

Introduction



Readers of novels continue to experience and interpret the public and private realms of human life as separate, despite the fact that feminism and Marxism have taught us that they are linked. By focusing on the interconnected nature—indeed, the interpenetration—of the private and public spheres of life (in this case, the domestic and national spheres), I redefine the terms of conversation about politics and gender in Africa. I focus on how collectivity is understood and how novels represent the individual's relation to the collective. For the first generation of postcolonial African novelists, who published between 1958 and 1988, the most obvious manifestation of political commitment took the form of anticolonial resistance and agitation for national sovereignty. Thematizing colonialism in public terms is not the only way to tell a political tale, however. I argue that reading allegorically allows one to elucidate new meanings in the domestic sphere of life and in intimate relations between people. The domestic, where women historically have set their novels, offers as sharp an analytic perspective on collectivity and national politics as does the arena of public political action. As readers of African literature, we must learn to read this realm more carefully.

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The novel has a complex relation to Africa and cultural nationalism, first, because unlike poetry and drama, it is the genre commonly believed to have originated outside the continent and therefore to have become African only as part of the colonial enterprise. Second, although the novelistic tradition in indigenous languages such as Kiswahili, Wolof, Yoruba, and Xhosa has mushroomed in the twentieth century, the African literature that is most significant to the world is written in European languages.¹ Moreover, at least one sociologist of literature has claimed of Nigeria, for example, that the production of African novels in English far outpaces that of novels in Igbo or Yoruba. “When Nigerians write novels,” says Wendy Griswold (2000, 31), “they normally do so in English.”

As the story goes, novel writing in both francophone and anglophone Africa emerged on the world literary scene in the 1950s and '60s as part of the cultural renaissance that accompanied decolonization. Négritude, which flowered in the 1940s and '50s and came out of francophone West Africa and the Antilles, was the first literary movement made thus visible, though its primary genre was poetry.² West African literature, francophone and anglophone, from Senegal, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana was the first literary expression of pan-continental African nationalism. Although East African novelistic production was not as great as that of West Africa, the region soon produced international writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and it nourished several important literary journals such as *Transition* and *Penpoint*, the first of which originated in Uganda, became continentally important, and ultimately moved to Ghana. Moreover, Kiswahili, more than its West African counterparts, flourished as a regional literary language, and it has been claimed to be a pan-continental language that speaks more for and to the continent than any other indigenous language.

There was a lag in time between state decolonization and black enfranchisement in southern Africa, in some cases a prolonged lag filled with varying degrees of armed struggle. Because of this décalage, and especially because of the more heterogeneous population—in part, white settler populations—southern African literature developed differently from that of West Africa and East Africa. Full citizenship rights came late to Zimbabweans (1981) and even later to

South Africans (1994). The 1970s and especially the 1980s were both politically active and literarily rich.³ Northern African writing, in rough terms, is either Maghrebi, in which French cultural influences are strong, and writers, especially those of the independence period and earlier, expressed themselves primarily in French, or in Arabo-African, for writers came from nations such as Libya, Sudan, and Egypt, whose literary language has always been Arabic.

Appropriating the language and narrative form of the colonizers, African novelists as diverse as Camara Laye, Chinua Achebe, Ferdinand Oyono, Mongo Beti, Ousmane Sembène, Kateb Yacine, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Alex La Guma imagined communities, invented traditions, and wrote themselves into History and Literature. The novel in Africa answered back to colonial silencing and helped to consolidate disparate religious, ethnic, racial, and class differences into a single national identity. In telling this story, I nevertheless aim to challenge its simplicity and note some lacunae that make the received narrative inaccurate in some important ways. I do not—indeed, cannot—offer a complete history of the continental novel. Nevertheless, my working historical model insists first and foremost on Africa as more than a cluster of countries south of the Sahara and sees Africa as a continent inhabited by people of different ethnicities, religious practices, languages, hues, and racial phenotypes. Objecting vehemently to the racially based separation of sub-Saharan from North African literature, the Cameroonian curator and novelist Simon Njami calls the will to divide the two a historical revisionism whose refusal to seek links between various cultures or peoples itself represents a colonial neurosis:

En effet, dans la plupart des esprits, l'Afrique se limiterait à l'ensemble des pays situés au sud du Sahara. Au nord commencerait une autre région, un autre monde presque. Cette forme de révisionisme, qui voudrait opposer la fraction "éthiopienne" à la fraction "méditerranéenne" d'un continent sur lequel le désert s'ouvre comme une interminable parenthèse, est pathologique, car elle prétend nier les influences multiples qui, depuis le Moyen Age, ont été nourries par les échanges entre les grands métropoles sahéliennes et leurs voisines du Maghreb. Elle prétend nier l'importance de la réli-

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gion musulmane à travers ‘Afrique noire’ et ce, bien avant l’arrivée des “découvreurs” européens, à la négritude avérée des premiers Égyptiens. En un mot, elle prétend nier la communauté d’histoire qui mêle les destins de nations ayant toute été colonisées par les mêmes puissances et les luttes de libération qui en découlèrent. Comme si l’Europe qui se construit sous nos yeux ne présentait pas des contradictions tout aussi criantes. Il est des cercles encore plus larges d’ont celui d’autres continents qui, avec l’Afrique, on constitué le cortège de ce que Frantz Fanon baptisa “les damnés de la terre.” (Njami 2005, 15–16)

Most people think of Africa as being limited to a group of countries south of the Sahara, with the region that starts in the north as almost another world. This kind of revisionism, eager to set the “Ethiopian” against the “Mediterranean” fraction of a continent across which the desert opens up like an interminable parenthesis, is pathological, for it seeks to negate the multiple influences fueled by exchanges between the large Sahelian cities and their North African neighbors since the Middle Ages. It contradicts the importance of Islam throughout sub-Saharan Africa, already present well before the European “discoverers” set foot there. In short, it seeks to negate the common history that united the destinies of nations colonised by the same powers and their ensuing struggles for liberation. As though Europe being built before our eyes did not present equally glaring contradictions. Wider circles exist too, including the ones encompassing other continents which, along with Africa, have formed a procession of what Frantz Fanon called “the wretched of the earth.” (Njami 2006, 113–14)

Njami’s words introduced the extraordinary “Africa Re-Mix,” one of the largest, most elaborate, geographically inclusive, and media-inclusive exhibitions of contemporary African art ever mounted. Within the genre of exhibition, Njami’s choices are difficult to criticize. His wide-ranging choice of forms (photography, sculpture, video, painting, and mixed media), artists (male and female), and races (white, Asian, Arab, and black), as well as his showcasing of uncommonly seen media and inclusion of frequently neglected artists, particularly those from lusophone Africa, made “Africa Re-Mix” a practice

of what he preached in the introduction to the catalogue, which, in its insistence on diversity as political strategy, speaks to the very first principle of an African literary history I outline here. Africa is represented in its continental diversity, not in simple racial, regional, or linguistic terms—though, to be sure, all of those terms and definitions help shape Africa and its many literatures.⁴ In some ways, the continentalist mode of African literature I propose, which claims that geography and proximity ought to be reassessed and revalued as models of cultural affiliation and political solidarity, works against Pan-Africanism, since the latter form of cultural nationalism employs a racial principle of organization, linking blacks in the diaspora to those of the continent but, in turn, categorically excludes Africans of Arab, European, and South Asian origin. Njami's choice of plastic artists illustrates a broad non-racialism. His citation of Frantz Fanon suggests his own wish to straddle a line between the activist-philosopher's evocation of Pan-Africanism, on the one hand, while embracing Fanon's non-racial humanism, on the other. By referencing Fanon—*The Wretched of the Earth* (1968), in particular—Njami signals something that most of the later chapters of this book elaborate: that Fanon's most famous and most important book has exerted a powerful inspirational influence on African novelistic writing. I will refer to this point again in the chapters that follow.

Second, in the period I examine, the category of gender does not exist; it can neither be comprehended apart from colonialism, nor is it legible apart from the cultural nationalism that arose in response to colonialism. Many of the works in the first big wave of novels written by men celebrated nationalism as a response to the colonial enterprise or explored it for its limits in effecting social transformation. However, one would scarcely realize from reading early novels written by women that nationalist struggles were then being waged in African minds and on African land. Early female writers' representation of politics rarely involved explicitly nationalist or syndicalist themes. Partly for this reason, writing by women has been considered apolitical—which means concerned only with domestic issues—and certainly not part of the national narrative. Even inquiring about female writers' relation to politics has been difficult within African literary studies because of a scholarly environment that historically

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has been inhospitable to feminism, rejecting it as a European import. Critics are far less openly dismissive now than they were fifteen or twenty years ago, but their history of dismissal has left a defensive critical legacy: feminist readers of African literature have tended to celebrate writing by women simply because they give voice to feminine subjectivity.⁵ My study grows out of a larger question: at a time when novels written by men were understood to be deeply involved in the project of anticolonial nationalism, why were novels written by women understood to be apolitical? In sketching a broad literary history, I attempt some answers. After briefly outlining a context for why feminists have not rigorously scrutinized women's writing in public political terms, I turn my attention to how such a scrutiny might take shape.

It was not only women's novels that were marginalized in nationalism's schemes for regulating the field of African writing and distributing cultural capital within it. Novels published by men as late as the 1930s, but before anticolonial sentiment reached its height in western and southern Africa, were also excluded from the consolidating canon of African novels. Critical attention by and large has focused on a narrow conception of resistance, and literary criticism has not yet fully acknowledged that African independence struggles did not gain momentum until after the Second World War. Not until after that set of global wars was settled did a francophone black cultural nationalism make itself heard, which is precisely what happened in the case of Négritude. One of Négritude's tenets involved the claim to moral superiority over whites precisely because Africans did not engage in the forms of warfare and civilian slaughter that became visible after the war.

