. The one element emphasized is tenderness: a regard for the other shared by both men. This, too, is an extremely reticent passage in its physical detailing: there are no references to the couple’s sexual organs—a conspicuous silence in a book in which genitals generally have attributed to them the vivid particularity of independent characters. In place of this, there is an emphasis on sensuousness, which brings into relief the couple’s absorption in each other, and an emphasis on the escape from self that Raymond achieves through their lovemaking (155).

In the following pages, however, the episode enters its third and final stage as Raymond achieves a full realization of the relevance of his middle name, Spartacus. Now, for the first time, he sees clearly the history of his continent; further, without dismissing the magnitude of the impact it has had on him, he identifies the relationship between himself and Lambert as the product of a history of exploitation and alienation. Recognizing now “the problem of his body and his skin, the body and money of his partner” (157), he realizes that he is enmeshed in a historico-cultural crisis from which he is unable to extricate himself.

In this episode, then, Ouologuem seems to make use of a homosexual affair as a way of exploring Raymond’s alienations. At the same time, the treatment of the subject appears more thoughtful than in novels where homosexual activity is simply identified as a particularly disagreeable aspect of Western exploitation.

Yet to leave it at that would be disingenuous. In this novel the homosexual episode eludes accurate assessment unless it is seen in the context of Ouologuem’s larger strategy—and it remains elusive even then.

Bound to Violence consistently challenges false and falsifying representations of history—this being perhaps its primary aim. A great deal of the commentary that the novel has attracted turns on its apparent denigration of African culture. Yet, while that is hardly an imaginary problem, Ouologuem’s primary targets are, in fact, the ideological formations through which that culture has been (mis)represented.

The novel comments explicitly on this process of falsification: noting the inaccessibility of fact, caught between the conflicting accounts of griots, chroniclers, elders, satirizing the mania of the Africanist Shrobenius for construing indigenous philosophies “which had lost all living reality,” a habit of mind Ouologuem identifies, angrily, as having been passed on to Africans themselves (87). Ouologuem exposes the process by which fact is,
consciously, deliberately transmuted according to the needs of competing ideologies. Thus, the legend of Saïf Isaac al-Heit becomes a vital component in “black romanticism” and in African nationalist thinking; whether the legend is “truth or invention” is hardly relevant (8). Bound to Violence constitutes an attack on falsifying representations—on racism, obviously, but also on any mode of representation that rarifies, rationalizes, sentimentalizes the history of the continent.

But literature, too, is, at one level, representation—a fact that Ouologuem insists on foregrounding throughout the novel. As Eric Sellin comments, there is here “an intentional fragmentation of structure . . . which . . . constantly reminds us that we are dealing with a fiction, an extension of the mind . . . of a creator” (142). It also vitally reminds the readers of their minds and of their capacity—like that of the serfs of Nakem—for accepting falsifying representations.

As Robert McDonald comments, Ouologuem’s treatment of the episode of Raymond and Lambert is “strikingly sympathetic and sensitive”; there is a poetic lyricism here that isolates the episode from its context—so that, like many other parts of the novel, it reads as a discrete entity: hence McDonald’s speculation the passage may be an imitation of an episode in some American gay novel (67–68).

If the Raymond-Lambert episode strikes a discord with its surrounding material because of its tenderness, other episodes describing sexual relationships are equally obtrusive: a passage on the courtship of Raymond’s parents has its tenderness disrupted by the ludicrously exaggerated account of the husband’s ritual observances on the marriage eve (49), while the account of the lovemaking of Sonia and Madoubo has its mild eroticism deflated by the German girl’s asking—“on the brink of ecstasy”—whether the background music is “functional” (89–90).

A more elaborate episode is the seduction of Awa by Chevalier, for which Ouologuem first employs his borrowing from Greene’s It’s a Battlefield (54–56) and then an imitation of the kind of early twentieth-century pornography that used to be printed in France for illegal import into English-speaking countries (56). This episode (an apparently gratuitous extension from the plot: Awa having been sent by Saïf to spy on Chevalier) and Ouologuem’s blatant imitation of period pornography seem to emphasize his view of the political dispensation of a colonial state. History is exposed as farce, suggesting that it deserves to be represented this way. This is later supported when a passage on Raymond’s feelings about his imminent election to the French National Assembly—a sensitive issue in the context of the political developments of the late 1940s—is suddenly interrupted by a long paragraph describing his wife’s treating him to a session of oral sex (168).