With a few exceptions, novelists who published before Négritude have been obscured by mid-twentieth-century genealogies constructed by both readers and critics, or if they have been noted, their importance has diminished, which Alain Ricard ably illustrates in *The Languages and Literatures of Africa* (2004). This fate befell Amos Tutuola, whose writing did not conform to the resistance model of cultural nationalism. Attention to these early novels highlights the stakes for Africans of both genders entering an emerging public sphere of novelistic writing. Moreover, African literary criticism,

which defined itself as a field in the 1960s, has tended to read and represent itself instrumentally rather than for an aesthetic sensibility, and anticolonial nationalism has shaped that political thrust.

Well before the publication of *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe 1958), *L'enfant noir* (Laye 1953), or *Une vie de boy* (Oyono 1958), several writers from different parts of the continent published variously successful long narratives with anticolonial content. Yet until the 1980s, when europhone African literature began to be incorporated more fully into the body of world literature, many of these writers had not been acknowledged as part of African literary history by critics and scholars. One of the most remarkable of these lacunae is Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), one of the earliest anglophone African novels. Its title is now fairly well known, but it remains rarely taught outside specialized courses in southern African studies, and until very recently, it was not much written about, despite Plaatje's importance as a co-founder of what became the African National Congress. A still earlier novel is *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) by the Sierra Leonean Joseph Caseley-Hayford.⁶ The Senegalese writer Ousmane Socé published *Karim: Roman sénégalais* in 1935 (translated into English in 1938) and the Nigerian Daniel Fagunwa published his first novel, *Ogboju ode ninu igbo irunmale*, in Yoruba a few years later (translated by Wole Soyinka as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* [Fagunwa 1968]).⁷ None of these early authors, not even Plaatje, appears in Gerald Moore's canon-shaping work of literary criticism, *Seven African Writers* (1962), or in his subsequently revised and expanded version, *Twelve African Writers* (1980).

Négritude, the first major black cultural nationalist literary movement, exerted a powerful influence on African belles-lettres of the 1940s and '50s, although poetry was its important genre. As a literary movement, Négritude is understood to have been assimilated into French literary culture through the publication of the enormously successful *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948), edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor and prefaced by Jean-Paul Sartre's essay "Orphée Noir." The book's translation into English meant that anglophone Africans, particularly Nigerians and Ghanaians, could be energized by its aesthetic and political spirit.⁸ By the 1950s, the novel had displaced poetry as the dominant genre even in francophone Africa. Although Laye, Oyono, and Mongo Beti were

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embraced early on for their aesthetic sensibility, as well as for their politics, critics did not link their work to earlier literary forays. I know of no scholarship, for example, that places any of the three writers in relation to Socé's *Karim*, a novel that explores the theme of assimilation. And with the notable exception of Abiola Irele, I know of no scholarship that juxtaposes *Karim* to Cheikh Hamidou Kane's lyrical and much admired novel *L'aventure ambiguë* (1962), which also explores assimilation through the protagonist's struggle between religious tradition and faith, on the one hand, and his experience of cultural change within the secular world, on the other.

Only now are critics of African literature beginning to elaborate the connections between these earlier authors and the traditions that emerged shortly after independence. By the 1980s, Fagunwa had become known to those not fluent in Yoruba, and *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons* is now read in English translation alongside works by Tutuola, Soyinka, and Ben Okri.⁹ Fagunwa published *Forest* in 1938; Tutuola, the celebrated *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* in 1952; and Cyprian Ekwensi, *People of the City* in 1954. Nevertheless, it is Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* that became the single novel read by those who knew nothing about African literature; it also became the novel that scholars of African literature returned to again and again. C. L. Innes bestowed upon Achebe the honorific "father" of African fiction, and Simon Gikandi elaborated her claim that *Things Fall Apart* performs a certain literary work that makes it the first African novel. Gikandi says that Achebe imagines a collective vision from within a colonial prism and writes a strong narrative of the colonial drama that also projects itself into a future of national independence.

Achebe is immensely important to African literature as the author of several major novels and books of criticism—and, perhaps more important, for his founding editorship of the Heinemann African Writers Series. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, *Things Fall Apart* has not formally influenced any other novel—indeed, any other work of literature—as has, for example, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.¹⁰ Tutuola's relation to a consolidating West African canon has been clearly established through genealogical readings, first, and most important, by Achebe himself in an essay delivered at the University of Ibadan.¹¹ Later, and perhaps more famously, this was expressed by Irele, and

some twenty-five years yet later, it was elaborated on by Ato Quayson, who linked Tutuola to the more recent writing of Ben Okri. In this respect, *Things Fall Apart* is unlike *Efuru* (1963), and Achebe unlike Flora Nwapa, the first female Nigerian novelist. Nwapa's influence on Buchi Emecheta is explicitly thematized by Emecheta in what remains the younger writer's most famous novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). The relations between the two may seem obvious today, but they were not in 1990 when I first published an essay outlining the influence Nwapa had on Emecheta.¹²

It has become increasingly clear—within the europhone tradition, at least—that the novels that have become important are those that were read as, and thus performed the function of, national narratives. However, not all political novels were visibly nationalist in their anticolonialism; not all, therefore, were easily recuperated for a national(ist) tradition. Tutuola serves as one example, illustrating an indigenous West African magical realism before the popularity of the Latin American Boom.¹³ Despite, or perhaps because of, his writing of non-realist prose, Tutuola has only recently secured a place in the pantheon of midcentury African writers. As the drive to read literature on behalf of an orthodox nationalism abated somewhat, and the wish to read against realism understood as transparent markedly increased, Tutuola's literary stock has soared since the 1980s, and anti-mimeticist writing, such as that by Okri, Yvonne Vera, Sony Labou Tansi, Dambudzo Marechera, and others, have captured the attention of the current generation of literary scholars of Africa.¹⁴

By 1980, shortly before the publication of Moore's restatement of the field in *Twelve African Writers*, a volume of criticism that, unsurprisingly, does not include any female authors, critics of African literature had established a nationalist aesthetic around anticolonial resistance. They had little imaginative space for female writers who were less interested in decolonization and national sovereignty than in "feminine questions." As time passed and gender became increasingly better received as a political category, female African writers were reviewed and written about more and, by the mid-1980s, were increasingly added to course syllabi and reading lists.¹⁵ New entrants to the public space shaped by orthodox nationalism, early female novelists such as Nwapa and Grace Ogot had been invisible as writers, and they con-

tinued to be illegible as political writers. The regulative mechanism of this aesthetic has become more visible recently, and by attending to the public–private divide that frequently has shaped our understanding of women’s writing, I hope we may begin to read for the complex, hesitant, and often ambivalent mix of political and cultural expression in which the first female novelists composed their first works. A reading structured along the axis of micro-politics and macro-politics makes visible a greater conversation between male and female writers wherein they address concerns raised by each other, regardless of gender.¹⁶

Amílcar Cabral and Mariama Bâ speak in very different, and differently helpful, ways to the questions I have raised. I quote from both and discuss their value for the sort of literary study I propose. In “Identity and Dignity in the Context of the National Liberation Struggle” (1973), Cabral, a revolutionary Marxist intellectual from Guinea-Bissau, takes a radically teleological approach to imperialism, claiming that despite its violence, imperialism ultimately benefited those who underwent it. Cabral gave this talk in English to the historically black student population of Lincoln University near Oxford, Pennsylvania, despite the fact that English was his second language (possibly his third) after Portuguese:

It is not to defend imperialist domination to recognize that it gave new nations to the world, the dimensions of which it reduced and that it revealed new stages of development in human sciences in spite of or because of the prejudices, the discrimination and the crimes which it occasioned, it contributed to a deeper knowledge of humanity as a moving whole, as a unity in the complex diversity of the characteristics of development. (Cabral 1973, 58)

Cabral said in 1970 what we in the early twenty-first century all know: that imperialism brought many of the world’s inhabitants closer and made them known to one another; that imperialism was produced by and, in turn, reproduced a form of internationalism and knowledge production; in effect, that imperialism originated what we now call global capitalism or globalization. The most prominent connection between imperialism and early capitalism in Africa is the Atlantic

slave trade, a mass movement of people that changed the landscapes, cultures, and economies of most of the world. The slave trade did not lead to the immediate colonial conquest of Africa, although it was made possible by and, in turn, exacerbated internecine African warring. Slavery and local warfare together were responsible for the destruction of human life and waste of incalculable human potential.

Trade in slaves allowed Britain, France, Spain, and the Netherlands to compete with—and, in the case of Britain and France, to surpass—Portugal in establishing toeholds on the continent. Africa was not formally carved up and its spoils were not divided between European colonial powers until the late period of imperialism, at the Berlin Conference of 1885. While formal colonialism does not have a long historical presence in Africa, as it did in much of South and Southeast Asia or Latin America, the transatlantic, transnational practice of African slavery, begun in the sixteenth century, sharpened and entrenched racial hierarchies and contributed to Britain's and France's newly asserted sense of themselves as imperial powers. Trade in human flesh bound racial difference to the consolidation of commodity relations. Cabral's language resembles that of the youthful Marx, who in 1848 sweepingly condensed description and prescription into a single statement and attributed to the bourgeois villain of his tale greater agency than he did the proletarian protagonist. Marx "grasps the long-range dynamics at work behind and beyond what he actually sees, so that if one sentence of the *Manifesto* gives us the capitalism of 1848 [as established by the creative and dynamic bourgeoisie] the very next one gives us an image of what was yet to be," says Aijaz Ahmad (1999, 39) in his introduction to a special anniversary Indian edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx's logic, some of which we hear echoed in Cabral, is that the economic and technological expansion of capitalism ultimately advances all of humanity, albeit at a far greater cost to some. For Cabral, imperialism appears as historically necessary as capitalism is for Marx. It ushers in a new stage of the life process, "reveals new stages of human understanding," seems to be an inherent part of the modern world and therefore, one of the stages humanity passes through to arrive at a non-racialized socialist world. I suggest that, although the novel is no more indigenous to Africa, as part of the imperialist enterprise it, too, constitutes part of the larger

global contribution to a “deeper knowledge of humanity as a moving whole.”

Bâ, one of the most important francophone female writers and certainly the most famous female Senegalese writer, focuses on similar concerns differently. In one of the very few interviews she gave during her short life, Bâ spoke as a woman and a Muslim about the vexed relation of modern educated women to Islam. Her perspective was also teleological. Unlike Cabral, who spoke on behalf of African socialism, her primary commitment was to the individual African woman, particularly the woman who wants to develop her abilities fully. Bâ was much concerned with the relation between the gifted woman and her more ordinary compatriots:

In all cultures, the woman who formulates her own claims or who protests against her situation is given the cold shoulder. If the woman who expresses herself orally is already labeled in a special way, the women who dare fix their thoughts for eternity are criticized all the more. Thus women are still hardly represented among African writers. And yet they have so much to say and write about. . . . The woman writer in Africa has a special task, she has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice. . . . We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. (quoted in Schipper 1987, 36)¹⁷

Individual advancement is incompatible with culturally approved feminine behavior, noted Bâ unhappily, signaling an issue of increasing importance to the “New Woman” of independent Africa. Her statement stands as an early and direct riposte to the deeply gendered iconography of decolonizing nationalism, and, in particular, that of “Femme noire,” an early and famous poem by her compatriot and fellow author Léopold Senghor. More important, Bâ recognized and named the topic of women’s representational burden—one that has come to haunt African and, indeed, Third World or Global South feminist discourse as a whole. As a progressive African woman, Bâ was called on to stand for as well as to write about all African women (“the position of women in Africa in all its aspects”), thereby invoking both aspects of what has been meant by the word “representa-

tion.” Judith Butler neatly sums up the difference between the two notions of representation I invoke. The first meaning is that of political function, wherein it “seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects”; the second, that of its linguistic function, wherein language “is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women” (Butler 1990, 1). The tension between representation as a legal-political phenomenon and representation as a semiotic phenomenon undergirds Bâ’s comments, as well as those of other female authors.¹⁸

I have juxtaposed Cabral and Bâ to establish a conversation between decolonizing nationalism and gender politics as they bear on African literary history. The different tendencies, interests, and agendas Bâ and Cabral bring to this project are echoed in the work of Florence Stratton and Olakunle George, two contemporary scholars of African literature who are concerned with acknowledging literary genealogies and the politics of representation. In general terms, Stratton and George elaborate and extend a set of thoughts that the earlier intellectuals explored in the 1960s and 1970s: the relation of nationalism to Marxism; the longstanding idea that African cultures are best apprehended as in a state of perpetual tension between tradition and modernity, a tension that dominates modern self-understanding; the place of education, that instrument of self-advancement and form of alienation from the collective; and, perhaps most important, the relation of the public and private spheres to each other, and particularly to gender. Here Stratton and George each stand for diverging opinions on the question of representing Africa and things African. Both benefit from a reading through the term “reflectionism.” Stratton’s practice of thematic reading on behalf of feminism leaves little room for attention to form, nuance, or contradiction. George’s reaction to the tendency to read African literature as unmediated drives him to emphasize mediation in the artistic interpretation of literature and to diminish attention to sheer content.

The rise of the anglophone novel to which Stratton devotes most of her attention in her pathbreaking *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) was significantly shaped by missionary activity, such as that of the Church of Scotland, which dedicated itself to the education of young men above young women. The

church's educational agenda put men in "the world" and women in "the home"; it did this despite the fact that, historically in most of Africa, women successfully and appropriately worked in public.¹⁹ The consequences of missionaries' good intentions and local patriarchy have meant more limited access to higher education for women. Stratton is aware of the relation of extra-literary factors such as who writes and what each writes about. Nevertheless, her reading method is primarily normative. Through a set of intertextual readings Stratton concludes that a strongly and simply configured *topos* of gender runs through the literature of decolonization written by men. Women are celebrated or victimized, adored or abused; they are Mother Africa, an essential figure of nurturance, or they stand as prostitutes, figures who traffic in their own bodies and thus represent one of the nightmares of modernity. Stratton's insight, broadly configured in metaphorical terms, has captured an important psychodynamic of male-identified cultural nationalism: its need for an idealized mother, as well as its fear of a self-commodifying female figure run amok in modernity.²⁰ These figures arise from men's projection of their own sense of anxiety or degradation, and, as I extend and elaborate on Stratton's scholarship, I reveal an underside to the celebration of masculine agency. Unfortunately, Stratton also seems to assume that there is a single, correct way to represent women; that literature does—or should—accurately reflect the lives of African men and women; and that the measure of a work therefore lies in the truthfulness of its representation. Accuracy is an unspoken standard that she brings to bear against male writers, and, as one might expect, all of them fail in some way. Stratton's critique of Achebe's depiction of women in *Things Fall Apart* is one example. Although she claims that the priestess, Chielo, is part of Achebe's depiction of the "great depth and value and beauty of African cultures," Stratton interprets the witch's abduction of Ezinma as Achebe's intimation that "women are incapable of exercising power responsibly" (Stratton 1994, 31). The question of accurate representation is posed of few, if any, of the female writers. Moreover, Stratton's book is uninterested in the formal properties that constitute a text's literariness, for to take up that perspective seriously would mean acknowledging that literature is a cultural product, an act of representation with mediation at its heart.

Telling the story of a prostitute, one might argue, could produce a sympathetic rather than an alienated response in the reader about a woman in the sex–gender system, depending on the manner in which the story is told.²¹ By focusing on vexed figurations of the feminine, Stratton’s work clears conceptual space in which we may take up the consequences of women’s engagement with modernity. For example, the figure of Mother Africa, which Bâ rejects so resoundingly, Stratton turns into a measuring stick by which to examine the gendered anxieties that accompany cultural nationalism’s commitment to modernity. Extending the types of questions Stratton poses, I extrapolate to historical authors the complexities of beginning to publish—itsself an act that ended the tradition of women’s literary and publishing silence. I do this by examining the representation of women in literature by women, an examination that constitutes the bulk of this book. Olakunle George engages both cultural nationalism and the question of African representation itself. Postcolonial theory, he argues, does not adequately speak to the colonized and the African subject. In fact, some strands of postcolonial theory “stand in the way of productive dialogue with a discursive tradition like African letters” and as such is, according to post-structuralism’s own logic, “self-contradictory” (George 2003, 188). Anglo-American critical theory, especially when read in historical relation to cultural nationalism, illustrates that nativists (George’s term for cultural nationalists) were not opposed to modernity and in favor of a simple or monolithic Tradition; rather, they participated in the formation of their own modernity. George makes a persuasive argument through interpretation of the artistic work of Fagunwa and Soyinka that Africans have already named themselves in relation to the rest of the modern world.

George seeks to address critical conceptual limits through these readings, some of which bear on the manner in which representation is perceived. The strength of his argument lies in its theoretical claims, which are substantiated through readings of mid- to late-twentieth-century Nigerian literature. As George traces the idea, reflectionism is inadequate, which puts him on the other side of the looking glass from Stratton. Criticizing reflectionism, he calls it “one of the most resilient tendencies” in modern attitudes to literary depictions of the world. For him reflectionism “assume[s that it is] . . . a representation of

reality in language that can (or should) strive to approximate that reality without ‘inaccuracies’ or ‘distortions’” (George 2003, 188–89).²² While he refuses to ignore the real-world politics that give rise to the desires for what reflection seeks to address, George is too committed to exposing the gap between the social and the representative to engage the relation of the aesthetic to the cognitive, which realism also involves.

George does once speak to reflectionism in a manner that makes it more than mere weak literary criticism, and in that one moment he suggests it might have analytic value. In discussing Achebe’s concept of art, he juxtaposes reflection to what he calls an “art for art’s sake” approach to literature. In so doing, he proposes a complex reading of Achebe’s writing: “What Achebe demonstrates here is at once an acceptance of a modern Western apprehension of the role of literature in society, and a rejection of part of it. Achebe reveals a traditional (reflectionist) attitude to literary representation even as he rejects another traditional (aestheticist, ‘art-for-art’s-sake’) view” (George 2003, 86). Reflectionism remains both an important and a vexed question.

Within literary critical discourse in general, the charge of reflectionism, part of the larger conversation about realism, often forms part of a critique of doctrinaire Marxism. In this context, it is treated as a crude optic that assumes an unmediated relation between the work of art and the world it represents. This critique is often made against the work of Georg Lukács, the Hungarian philosopher and most important Marxist advocate of literary realism. Whether or not one believes it is fair to call Lukács a reflectionist, George does not deploy the term “reflection” as systematically as Lukács does. He shows no hostility towards Lukács himself. Moreover, he seems to mean something simpler in his renunciation of the term: that African literature does not or cannot perform sociology or anthropology and that American students who believe they might fully know Africa by reading African literature are deluding themselves.