The absurd dislocations and distortions that Ouologuem’s text performs may well be intended to alert the reader to the nature of representation:
to suggest, especially, that the ideology of colonialism and neocolonialism depend upon a ruthless misrepresentation of real relationships. This seems, however, not to be Ouologuem's entire subject, since a large part of the novel suggests a concern with the proper way to present sex in serious fiction—and a scathing disregard for the conventions to which the majority of African literary texts subscribe. Here again Ouologuem seems to identify a history of misrepresentation: in this instance, society's convention-bound falsification of the status of sexual relationships. The episode of Raymond and Lambert may play another function, apart from allowing Ouologuem to develop ideas about the condition of alienation among an African elite. Deliberately offending a conventional sensibility by projecting a homosexual relationship as tender and mutually satisfying, this episode may be meant to reflect on the role of sex in the way we articulate the priorities and the ordering of society. When Ouologuem describes the first night of Raymond and Lambert's affair as the "apogee of the natural order of love" (155), the critical focus is set firmly on the word "natural": the whole novel, after all, questions whether ideology bears such a natural relationship to fact as it claims, and one specific aspect of the novel—its account of sexual relationships—questions whether the official history of sexuality (which includes its representation in literary texts) really meshes with its actual role in our lives.12

In the end, however, it is difficult to determine precisely what Ouologuem's intention is. One problem in this novel—or one distinctive feature, since Ouologuem's challenge may lie just here—is that there is no still point in the text, no acknowledgment signaling immutable fact, only the counterpointing of competing false rationalizations. For example, while the novel's stylistic dislocations and imitations are obvious enough, much of its quotation and plagiarism might have gone unnoticed were it not for the diligence of some early readers. What kind of novel would it then be—or for that matter would it be if, as Ouologuem himself has suggested, the novel was intended to be printed with an apparatus of quotation marks and references surrounding its borrowings?13 That doubt refers us again to the problem of representation. Ouologuem's intention seems to be to warn us against the process of falsification: to counsel, as does his Archbishop Henry, "keep your eye on the other man's play. . . You must learn to know it and to know yourself in it" (177). The difficulty is that Ouologuem's procedures are, variously, both so blatant and so covert: as if he has participated in Henry's admission, "'I want to play as if they did not see me playing!'" (177). The novel leaves wide open the question of what is the relevance of recognizing Ouologuem's borrowings for what they are—representations of representations. I am leaving this question unanswered; it provokes some doubt as to what is the relevance of relevance.
The Interpreters

In his article on homosexuality in the African novel, Vignal comments: "[The homosexual] is at one and the same time the Jew, the communist, the gypsy and the negro of the others, of right-thinking citizens" (65). The drawing of parallels between the black and the homosexual experience is one that has occurred to black writers outside Africa (James Baldwin, British screenplay writer Hanif Kureishi, George Lamming in Of Age and Innocence). Can, then, a persuasive metaphor be established between the stigma placed on homosexuals in most contemporary societies and that experienced by blacks in the face of racist denigration, and if so, does this emerge in any of the African texts that feature homosexual relationships?

This, after all, would be similar to the strategy used by Ouologuem in his "Lettre aux femmes nègresse seules," when he comments: "Single women, you are like Negroes, seeing that your condition places you at a remove from life, relegated to the marginal society of minority groups" (Lettre 97). Yet the drawing of a parallel between the stigmatization of blacks and that of homosexuals remains a possibility approached only in a few of the texts discussed above—and then somewhat gingerly.

Aidoo seems to go furthest in this direction, establishing in Our Sister Kiljoj an elaborate complex of empathetic links between Sissie and Marija, among which is the recognition of a shared marginality. In No Past, No Present, No Future, Maddy suggests explicitly at one point that the one marginal group shares the experience of the other, commenting that Joe realizes the irony of Santjie's delivering a lecture on racism, in the light of his hostile reaction to Joe's homosexuality (93). This identification is, however, hardly developed further. While in Why Are We So Blessed? there is an implicit identification between the American homosexual Joel's reaction to Aimée and that of Modin, the parallel is a limited one. Joel's fear is founded on his regard for Modin—for any man like Modin—between whom and himself, any woman like Aimée will intercede. In Bound to Violence, Raymond realizes through his encounter with Lambert "an ineffable brotherhood of his being with the world's unhappiness," and later Lambert's social isolation leaves him "a shipwreck like [Raymond] himself" (152, 157). Yet this identification is foreclosed by Raymond's realization that the history of exploitation, West over African, has brought him to Lambert's bed. Finally, in A Question of Power, Elizabeth is able to see a parallel between the position of "weak, homosexual Coloured men" and her own stigmatization as colored woman living among blacks; reading a biography of Oscar Wilde, she is able to recognize the injustice of anti-homosexual prejudice. At the same time, however, she argues that this instinct to draw empathetic parallels can be sustained only if the object of
concern is remote. In crisis, and with her sense of identity disintegrating and projected into brutal entities (Dan, Medusa, Solo) that articulate monstrously amplified versions of the ground of her alienation, homosexuality becomes part of the material on which her hallucinations are founded—a representative element of the worst she knows, which she correlates with bestiality and child abuse (47, 138).