To elaborate the question of reflection that haunts criticism of the African novel, I turn to the ways by which one might use or understand the more richly complex term “mimesis.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines “mimesis” as “the imitation, or representa-

tion, of aspects of the sensible world, especially human actions, in literature and art.” At the first level of analysis, mimesis consists of the simple imitation or mirroring of the thing itself; this definition does not account for mediation or difference between world and art, between object depicted and the thing itself. At a second level, however, mimesis consists of an act of representation rather than reflection, a position that acknowledges the mediation that always inserts itself between art and object and thereby allows for mediation. This is the definition that Aristotle puts forth in *Poetics*. Because it is not formulated around the standard of accuracy, mimesis as representation differs from mimesis as imitation. Mimesis as representation understands that all art, all symbolization, produces a gap between sign and object. Remaining at the second level of analysis, one might examine each art work for similarity or difference from the object it seeks to depict; this approach understands the representation to be a thing in itself and not a mere distortion.

There is yet another, third, level by which one might understand representation, one that moves still further away from the question of accuracy. Here we perceive mimesis as the art of giving form, or the very process of representation itself. Through this understanding of mimesis, we can give serious thought to the manner or type of representation that, in novels, we would call genres, figuration, or modes of narration. In so doing, we encounter the means by which a work of art impresses itself as realist or antirealist. Finally, the representation of a thing in the world produces some form of change in the world itself. Once something has been represented in words or visual images, the world has been altered or transformed, for now the object represented exists alongside the representation, the object, and some form of itself that is also not itself.

In figure 1, a photograph taken in 1960 by Marilyn Silverstone, a young Lagosian boy looks at himself in a funhouse mirror, called “magic mirrors.” The action takes place during the celebrations that accompanied Nigerian independence. The image of the boy in the mirror is elongated and obviously distorted. Although we see him reflected in the mirror, the shape and size of his reflected face is very different from the back of the head as captured by the camera alone, which presumably is the viewing eye. The mirror also shows us two

boys, only one of whom can be seen just through the camera's eye. The photograph's angle captures in the same mirror the reflection of an older, uniformed male standing behind the two boys. The distortion does not hide his uniform—a hat, khaki shorts, and light-colored shoes. Though older than the boys, he is not a full adult but a teenager, presumably a uniformed Boy Scout and, if so, an example of Robert Baden-Powell's colonial legacy to the continent.²³ This young man appears to be carrying a long instrument, not a gun but probably a stick. Without the mirror, the Scout is not visible at all; he exists for the viewer only in the mirror's reflection, though in the mirror he looms larger than anyone else. Presumably, at the moment the photo was taken he stood directly behind the boys and out of view of the camera. The second boy, like the teenage Scout, is visible only in the mirror. The image in the funhouse mirror does indeed represent a reality: that of the boy himself, as well as that of his companion and the Boy Scout. And last, though certainly not least, it represents the potential for eros. The boy most visible to the camera clutches an armload of books and papers that we see more clearly through the reflected distortion of the mirror. One of the books is a paperback that, on closer inspection, reveals a blonde woman of European origin on the front cover.²⁴

The relation of the mirror to the viewer's perspective allows for the glass to represent more than is available to the naked eye alone, which in this instance is the camera's eye. The angle at which the viewer sees the youngster suggests that there is knowledge in the representation that is not a mere duplication. My discussion here of interpretive practices makes the mirror a metaphor for the work of art, and, conversely, it makes the camera a "neutral" stand-in for the naked human eye. This interpretation heightens the perspective of the mirror's reflection. It stands for Art and for Art's relation to reality. The mirror can cast more light on a given situation than can the angle of the camera alone. A reading of the photo along these lines for African literature on the eve of independence might see in the boy an allegory of the youthful nation eager to exert itself under its own power. Pursuing the allegory, the contorted face, the hat (and the possible weapon) of the Scout in uniform would suggest the strongmen yet to come to power. The image as a whole does not merely duplicate the



Young Nigerian boys in Lagos amusing themselves
in “magic mirrors” at a fair during independence celebrations.
Photograph by Marilyn Silverstone, bw Photographe, Magnum Photos.

image of the boy looking at himself, a perspective the camera alone offers. The image shows us an African (or Nigerian) present and future in one image, and it thus serves as an excellent example of the value of the wish to speak to reality—along with the belief that there is no reality without representation, even though representation is always mediated.

Stratton and George differently illustrate the limits of polemic or culturally blind one-sidedness that I seek to move beyond. Stratton expects a work of literature to mirror accurately and on behalf of African feminism. Against her wholly thematic readings, I assert the importance of attention to form, to the value of literature's ability to lie on behalf of a greater truth. Against George's more subtle anti-reflectionism, I assert substance or attention to content, the claim that much literary writing makes to the real.

According to Lukács, art becomes most powerful when it represents the momentous historical forces at work at a particular time. The importance and value of great art lies in its representation of the important causes and turning points in history, in making visible the means by which human beings make their history. I take from Lukács the notion that the novel, like other literary genres, comes about and exists to solve a social problem. Exploring a literary text for its less obvious meanings and resolution of contradictions gives the reader insight into a historically specific social problematic.²⁵

To avoid redundancy, from now on I will assume that the reader is aware that African narrative prose and African authors are the primary subjects of this book. I no longer qualify each text or tendency with the adjective "African." When comparing things European, Latin American, or Asian to things African, however, I will, of course, be as precise as needed.

Male novelists have customarily told their tales in allegories of colonial resistance or national consolidation—or have been understood to do so—and like their female counterparts, they have often used the family as sign of the body politic. These national allegories have either unselfconsciously put themselves forward or have been interpreted as allegorical in the narrow sense, wherein the literal meaning becomes subsumed into the figural. The literal or less im-

portant entity, such as woman, child, or family, thereby necessarily stands as part of the larger, national one. Occasionally, as with Laye's *L'enfant noir*, this allegory functions as straightforward idealization. In *Things Fall Apart*, where the family is not quite so romanticized, the local with all its troubles disappears into the larger and more important national.²⁶ Female writers, themselves excluded from the hierarchies of national politics and historically perceived as unable to engage nationalist and feminist politics simultaneously, have often deployed one fiction to expose another. To invert a cliché, in the narratives of many African female writers, the family becomes the nation writ small.

The tendency of female novelists to tell domestic stories historically has gone hand in hand with nationalism's confirmation of a separate "domestic sphere." As a result of the dominance of nationalist reading paradigms, readers have not been alert to either the literal or the allegorical relations between private and public spheres and forms of power in their fiction. There are good reasons that we can expect to find precisely these relations in these novels. As I have suggested, Marxism and feminism alike have emphasized the continuities and interchanges between public and private life: that domestic labor is part of the labor of a collectivity, for instance; that women's taking it on makes possible a certain kind of public participation for the men who are freed of it; and that patriarchal authority within a family can underpin a form of patriarchal authority practiced in the public sphere, or, alternatively, that it might serve as compensation for the public disenfranchisement of a group of men. If one comes to these novels by women with this understanding of the necessary implication of the domestic in the public, and with a knowledge of the highly allegorical texts that dominated the literary scene into and out of which these women wrote, then one may better perceive how domestic life functions both literally and allegorically in relation to nationalism.

History and theory written from the perspective and in the interest of the formerly colonized or developing world has a complex relation to the intellectual material of the First World of the colonizers, from which it takes some of its intellectual tools and against which it also struggles. In the introduction to *Recasting Women*, a groundbreaking collection of essays on feminist historiography in India, Kumkum

Sangari and Sudesh Vaid make clear the intellectual and political stakes of their work:

Overarching theoretical formulations are helpful and necessary to undertake any work but they need constant testing and overhauling by historically and materially specific studies of patriarchal practice, social regulation and cultural production. . . . We are not making a plea for theoretical eclecticism or 'pluralism' but for flexibility within a field which is still being defined. (Sangari and Vaid 1990, 3)

Sangari and Vaid object not to theory as such but to a level of abstraction or generalization that loses sight of the fact that the data and paradigms under discussion do not have a longstanding scholarly tradition of debate and therefore are vulnerable to misreading. My intent, similarly, is to test and overhaul a broadly outlined literary history and theory against specific textual analyses of europhone African literature, a field similarly in the process of establishing itself. It may appear contradictory, even counterproductive, to assert theoretical flexibility, on the one hand, and discuss a notion of allegoresis, or reading strategies shaped in dialogue with the work of Fredric Jameson, on the other. In the next few pages, I illustrate the historical, political, and *literary* value of such a reading. Allegory is like all other figures of speech in that it refers simultaneously to two meanings for the same set of literary features. M. H. Abrams (1981, 4) defines "allegory" succinctly as a form in which "the agents and action are contrived to make coherent sense on the 'literal,' or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts and events." Tzvetan Todorov declares that "for some [scholars of allegory] the first meaning must disappear, while others require that the two be present together." Aligning himself with the camp wherein the vehicle disappears into the tenor, Todorov insists that the allegorical meaning not be the result of an interpretive act but inherent in the text: "this double meaning is indicated in the work in an *explicit* fashion; it does not proceed from the reader's interpretation (whether arbitrary or not)." Talal Asad (1986) offers another perspective by stating that "allegories are secured . . . by *teaching* people to read in certain ways."²⁷ Allegorical reading is culturally and historically bound. James Clifford suggests that there is no way to separate the

essential from the allegorical. I suspect that most of us would claim that allegories are neither intrinsic nor natural but learned, and that our ability to perceive them has much to do with systems of education and literacy. They are legible according to how readers have learned to make sense of them. There is good reason to imagine that the context of African nationalism and the reception tradition of allegory in men's novels together create an interpretive opening for the reading of nationalist allegory in the women's novels. What follows via my extended discussion of two different works by Fredric Jameson is an argument for developing a political literacy about works to which we have hitherto been blind.

Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986) is one of the more important and controversial essays on the topic of decolonization and literature to have been published in the past three decades. His sweeping interpretive paradigm for reading the artistic writing produced in formerly colonized countries provoked a scandal when first published, and rightfully so. As several critics have pointed out, for all its erudition and insight, the essay contains many wrongheaded assumptions, the most objectionable being that narratives from the Third World always contain within them a national allegory. However one might object to some of Jameson's assertions, the fact remains that more than twenty years after its publication the essay reveals itself to have been prescient in its understanding of the field of "postcolonial studies," which was just beginning to make its mark in the American academy. An outpouring of the study of these literatures has taken place in the intervening years, much of it focused precisely on the national allegory Jameson outlined and celebrated in 1986. We might understand this critical reception in two ways. One would be to agree that nationalism does in fact play a significant role in the imaginative literature of decolonization. The second is that scholars of this literature have themselves been limited in their ability to perceive other metaphors of collectivity or political organization and so have overly relied on a nationalism-individualism binary. Both readings are useful here, as I illustrate.

Jameson's essay is valuable for several reasons. First, and most important, it sympathetically represents the historical investment in nationalism as part and parcel of the decolonizing enterprise. From

the “foundational fictions” of pre-independence Latin America to the fictions of disillusionment and its subgenre of novels of dictatorship in Africa and Latin America, the category of the national has proved to be a rich one for the literature of decolonization. Jameson’s work is valuable also because here and elsewhere he seeks to theorize realism as something more than an outmoded aesthetic phase before modernism became aware of the market.²⁸ His project of cognitive mapping suggests a renewal in the First World of the project of realism.²⁹ And realism, after all, is the narrative mode in which (europhone) artistic texts from Africa, Asia, and Latin America continue to be most frequently written. Nevertheless, so preoccupied is he with discovering a way out of the seduction and paralysis of postmodernism that Jameson is willing to homogenize what he calls the Third World, making the entity into a single, coherent ground from which to resist the First World. His idealization runs the risk of reducing the Third World to a monolith rather than recognize it as a cluster of sites of resistance and co-optation. Worse yet, he fails to understand its literature as ambivalent, conservative, or, indeed, mediated in any way.

The novels I examine in *The Nation Writ Small* are particularly well suited to the dialogue with Jameson because, on the one hand, as literature from the African continent, they form a subset of the body of texts used to make the original theoretical assertions in “Third World Literature.” (Recall that Sembène figures prominently in Jameson’s essay.)³⁰ They ultimately uphold his claim that the category of the nation underpins many—though I say, not all—artistic texts from the Third World. On the other hand, most are written by women, and all help me articulate a feminist politics of reading. Capitalist culture imposes a radical split between public and private, politics and poetics. Jameson suggests that in the Third World, the relations of those spheres to each other function in a manner “wholly different” from those in the West or First World; moreover, he continues, though not repaired, the breach is fictionally reconciled in the Third World. This claim is the basis for his controversial assertions that Third World novels are inherently allegorical and that the allegory is always national. The claim leads him to the polemical though untenable assertion that for the Third World—though apparently for no one else—the national allegory functions as a passage between the two spheres:

All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel. Let me try to state this in a grossly oversimplified way: one of the determinants of capitalist culture, that is, the culture of the western realist and modernist novel, is a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes. . . . Our numerous theoretical attempts to overcome this great split only reconfirm its existence and its shaping power over our individual and collective lives. . . . I will argue that, although we may retain for convenience and for analysis such categories as the subjective and the public or political, the relations between them are wholly different in third-world culture. Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.* (Jameson 1986, 69)

First, there is much here to explore at the level of the political. This polemical passage contains much of what is central to the problem, as well as the value, of Jameson's enterprise. Critics have responded to him by pointing out that it illustrates Jameson's representation of the Third World as wholly other than the First World and as marked by belatedness. They are correct to do so, since that is what the quotation rather baldly expresses. I submit, however, that the impulse behind this rhetorical move is one of wrongheaded idealization and willful blindness rather than intended indignity. Exploring the hows and whys of idealization proves far more productive in understanding Jameson's value, as well as his limits, as a fellow traveler. It also constitutes the first step in establishing a national allegory sympathetic to feminism in Africa.

Jameson is willing to romanticize the Third World, representing it as a unitary critical perspective, even as a possible site from which to

cognize and act on resistance. His preoccupation with a way out of the seduction of postmodernism arises from the hopeful assumption that the cultural condition of postmodernism exists only in the First World. Because it is combined with his powerful hope that the industrially underdeveloped world has not (yet) experienced postmodernism, Jameson's assumption requires that the Third World be conceptually removed from its historical relation to capitalism. The essay must therefore shuttle between two positions: either the Third World never experienced the violent schism of public from private, or having experienced it, it was afterward able to suture those realms by virtue of its experience with decolonization. (Jameson appears to believe in the force or value of decolonization as suture, a gesture of great idealism on his part. Those who have objected to his essay see it as placing the Third World in the realm outside of history.) It may be of interest to note that Jameson considered the Third World essay a "pendant," or a supplement, to his work on postmodernism. In economic and political terms, Jameson recognizes that the Third World has been penetrated by capitalism. However, he does not seem to acknowledge capitalist penetration at the level of culture or structures of feeling.

Second, in literary terms, Jameson saves the personal for the political by reading the private (or personal) as a necessary and exclusive allegory of the public, by focusing on the libidinal or private realm of Third World fiction in literary terms. In so doing, he repeats in formal terms the same gesture made by many theorists of allegory: making the first meaning (or signifier) disappear in favor of the second meaning (or signified). This allegorical mode of reading is too simple and ahistorical, closer to Todorov than to Asad. Jameson's claim that the relation between private and public spheres is differently configured in the various nations and cultures subjugated under imperialism may well be true. Partha Chatterjee's discussion in *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) of how gender serves as the fulcrum conjoining and keeping separate the binaries of colonizer–colonized and tradition–modernity in nineteenth-century Bengal might even serve Jameson as an example. However, because of his desire for an uncontaminated space of resistance, the libidinal that Jameson describes can *only* serve as a vehicle of illumination, in other words, metaphor of the public ("*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the*

embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society”). It can therefore never narrate a politics of its own.

Ahmad, Jameson’s first, harshest, and still most instructive critic on this particular essay, objects to what he considers Jameson’s enshrining of nationalism, which, Ahmad correctly points out, is only one among many political or cultural formations in the wake of decolonization. Jameson, he complains, ignores other, frequently more progressive social practices or movements in his rush to celebrate the national imaginary. Moreover, Ahmad perceptively notes a gesture Jameson makes in his reading of aesthetic forms within political terms, a gesture made only in relation to the Third World, so invested is he in a utopian space not saturated by the market relations of modernism and postmodernism and, therefore, so uncomplicated does he believe Third World literature to be. Ahmad is insightful about Jameson’s flaws, and I often take my cue from him. His particular commitment to internationalism and to a global Marxism, however, blinds him to the value of Jameson’s contribution to the developing literary histories of formerly colonized zones, including that of Africa. I begin with what Ahmad forgets: that nationalism did, and in some cases still does, haunt the imagination of writers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America and therefore offers one way, and an important way, to thematize literary history.³¹

One such example of a literary history with a central place for allegory might be found in *Foundational Fictions* (1991), in which Doris Sommer argues that reading historically for the national allegory in nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Latin American novels makes visible the resolution through marriage of the competing interests of white creoles, blacks, native Indians, and mestizos, those different populations who had to be represented collectively as the nations of Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina, and others.

Political tensions between races and classes are translated into the love plot; competition is displaced into eroticism. For Sommer, romance refers to both theme (courtly love) and genre (prose narrative about heroic characters). At the level of theme, Romance results in sanctioned reproduction, and at the level of form, it proleptically gives rise to the Boom—in other words, to magical realism, the particular form of the novel for which Latin American became famous. Sommer’s historically particular attention allows us to notice that

novels from Africa and Latin America are often so explicitly national-allegorical as to bear as title the name of a woman who stands as the figure of the nation. Just a few of the many Latin American examples include *Amalia* (1815), by José Marmol of Argentina; the extremely popular novel *María* (1867), by Jorge Isaacs of Colombia; and *Doña Barbara* (1929), by Romulo Gallegos, who later became president of Venezuela. All are foundational fictions to which Sommer gives significant attention and, when read together, help prove her thesis about literary problem solving. *Aura*, by Carlos Fuentes of Mexico, published in 1962, during the Boom's heyday, self-consciously plays on the allegory of fecund or barren woman as nation. The most famous North African novel that openly make of its eponymous female character a woman as allegory of the nation is *Nedjma* (1956), by Kateb Yacine of Algeria. Although *Bones* (1988), by Chenjerai Hove of Zimbabwe, does not bear the name of a female character, its title refers to the remains of its maternal heroine, Marita, a sacrificial mother of the nation. *Qui se souvient de la mer* (1962), by Mohammed Dib of Algeria, puns on the relation between mother and land and, here, land's synechdochal relation to ocean. And *The Home and the World* (1915), by Rabindranath Tagore of India, thematically binds the nationalist struggle to the emergence of the "New Woman" of Bengal. Feminine first names often serve as titles for these novels; more important, the female main characters are usually thinly individuated and saturated with symbolic value.³²