In this context Wole Soyinka’s *The Interpreters* is interesting because, while Soyinka is hardly concerned with projecting a metaphorical identification of the stigmatization of homosexuality with that of blackness, he does establish such an identification as integral to Joe Golder’s psychological make-up. He shows how Golder advertises his blackness as a means of displacing the alienation he suffers because of his homosexuality.

Joe Golder is a light-skinned Afro-American who teaches at an African university. In his first appearances in the novel, the dominant emphasis is on his need to blacken himself until he is at least three-quarters black (219) and on the tension that emerges as he struggles to impress the fact of his blackness on his friends and colleagues. As the narrative proceeds, the motivation behind this need becomes clearer. It is in itself a function, a means by which Golder wills himself closer to an African society from which he is excluded—in a weak sense, as a foreigner, but more crucially as a homosexual. Golder rationalizes his blackness, elevating it into a dominant characteristic, in order to displace his alienation from African society and so to heal his “cleavage from the world of understanding” (247). For him the blackness of other men creates a vertigo of unrealized desire, and one way of offsetting this is to will a cancellation of differences. He articulates his desire to draw close to African men through a racial definition, since he knows that through expressing his sexuality he will only confirm his isolation.

To an extent Soyinka’s characterization of Golder corresponds to the stereotype found in novels like *The Edifice*. Certainly Golder’s sexual behavior tallies with the standard image of the voracious Western homosexual, and the reaction of the Nigerian characters to him projects his status as an outcast. While it is true that the artist Kola is able to see him as a friend (218) and Egbo’s revulsion is glossed as being extreme (238), Sagoe’s firm distancing of himself from Golder after learning he is homosexual (his caustic reference to Golder’s methods in picking up men) is not deflected by Soyinka but is projected as an appropriate critical response. Further, as with Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy*, Soyinka’s tactical delay in releasing information about Golder emphasizes the “specialness” of his position, excluding him, as a marked term, from the mainstream. Soyinka’s characterization of Golder can hardly be said to be sympathetic. Yet there is a concern with Golder’s social psychology that finally does distinguish his characterization from the stereotype and that suggests that his role bears a complex relationship to the novel’s thematic development.
This, I think, explains the length of the scene in which Golder’s homosexuality is revealed to Sagoe (183–202) and its strategic placement immediately after the crucial episode in Lazarus’s church. The focus is set firmly on the social performance through which Golder exposes both his self-apprehension and his acute need to express this to other people. For Sagoe, the confrontation poses a challenge: while Golder has no large, fixed vision to impose systematically on experience as Lazarus does in his sermon, he still projects a statement on experience that Sagoe must find a way of negotiating. Finally, too, however febrile these may be, Golder’s means of articulating his sense of reality will reflect on those means of self-expression chosen by Sagoe, Kola, and the other interpreters.

From the beginning of this scene Golder marks his concern with identity through his persistent comments on the relevance of being American or of being African; for Golder the subject of nationality and race is part of his weaponry, as he continually states his own identity and tries to manipulate Sagoe’s apprehension of this. Indeed, everything about Golder constitutes a statement of character. The deliberate projection of his personality, evidenced by the furnishing of his room, is so unsettling that at first Sagoe is too uncomfortable to sit down (188–89). Golder’s need to impose his personality becomes even more blatant in the conversation that follows: in his immediate intimacy with Sagoe, in his unsolicited revelation of flaws (“I am a very sudden person. My moods change,” 186), and in his constant use of the first person (“I” appears more than thirty times in the half-page speech). As with Marija in Our Sister Killjoy, the statement of personality is carefully planned, part of a strategy intended to create a bonding: thus, with his “unwitting” revelation he is black: “In my home town . . . a white fool set his dog on me.” He laughed and seemed to anticipate Sagoe’s puzzlement. “Oh, you are taken in like the others. I am negro. One-quarter negro in fact.” He smiled then. “I wish it were more.” (187). The anecdote of Golder’s relationship with a Guinean dancer that follows (191–95), helps alert Sagoe, if not to Golder’s homosexuality, at least to his oppressiveness, revealing his ruthless manipulation of the dancer’s entrapment. It is an oblique image of what Golder’s germinal relationship with Sagoe might be like, if the relationship is allowed to develop.