As far as African novels are concerned, Jameson's paradigm is not entirely unproductive, for it seems ideally suited to elucidating the texts of Marxists whose notion of History is untroubled by the dialectics of public and private, such as that of the later narrative fiction of the Kenyan Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Ngugi's vaunted representation of women, particularly in *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1980) come to mind. Though sexually used or abused, his female characters rarely articulate their suffering on a personal or subjective level. The grief they experience is not so much their own—that is, individualized—as it is collective; it points to a bigger story of violence. Simultaneous exploration of a gendered or sexual violence with the relation of that violence to that perpetuated by the state, whether native or colonial, simply does not appear in Ngugi's literary formula-

tions. Similarly, the allegorical form Jameson proposes for the Third World requires that the allegory be inherent in the text and not produced as an interpretive act. This strict one-to-one correspondence between tenor and vehicle allows his presumed audience of parochial American readers no room to learn the various forms of legibility or meaning-making a text produces, or, more importantly, that a text produces in dialogue with its reader. By contrast, there is room for mediation, if not for interpretation, in Jameson's formulation of the national allegory as it appears in the work of the British modernist writer, Wyndham Lewis.³³

Recognizing the literary and historical importance of nationalism does not mean that I here make a plea for its inherently progressive nature as both Jameson and Ahmad might think from their different vantage points, nor even would I claim that nationalism is the most progressive form of social movement that arose out of decolonization.³⁴ Rather, I seek to outline a literary history of gender and decolonization. Because decolonization took place under the sign of the nation and used gender—and, in some cases, ethnicity—as particular markers of cohesion and difference, we must pay particular attention to how the moment of national sovereignty offered the possibility for transformation of various social relations, as well as the literary effects of the success or failure of these relations.

The value of Jameson's work for my purposes therefore lies far more in the symptomatic reading practices that a full engagement with his notion of the dialectic involves than in unearthing buried or invisible national allegories. A corrective reading of "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," therefore, illustrates the value of some of Jameson's concerns as they bear on those central to a progressive feminist politics of decolonization. African women's literary history might seem like an ideal tool of interpretation since novels from this part of the world are the ones Jameson uses to make his argument. These earlier novels by women give the literary lie to Jameson's desire for the Third World to rescue the First World politically, because they do not represent nationalism as such.

Only three major female novelists from the period I review express themselves in terms that are unambivalently anticolonial and na-

tionalist while simultaneously rendering full female protagonists. They are Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria, Assia Djebar of Algeria, and Nawal El Sadaawi of Egypt. Emecheta and Djebar figure prominently in my project. A fourth, Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana, who did notably depict a fully developed female character engaged with cultural nationalism also represented the story as taking place outside Africa, almost entirely in Germany, which I discuss briefly later. In short, it is rare to find female characters who function as more than flimsy metaphors of the nation, either beloved mothers or prostitutes with hearts of gold. And with regard to Emecheta and Djebar, I believe they have achieved the uncommon synthesis of nationalism and feminism in narrative by virtue of their membership in literary communities, a point to which I will return.

Two novels by female writers would seem to contradict my rough model here; both explicitly depict female characters in direct relation to the nation or state. The first, *L'ex-père de la nation*, (1987) by Aminata Sow Fall of Senegal laments betrayed hopes under the neo-colonial state. Sow Fall is a contemporary of the more famous Bâ and for many years has been a writer of pointed social criticism.³⁵ The second, *Cross of Gold* (1981), by Lauretta Ngcobo of South Africa, celebrates black nationalism as it squares off against the apartheid state. The protagonists of both, however, are men (the national president in Sow Fall's novel and the freedom fighter whose mother dies for him in Ngcobo's), and in both cases the moral force of the novel lies in the realm of national politics. Nationalism or national politics takes precedence over or usurps women's subjectivity, which supports my contention about the discursive limits of women's individuality and national collectivity in works written by women. My interest is in tracing the complex mechanisms (representational, as well, perhaps, as psychological) of the coming into being of a fully formed female character by a female author. At some level, therefore, I seek to juxtapose a form of feminine coming into being in the world (a narrative mode exemplified by the genre of the Bildungsroman) against and within the national narrative.

One of the most idiosyncratic of early female writers, and therefore one whose writing I read with special pleasure, is the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, who does openly tackle the thorny question of familial

issues, female subjectivity, and public politics.³⁶ Aidoo's vigorous Pan-Africanism in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), combined with the assertive personality of its protagonist, Sissie, would appear to slip out of the nationalist injunctions I have been naming. But when one considers the novel's setting—Germany and England, not Ghana—it becomes clear that leaving the site of nationalist orthodoxy and focus has some bearing on the author's ability to withstand its silencing powers. Few other novels by women at this time deploy Aidoo's narrative strategy of exodus. It is also worth noting that Emecheta began writing only after she moved to London, away from the site of nationalist orthodoxy.

The very first black African women to publish novels, the Nigerian Flora Nwapa and the Kenyan Grace Ogot, appear silent in the face of national politics. Nwapa's *Efuru* and Ogot's *The Promised Land* (both published in 1966) are marked by a parochial tone and insular, rural settings. The female protagonists of this novelistic vanguard are themselves not unconventional. Both Nyapol and the eponymous *Efuru* are models of feminine decorum and propriety, wrapping themselves in mantles of traditional moral authority. Both novelists narrate stories set in a rural sphere seemingly untouched by Western modernity. I emphasize "seemingly." The fact that *Efuru* is much more of an individualist and ends up alone (which is to say, without a man) by choice after the disappointments of two husbands and childless (not by choice), but rich and well respected, especially by her female peers, has made her a character easily recuperated for feminism.

Later writers—in particular, two who have become part of the consolidating tradition of europhone writers—exemplify far greater self-confidence in depicting assertive or proto-feminist female characters within a political context more sympathetic to nationalism than do Ogot or Nwapa. We see this particularly in the cases of Bâ and Tsitsi Dangarembga. Bâ, whose first novel, *Une si longue lettre* (1979), allegorizes public politics in privately political terms, names the story of national disillusionment as a romantic failure. Dangarembga's first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1988), narrates the struggle for self-determination of two teenage girls and yet never risks trivializing their youthful problems or making either girl a simple icon of national subjectivity. These departures from generic convention (representing a female character more complex than Wanja in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*

or the eponymous Nedjma in Kateb Yacine's novel) account for why, despite its great popularity, *Nervous Conditions* is only now perceived to function as a national allegory.³⁷ The novel tells a simultaneous, if obscured, tale of public politics that, as the Fanonian and Sartrian title suggests, is also a nationalist one. As one might expect, it rewrites Fanon, whose work either elides gender or, when engaging it, frequently echoes conservative aspects of decolonizing nationalism.

The focus of my argument and my commitment to a range of novels and regions does not allow me to fully develop an influence study that traces in detail changes in representational mechanisms that followed the first female authors' representation of female characters. Nevertheless, I venture some generalizations about the first twenty years of women's writing. Many of the very first novelists, such as Nwapa, Ogot, and Sow Fall, depict female characters who seem to be "flat" rather than psychologically complex. Of these particular novelists, not even Sow Fall, the youngest and, at the time of my writing, the only one still alive, has yet published a novel with significant depth of characterization. Nwapa's novels and especially those by Ogot and Sow Fall are plot driven rather than character driven and are frequently explicitly moralistic. Sow Fall's brilliant *La grève des battu* (1979), to which I devote some attention in chapter 2, illustrates how satire expresses two opposing states of feeling by locating converging perspectives in twists of plot rather than in character ambivalence. These characters belong to the tradition of fable, rather than demonstrating the nuance or "roundedness" we associate with those who populate the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century European novel.³⁸

What, then, encouraged writers to move from the "flat" characterizations of Nwapa, Ogot, and Sow Fall to the rounder characters of Aidoo, Bâ, Dangarembga, and the South African-born writer Bessie Head, for whom ambivalence is part and parcel of character development? What is the relationship between literary history or periodization and characterization? I submit that what we call character depth is in some manner bound to social change: represented in literature or as the social condition of possibility that the author encounters and resolves. Psychological complexity is more fully represented (and representable) as characters enter a literary field with some sense of

historical continuity—that is, when the author does not feel herself to be “the first” speaker or writer. African women’s writing has proliferated since 1988, the year *Nervous Conditions* was published, and authorial voices have become more assured and explicit in rendering female characters and national contexts. I mention in passing *Triumpf* (1999), by Marlene Van Niekerk of South Africa, which won the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa in 1995; *David’s Story* (2001), by Zoë Wicomb of South Africa; and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), by Chimamanda Adichie of Nigeria, as illustrations of the most compelling writing.³⁹

Complexity of characters evolves as authors explore juxtaposing individuals against one another rather than setting all-important character relations between an individual and the colonial state or another immense institution. In the cases of all of the female writers, though in different ways, conflict comes about through family relations. I suggest that in general, the representational form of the family differs between works by women and feminist men, on the one hand, and by most men, on the other.⁴⁰

As the primary institution by which domestic collectivity is organized and represented, the family is often understood to be naturally given, biologically determined, and eternal in its duration. As an idealized institution imbued with unique social and moral force, its symbolic power exceeds its historical boundaries—that is, family is felt on the part of its members to have always existed in the way they know and feel it. The fact that family formations have changed dramatically from century to century and look very different from culture to culture appears to have little bearing on the fact that family is experienced by its members as natural, timeless, and universal. The same is true of the nation. Nation and family are units of social collectivity and fictions of symbolic totality, each provoking from its members sentiments of affiliation and nostalgic yearning. Moreover, when read in relation to each other, family and nation roughly correspond to the public and private spheres, the private and familial pertaining to the domain of women and the public and national to that of men.

If in their fiction men have represented the family through nostalgia-colored glasses—and I argue that indeed they have—women are far

more likely to have depicted the institution as both a product and an instrument of social power. For men, family might serve as an organic mode by which the social hierarchy of national politics is sanctioned. Women, themselves excluded from the hierarchies of public politics, might well, along with their male feminist allies, deploy one fiction to expose another. So when the family becomes the primary site of social engagement, as it frequently does in women's writing, relations between family members are neither organic nor transparent. Instead, family relations commonly depict the consolidation and dispersal of social power. Novels written by men evolve out of their understanding of the economic and legal underpinnings of cultural acts, which bear directly on their representation of national phenomena. Novels written by women converge around the sphere of the familial as the orchestrating unit that looms over and plays out national dramas.

Women writers' representations of family relations often expose the consolidation and dispersal of social power. One example can be found in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which Nnu Ego's husband, Nnaife, is impressed into the British Army from his place of work and sent to Burma to fight in the Second World War. So abrupt is the conscription that he cannot notify his family. Nnu Ego is informed later by his friend Ubani, whose counsel is, "There is nothing we can do. The British own us, just like God does, and just like God they are free to take any of us when they wish" (Emecheta 1979, 148). Later in the novel, Nnu Ego utters a very similar locution to a British magistrate who settles a domestic fight. She speaks in Nnaife's defense, unwittingly sending him to prison by explaining his role as patriarch: "Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the [school] fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays" (Emecheta 1979, 217). Through the explicit comparison of the marital relation to that of the colonial relation, the novel likens Nnu Ego's subordinate position in the family to the subordination (or "ownership") of the Nigerians by the British. Moreover, *The Joys of Motherhood* does not merely metaphorize one form of domination in terms of another. By illustrating the overlapping public and private realms and narrating them simultaneously, it comments on domination within the family and within the colony and points to how colonial and patriarchal relations structure not

only the public realm of politics, war, and employment, but also the private one of food procurement and children's education. It suggests that colonial relations saturate all aspects of daily life and illustrates that the private realm is not immune to the violence of colonialism.

The allegorical model Emecheta offers is a relatively complex one, and extending Emecheta, I suggest that it is practiced by many female writers. In the example above, the novel's political meaning does not reside exclusively in either tenor or vehicle but in a conversation between the two, and it is this dialectic that informs or explains the forces that drive Nnu Ego and her relations with the world around her. Such a reading strategy has far more in common with the allegorical reading practice advocated by Jameson's magnum opus, *The Political Unconscious*, than it does the determinative model of "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." Historically, part of the problem with reading novels written by women in genealogical terms has inhered in the sheer intelligibility of certain political practices. Jameson's reading model in "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," which so usefully illuminates the work of many of their literary brothers, leaves the feminine works obscure. To make relations more visible, I take my lead from the passage quoted from *The Joys of Motherhood* in which the public and private are obviously interpenetrated, and the domestic and national realms are inseparable from each other. As readers, we make it possible to read the realms of intimate domestic life as not merely micro-political or insignificant but as interlocked with the macro-political, as that on which it depends.

In the early phases of novel writing, male authors probably did render public politics more directly than did their female counterparts. Certainly, they were more likely to represent an explicit relation between character and nation, whether through the use of obviously allegorical figures or by recounting stories that made strikes, group actions, or other obviously public political activity central to their plots. Their readers expected these writers to address politics through their aesthetic writing. Whether the writers intended to represent the nation (or some other form of collectivity), their works were read as national allegories—though rarely were they perceived as allegorical in the narrowest senses. The interpretive paradigms applied to novels

by men were flexible enough to incorporate a diversity of texts and ways to understand the question of politics.⁴¹

Second, in contrast to the ways men were read, the interpretive model for novels written by women historically has been narrow in scope, a claim I elaborate further in the four chapters that follow. Women have not often represented explicitly national-allegorical feminine figures. (Again, it is the *reception* of their novels that has been particularly limited, a practice I hope to change.) Telling domestic tales at a time that anticolonial nationalism was expected to be a necessarily and exclusively public phenomenon has resulted in the political invisibility of fiction written by women. Readers who hope to understand the relation of women to politics face the task of developing new forms of literacy, new means of understanding these novels' mode of political representation. While the earliest female novelists commonly did "what was expected" of them, such as conform to or enact the discourse of tradition that conferred moral authority, on another level they also broke new ground: they entered the public sphere of the literary marketplace. Part of my book's intervention is to illuminate the relation of writing practices to political activity with a select group of authors from around the continent. These are practices to which we largely have been blind.

Finally, the fullest analysis of African novelistic production lies in interpretational flexibility—in this instance, noting differences produced in the writing over time. When used as a critical lens through which to read African women's novelistic writing of the period I have discussed, Jameson's schema illustrates at least three things, which make sense as one makes one's way into his model via his dialectical reading. First, as I have pointed out, women's novels expose a critical blindness on the part of Jameson's "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," because on the face of it, these novels by women from the Global South do not immediately demonstrate a national allegory, as Jameson insists all such novels do. Many seem to be parochially domestic tales. Second, the novels help illustrate Jameson's critical insight at the level of interpretation. Any reader who takes seriously his methodology in *The Political Unconscious* believes that allegorical readings of the nation—or, indeed, any other collective entity—can be made visible through an act of reading and that

such a reading might even allow for a more historically rich textual understanding than discovering a pre-existing figure on the page. Finally, and most important for my purposes, Jameson's model offers an interpretive possibility. By pointing to how the public-private divide, itself a necessary fiction instantiated and reified by capitalism, is essential to the understanding of contemporary human relations, he names a way by which one may place these African women's novels in dialogic relation with the men's. Since Jameson has never accorded feminism more than a rhetorical nod in his own writing, this is a salutary move. Gayatri Spivak offers a differently configured Marxist statement that is deeply informed by feminism: "For if the fabric of the so-called public sector is woven of the so-called private," a statement that rings true to the basic tenets of Marxism, then "the definition of the private is marked by a public potential, since it is the weave, or texture, of public activity. . . . The deconstruction of the opposition between the private and public is implicit in all, and explicit in some, feminist activity" (Spivak 1987, 103).⁴² Spivak's formulation makes it possible to see within one sphere the possibilities of the other, one that recognizes both the practice of the divide and the day-to-day practice of obscuring a more complete understanding of social and political relations.

Jameson's move effectively occludes relations of power within the private sphere of the literary text. Unable to narrate a politics of its own, the personal in the Third World functions only through the national allegory in a synechdochal relation with the public sphere. However, in *The Political Unconscious*, which is probably still his most influential work on literary studies, Jameson deploys a much richer form of allegory, one better suited to advancing a complex Marxist reading strategy. Borrowing from Northrop Frye, who in turn borrows from the medieval exegetical tradition, Jameson establishes an allegorical model whose richness derives precisely from the reader's having to traverse it dialectically. Three of the four exegetical levels generate the next as a new or further level of meaning, illustrating that when he reads classical Greek or nineteenth-century and twentieth-century European literature, Jameson perceives allegory to be an impoverished—and impoverishing—figure when it insists on a one-to-one relation between interpretation and text. In explaining how

medieval allegorists appropriated a pagan model saturated with inappropriate belief systems, he seeks to outline a system of literary interpretation that acknowledges, rather than contains, the contradictions: “The originality of the new allegorical system may be judged by its insistence on preserving the literality of the original texts: it is not here a matter of dissolving them into a mere symbolism, as a rationalistic Hellenism did when, confronted with the archaic and polytheistic letter of the Homeric epic, it rewrote the latter in terms of the struggle of the physical elements with one another, or the battle of vices and virtues.” More explicit:

Allegory is here the opening up of the text to multiple meanings, to successive rewritings and overwritings which are generated as so many levels and as so many supplementary interpretations. So the interpretation of a particular Old Testament passage in terms of the life of Christ—a familiar, even hackneyed, illustration is the rewriting of the bondage of the people of Israel in Egypt as the descent of Christ into hell after his death on the cross—comes less as a technique for closing the text off and for repressing aleatory or aberrant readings and senses, than as a mechanism for preparing such a text for further ideological investment, if we take the term ideology here in Althusser’s sense as a representational structure which allows the individual subject to conceive or imagine his or her lived relationship to transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of History. (Jameson 1981, 29–30)

This form of allegorical interpretation, which explicitly calls on the tension between the literal (here, allegorical, moral, and anagogical) and various levels of figural is, like the novels by African women to which I have referred, characterized by a productive interchange between different levels.⁴³

For feminists, the family reasserts itself continually, interfering with the normative reader’s desire or expectation that it give way to a “deeper meaning” or “higher truth” about national life. These fictions require that we perceive the simultaneous production of both literal and allegorical meaning: family does not disappear so that the glory or pathos of nation might be revealed. Instead, family retains its literalness, its banality, as well as its real material and social signifi-

cance, thereby troubling the tendency of the national allegory to soar into the realm of the transcendent. The allegory produced under these circumstances is characterized by a quality of productive interchange between the figural and the literal.