Sagoe becomes increasingly defensive, and as the conversation fails to build into the bonding Golder requires, the American resorts increasingly to statements on Sagoe’s personality, further symptomatizing his need to control the components of the relationship (190). The episode moves into the strategic discussion over whether Sagoe will stay the night or not. If so, whether he will sleep in the bedroom or on the floor. If on the floor, whether Golder will prove his hospitality by also renouncing the bedroom. It presents a series of stimuli and reflexes edged a little further forward.
each time by Golder. In the angry dialogue that follows Sagoe's decision not to stay, Golder's anxiety impels him to push his guest toward a realization of his homosexuality. It becomes clear that Golder is as much afraid of the prospect of an irresolution in their dialogue as of anything else. When the truth is out and when it is clear that Sagoe is not available as a sexual partner, Golder seems more comfortable. What has been painful and arduous, clearly, has been his need to negotiate his own and Sagoe's apprehension of the truth, to project his personality up until the point where at least it is assigned a name. And it is here that Golder's characterization begins to relate to the central thematic development of the novel.

The problem of naming is addressed in an early scene, when Egbo insists that polygamy is a modern concept: "'I don't deny the practice is old, but whoever thought it was polygamy then?'' (12). This apparently flippant comment occurs in a crucial episode in which Egbo struggles to resolve his own uncertain sense of direction and identity. His comment suggests that the natural is that which remains unnamed.

This key scene establishes the novel's problematic because throughout the book characters comment on that which eludes them: a condition of wholeness, unbroken by self-consciousness, by the need to state one's case. Egbo realizes that the special quality of the state of self-discovery he once gained during a night by the Ogun River was, precisely, that he had no need to analyze this (134–35). Kola identifies wholeness as being realizable "if only we were . . . neither acknowledging nor weakening our will by understanding" (246). Sekoni's sculpture, The Wrestler, is seen as the product of a man "who had waited long to find himself" (100), its value lying in the fact that there is no gap between (creative) act and understanding. Logically, one suspects, his work should not have been given a name.

Sekoni's achievement, however, is a rare one, perhaps for him unique. Part of the crisis faced by the interpreters lies in their inability to "find" themselves as Sekoni has done and—a problem indivisible from this—in placing themselves in a society they find antipathetic. Here is a parallel with Golder's need to find and to place himself in society and to do so against considerable odds.

The parallel is not, of course, precise: Golder is not one of the interpreters. His insertion in their society is a marginal one, and the problem this creates for him is distinct from the pressures the interpreters' society places on them. Golder's desire is less to cast adrift from societal bonds than to create these for himself;" naming is precisely what he struggles to achieve. Similarly, while Egbo in his discussion of "apostasy" (11) points to the crisis of indecision that he is trying to escape, Golder faces a different problem: knowing himself to be under one violently distinguishing mark, he tries to displace this by fostering another.
Soyinka's novel is centered on the twin problems of interpretation and expression. Like the banal and corrupt, Golder is a quantity that has to be understood and negotiated by the others; but it is important, too, that he is characterized—in some detail—as an individual faced with a permanent crisis in his social insertion and in seeking ways of addressing this.

Golder's problematic is too specialized and the distortions this creates in his behavior too great for him to play a role as central in the novel as any of the interpreters. Yet, as is true to some extent of Lazarus, Golder's function is an intermediate one: crisis-bound, he does not stand as far from characters like Kola, Sagoe, Egbo, as do those for whom the need to interpret is foreclosed by their dominant status in society: Oguazor, Winsala, Derinola. Again, the fact that Golder's behavior is consistently selfish and destructive—and ends with the death of Noah—distances him from the interpreters, but does not place him in so radically distinct a category. Throughout the novel, the interpreters struggle to find a means of expression, and the solutions they hit upon are often imperfect, if not destructive. Success lies in pure art, in Sekoni's sculpture, (arguably) in Kola's canvas of the pantheon. Much less adequate are Sekoni's philosophizing, which the others find oppressive, or Sagoe's journalism: his editorial, for instance, on night-soil, which, like his excited witnessing of the chase of Noah, betrays his cynical rapture before anything that illustrates the worst he already knows. Soyinka designs a key scene in the novel—the aftermath of the visit to Lazarus's church—to expose this problem, as Sagoe decides he can use Lazarus's conversion of Noah as the basis for a newspaper article (a representation of a representation) and asks Kola to paint a picture of Lazarus, to give this "'some kind of dimension'" (178). There is a disturbing link between Sagoe and Kola and Lazarus, all exploiting raw experience for their own ends.

In this area—in the search to find vehicles for expression—an intimate linkage is established between the interpreters and Golder in the scene in which, with his face peeling after his sunbathing, Golder sits as Kola's model. Kola uses the American as raw material for the pantheon, while Golder suffers from his misjudged attempt to achieve a representation of himself as black. The situation is brilliantly imaged by Soyinka as Golder's skin flakes away in the breeze, only to be caught by Kola on his paintbrush and incorporated in the canvas (103). But Golder, too, is an artist, a fine singer. An acknowledgment of his expressive power is given by Kola, who decides it is appropriate for Sekoni's sculpture and his own canvas to be unveiled, not as a separate event, but at Golder's end-of-term recital (219). Between that decision and the event comes the death of Noah. Yet the recital is not merely the "'freak-show'" some of the interpreters now expect (245–46). Even if it were, few of the characters are entirely innocent of having exploited Noah. Golder's choice of songs—especially "Sometimes
I feel like a motherless child'—is characteristic of his attempt at displacing his sexual identity by articulating his will to be black. It has the effect of allowing him a mode of expression and release from anxiety that still does not ensure resolution. (The narrator comments on the song, 'It cradled him . . . but would not fling him clear,' 247). Yet the song is sufficiently expressive for the interpreters, in the audience, to realize the impact that recent events (Sekoni’s death, the encounter with Lazarus, Noah’s death) have had on them, to realize the extent to which they have drawn apart from each other and thus to interpret more clearly their own positions. Golder’s art, in the end, is granted considerable status, reflecting the seriousness of his crisis and its links—however oblique—with the crisis suffered by the novel’s major characters. Unsympathetic though it is, Soyinka’s characterization of Golder goes beyond a simple stigmatization of his sexual orientation. In relating Golder’s neurosis over race to his negotiation of his sexuality, Soyinka attempts to explore the social psychology of a homosexual—and this is a rarity in the context of African writing. Further, Golder’s characterization is clearly related to the novel’s primary thematic development, without being crudely illustrative of a simple thesis (such as the identification of sexual exploitation): it plays a function in the novel more complex and satisfying than the characterization of homosexuals in most other African literary texts.

Conclusion

Clearly there is a considerable divergence between the texts discussed in the first part of this article and those by Aidoo, Maddy, and Soyinka. The latter exhibit a much deeper imaginative engagement in the condition of homosexuality and in its social psychology. But there is little to be gained from constructing a league-table proposing clear divisions between the defective and the reflective text. Few of the works discussed early in this article are as crude and shallow in broad terms as their stereotypical treatment of homosexuality would suggest. Novels such as Wirriyamu or Remember Ruben imply the same pejorative assessment of homosexuality as do the majority of African texts, but in so doing they display an ideological foreshortening that is not typical of their larger thematic structures. On the other hand, the more responsive and detailed treatments of homosexual relationships by Maddy, Aidoo, and Ouologuem, are actually dependent upon the stereotype in the sense that they are only thematically effective when read against this. Maddy’s decision, for instance, to characterize Joe Bengoh as homosexual and at the same time to project Joe’s moral priorities as being superior to those of any character in the novel, is only fully significant in a context in which the pairing of homosexuality with moral consciousness would normally be dismissed as absurd. In these texts,
then, the presentation of homosexual relationships remains schematic, intentional.

What remains conspicuous in all these works is the abstention among African writers, and even among the most searching and responsive of these, from a fully characterized and nonschematic depiction of a homosexual relationship between Africans. It is true that the treatment of such relationships between African men or between African women would involve more than the transference of the category "homosexual"—which is, as has been seen, a highly marked term—to an African context. A nonschematic treatment of the subject in that context would, after all, have no need to acknowledge Western modes of self-representation. Nonetheless, the practice of homosexuality within African society remains an area of experience that has not been granted a history by African writers, but has been greeted, rather, with a sustained outburst of silence. Whether this has been carried out within or beyond the limits of the stereotype, the identification of homosexuality with the West has helped defend that silence. An "official" history has concealed the reluctance of African writers to admit homosexuality into the bounds of a different kind of discussion.