Family rarely dissolves into a symbol; instead, it reasserts itself in literal terms and interferes with the normative expectation that it give rise to a “higher truth” about national life. The allegory produced is thereby characterized by a quality of interchange between the literal and the figural. The very title of Sow Fall’s *L’ex-père de la nation*, for example, turns the naturalized nexus of family, gender, and nation into a single figure—by pointing to its undoing. Through an awkward syntax, Sow Fall’s title and novel make visible the slippage between biology or parenting, on the one hand, and national politics, on the other, unstitching a metonymy that is rendered seamlessly in masculine nationalist iconography. It is precisely this quality of interchange instead of the understanding of allegory as a one-to-one correspondence between tenor and vehicle that Jameson does not imagine when writing about the Third World. In the chapters that follow, the dialogue between literal and figurative, domestic and national, is most sharply visible in allegorical readings of *Une si longue lettre* and *Nervous Conditions* and in the interconnected reading of *L’amour, la fantasia* and *Ombre sultane*.

Read in relation to “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” the women’s novels function as a deconstructive supplement to Jameson’s argument. In tracing the maneuvers necessary to read this group of texts, I thereby also propose a corrective reading of Jameson’s essay, which is fundamentally valuable to Africanists and those who study the Global South in general. Jameson fails to read complex interchange or tension in the Third World precisely because, at the literary level, he is unwilling to perceive this region as one that continues to be shaped by capitalism even after decolonization and, therefore, as over-determined instead of as simply determined. My appropriation of Jameson’s national allegory therefore modifies some of his original claims. Novels written by women from the Global South often do have allegories within them, but they are usually subtle (or not immediately visible) and require an act of strong reading to discern them. Moreover, readers who

employ allegorical reading strategies (regardless of whether the authors intended to write allegorically) will be more richly rewarded in their reading of the politics of African literature, whether the works are written by men or by women.

Chapter 1 investigates the making of an important nationalist genealogy and unearths a powerful feminine counter-discourse. Igboland was the region in Nigeria where anglophone literature was most actively produced. Flora Nwapa, the first published female novelist in Nigeria and an exemplar of feminine public political reticence in her writing, published her first novel at a time of great interest in nation building. Unlike the male Igbo authors of her generation Nwapa almost entirely ignores the world outside the village in which her protagonist lives, makes one reference to colonialism, and narrates public politics only in very private terms.⁴⁴ *Efuru* depicts a strong women's community; men's continual betrayal of the marriage contract is offset by a thriving domestic economy of monetary and social exchange. The novels' enumeration of the eponymous protagonist's traditional virtues (good wife, daughter-in-law, and successful businesswoman) symptomatizes Nwapa's hesitant first steps into the modern world of novelistic authorhood. A mere thirteen years later, Buchi Emecheta wrote a novel with far more explicitly anticolonial and nationalist feminism. The open engagement of *The Joys of Motherhood* with the public social sphere, as well as with the private one, is predicated on its conscious self-understanding as a "literary daughter" to *Efuru*.

I read the relationship between the two novels using as a guiding metaphor the historical phenomenon of the Igbo Women's War of 1929. This anticolonial uprising (until the late 1980s, at least) had been written out of the Nigerian national narrative in much the same way that women's literary histories have been marginal to the national tradition.⁴⁵ The relation between Chinua Achebe and the Women's War itself is critically significant and points to a connection that is more than symbolic. *Things Fall Apart*, supposedly a "father text" of the contemporary anticolonial novel from Africa and ur-national narrative, can now be read as a direct, causal response to the flurry of anthropological writing that followed the British police response to the women's rebellion, suggesting that gendered anxieties have always lurked around canonical national narratives.⁴⁶

Chapter 2 is also organized around a national-ethnic rubric, this time in francophone and Wolofized Senegal. Its thematic focus is post-independence betrayal, a premise that is the starting point for all three fictional texts and the theoretical-political essay from whose premises they depart: *Xala* (1973), by Ousmane Sembène; *Une si longue lettre* (1979), by Mariama Bâ; and *La grève des battú* (1979), by Aminata Sow Fall. Struggles for national self-determination have been corrupted into choices between various modes of consumption. The new state is driven by individual desire and self-gratification, for people and for things. The tone of the novellas is one of profound disillusionment; all of them take their cue, directly or indirectly, from Fanon's essay on the corruption of the national bourgeoisie. This is the first of two chapters that illustrates the depth and breadth of Fanon's importance to europhone African writers, male and female. All three narratives, and particularly *Xala*, owe an immense intellectual and inspirational debt to Fanon. I trace the relation between this constellation of novels and Fanon's unhappily prescient essay "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," from *The Wretched of the Earth*. Beginning with *Une si longue lettre*, I read in reverse chronological order to explore the complex ties that bind this early female-feminist work to *Xala*, then I attend to the more straightforward linking of *Xala* to Fanon. In the process of rewriting Sembène's novella, Bâ promotes gender from the secondary to the primary level of analysis.

Une si longue lettre tells the tale of a romance gone wrong, a failed version of precisely the sort of relation Sommer charts in Latin America. Reconsidering this most canonical of novels by Africa women makes visible an intricate—and deeply ambivalent—relation between the novella itself and the polemical Marxist essay to which it is in some manner indebted. *La grève des battú*, published in the same year as *Une si longue lettre*, stands in every way as a "sister text" to it; it also stands in filial dialogue with *Xala*. The conceit of religious charity, specifically alms giving as a requirement of Islam, is turned into the grounds for a monetary, moral, and human economy and results in the beggars' walking off their job. Sow Fall's unsentimental and sharply humorous portrayal of neocolonialism takes up the other side of *Xala*'s Marxism and stands in sharp contrast to the sentimental feminism of *Une si longue lettre*. Moreover I find that being an early and even an important writer does not necessarily enable one to

spawn a new writerly generation. With *Bà*, it might mean instead that the author recasts stories by earlier writers in such a way as to make visible the assumptions of the older tale, thereby clearing the room for different and, in this case, feminine voices.

The concept of the Bildungsroman, that genre of individual development and, by extension, of conventionality and embourgeoisement, organizes chapter 3. The intertwining of subject formation with nation formation is examined through two very different novels from anglophone Africa of the 1980s: *Nervous Conditions* (1988), by Tsitsi Dangarembga, and *Maps* (1986), by Nuruddin Farah. Written at about the same time, both are novels of contemporary history. More important, both are explicitly feminist stories, invested in the plight of women of all sorts whether urban and educated or illiterate villagers, upwardly mobile or “traditional” and superstitious. Both novels recount the classic move of protagonist from country to city in search of education. The quintessential European and masculine hero of the Bildungsroman undertakes his quest alone; in both these African novels of development, however, the protagonist is doubled or mirrored.

The nation as such is never named in *Nervous Conditions* and must be found through an act of reading. Just as importantly—and inversely—the nation is expressly thematized in *Maps*, the subject of endless speculation only to be undone as a livable mode of social organization by the novel’s end. *Nervous Conditions* tells the story of two cousins, intimate friends separated by class and ideology. The dialectic of the novel, however, predicates Tambu’s path to education and self-knowledge on Nyasha’s political astuteness, which in its extreme form turns into psychological instability. Tambu’s sense of herself in the world as a raced, colonized, and class-formed subject, as well as as an ambitious girl, is formed in dialogue with Nyasha. The teleological impulse of the genre is both represented and made available for critique in this classically realist novel. Though Nyasha is better educated than Tambu and for much of the novel her mentor, Nyasha’s sensitivity to injustice also makes her psychologically unstable and vulnerable. I read her as a Fanonian protagonist whose existential angst gives the novel its psycho-political dimension.

Chapter 4, which contains my last set of literary close readings,

focuses on two novels by one of the most accomplished contemporary African writers, Assia Djebar. The novels' content and, in particular, their form strongly suggest that they be read as a pair, two halves of a whole, as a single Bildungsroman attempting to stretch its bounds. *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985a) and *Ombre sultane* (1987) share a structure of double-threaded narration. *L'amour* alternates between chapters on the public and the private: the domestic story of a girl growing up in Algeria in the 1930s is interspersed with the national conquest of Algeria by the French in 1830 and, later, the war of independence. In *Ombre sultane*, the alternation takes place between two characters, each chapter telling an interiorized tale of two women from the same time but different classes. The narrator, Isma, whose life resembles the growing girl of *L'amour*, is an educated, unveiled, and bourgeois woman. But it is Hajila—who comes from straitened circumstances and whose link to Isma is produced by Isma herself, both women having married the same man, though at different times—who drives the narrative action by secretly and rebelliously unveiling herself in public. Both novels use formal divisions to organize the narrative unfolding, ultimately suggesting toward the end, at the level of form and content, that the distinctions between public and private (domestic and national, even French and Arabic) ultimately cannot hold.

Both novels consist of three parts, the first two of which are sets of contrasting tales recounted in alternating sections. The third part consists of stories of women who are not otherwise part of the narrative action. In *Ombre sultane*, this choral section comes in part 3 and resembles the tale of *One Thousand and One Nights* that the original Scheherazade tells the sultan and her sister. In *L'amour*, the multi-voiced stories appear in part 2, turning into literature the oral-history tales of women who fought during the Algerian War of Independence. Each novel putatively tells the story of an individual entity (woman or nation) that is interrupted by sheer collectivity, the story of someone other than the Bildung protagonist. *Ombre sultane* offers the interiorized richness of Bildungsroman character subjectivity, while *L'amour* illustrates the outline of the development narrative: a girl who passes from childhood to marriage. Together they pose a challenge to the generic form, straining at its boundaries to tell another story.