NOTES

1. Translations of this and other quotations are my own unless otherwise stated.

2. The term "homosexual practice" is used in this article to cover a range of sexual practices: male homosexuality, featured in the majority of texts under discussion, masturbation (Blanket Boy’s Moon), pedophilia ("For Love of Thérèse," Two Thousand Seasons) and lesbianism (Our Sister Killjoy). The distinctions between these practices would appear not to be relevant to the writers, and so to have little significance in discussing the ideology of these texts. The exception is in the case of Our Sister Killjoy, where lesbianism is related to a wider discussion of female identity.

3. The terms "West" and "Westerners" are used throughout the article—the latter in preference to "whites"—so as to incorporate reference to black American homosexual characters, such as Joe Golder (The Interpreters) and Jimmy (Le Déboussole). The point is that homosexual practice consistently is projected as being external to African culture.

4. In Soyinka’s earlier novel, The Interpreters, the American Joe Golder dismisses the idea that homosexuality is exclusively an imposition by the West: "‘Comparatively healthy society my foot. Do you think I know nothing of your Emirs and their little boys? . . . And what about those exclusive coteries in Lagos?’” (200).

5. Onyeama’s autobiographical Nigger at Eton contains a chapter titled
"Homosexuality" in which the chief interest is the determined emphasis with which he marks homosexuality as being a Western phenomenon. "In Nigeria it certainly was very uncommon, and truly I have never heard of any case of serious homosexual practices there" (164).

6. Though not in prison alone: for a description of the sexual exploitation of young boys in a migrant workers' camp, see Mathabane (74); for comments on the incidence of homosexuality among migrant workers, see Mopeli-Paulus and Lanham (36, 95).

7. For comments on sexual exploitation in South African jails, see also Mopeli-Paulus and Lanham (77) and Zwelonke (21, 61).

8. Writing on Europe, Sembène Ousmane also identifies homosexuality as a social problem, identifying it as "a product of the times," engendered by poverty and unemployment. The reductive nature of this approach is clear when he then links homosexuality with "murders, abortions, poisoning, theft, prostitution, alcoholism" (119). For a similar reductive categorization, see Arthur Nortje's "Sonnet three," where homosexuals are among the detritus Nortje wishes to make "sublime" (a wish that is predicated upon identifying them as being in the depths: "homosexuals, bums, rag-pickers so obsessed / me I could watch them all for hours in fascination," 135).

9. Adele King notes that James Kirkup's translation of this passage presents a coarsened version of Laye's reticent original (106).

10. Later he remembers that Seins Jambes Peau (breasts, legs, skin) had been a password among himself and Guinean friends, signifying the prospect of conquering white women. But another interpretation of these words comes to mind: Saint Jean suggests the title of Sartre's book Saint Jean Genet; Po is (British) English slang for lavatory: derived from the Fr. pot (pronounced po, meaning chamber pot). Sartre's essay "Orphée Noir" is a clear source for this novel.

11. For a detailed account of the controversy over Ouologuem's plagiarism, see Sellin; for an important interview with Ouologuem on this subject, see Whiteman.

12. Under this reading, Bound to Violence is a work that might have appealed to Roland Barthes: "The 'healthy' sign for Barthes is one which draws attention to its own arbitrariness—which does not try to palm itself off as 'natural' but which, in the very moment of conveying a meaning communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well. . . . signs which pass themselves off as natural, which offer themselves as the only conceivable way of viewing the world, are by that token authoritarian and ideological. It is one of the functions of ideology to 'naturalize' social reality, to make it seem as innocent and unchangeable as Nature itself" (Eagleton, 135).

13. See Whiteman (941).
14. Another of the very rare sympathetic treatments of a homosexual relationship in African writing occurs in Dambudzo Marechera's "Grim-knife Jr's Story." Marechera suggests a parallel between sexual identity and artistic viability, as the awakening of a lesbian affection between two women is related to the struggle of an individual poet in postcolonial Zimbabwe to maintain his sense of artistic integrity (68–71).

15. Contrast Egbo, for whom the crucial problem is to unravel "the tyrannous energies" of "blood skeins" (10), or Dehinwa, oppressed by the "blood cruelty" of her mother (37).

16. I am grateful to Rhonda Cobham-Sander for her comments on this point.

WORKS CITED