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In search of « camerounité »: on the reappropriation of emigrant authors in the Cameroonian press

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Article abstract

This article examines the reception and self-positioning of fiction authors of Cameroonian descent in the press of their country of origin. It draws upon material from two daily newspapers and two culture magazines and covers a period of 20 years between 1996 and 2016. The analysis of the material is based on the method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring 1983, Kuckartz 2012). The article focuses on gendered aspects of the reporting on emigrant authors, on the negotiation of their affiliation with several national spaces, as well as on the strategies that are employed to reappropriate them into Cameroonian literature.

IN SEARCH OF « CAMEROUNITÉ » : ON THE REAPPROPRIATION OF EMIGRANT AUTHORS IN THE CAMEROONIAN PRESS

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la réception d'auteur·e·s de fiction d'origine camerounaise dans la presse de leur pays d'origine, ainsi que leur propre positionnement à cet égard. Il s'appuie sur un corpus d'articles parus entre 1996 et 2016 dans deux journaux quotidiens et deux magazines culturels, couvrant une période de vingt ans. L'analyse de ce corpus se fonde sur la méthode de l'analyse qualitative de contenu (Marying 1983, Kuckartz 2012). Cet article étudie le caractère genré des propos tenus sur et par ces écrivain·e·s émigré·e·s, la manière dont s'y négocie leur appartenance à plusieurs espaces nationaux, ainsi que les stratégies employées pour les (ré-)affilier à la littérature camerounaise.

Mots-clés : Cameroun – auteur·e·s émigré·e·s – réception – champ littéraire transnational – genre.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the reception and self-positioning of fiction authors of Cameroonian descent in the press of their country of origin. It draws upon material from two daily newspapers and two culture magazines and covers a period of 20 years between 1996 and 2016. The analysis of the material is based on the method of qualitative content analysis (Marying 1983, Kuckartz 2012). The article focuses on gendered aspects of the reporting on emigrant authors, on the negotiation of their affiliation with several national spaces, as well as on the strategies that are employed to reappropriate them into Cameroonian literature.

Keywords : Cameroon – emigrant authors – reception – transnational literary field – gender.

It is a peculiarity of African literature that the most successful African writers do not live in Africa. All of them have, at least for a certain period of their lives, migrated to one of the literary « centers »¹ of the North. The positions and strategies of postcolonial

¹ CASANOVA (Pascale), *The World Republic of Letters*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2004 [1999], 440 p. ; p. 17.

authors in a global book market that is dominated by the former colonial powers has been subject to a growing number of critical studies². I consider emigrant authors to be positioned in a transnational literary field that spans from their country of origin to their country or countries of adoption or residence and publication. Whereas many of the mentioned analyses focus on the reception and positioning of emigrant authors in France, the United Kingdom (U.K.) or the United States of America (U.S.A.), I will look at the Southern end of the transnational literary field. Taking authors of Cameroonian descent³ as an example, I will examine the reception and self-presentation of emigrant fiction authors in the press of their country of origin.

On account of the progressing « feminization » of contemporary African writing⁴, my study includes a gender perspective. As is the case for Nigeria with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Cameroonian women writers such as Calixthe Beyala, Léonora Miano and more recently Imbolo Mbue have reaped more media attention during the last two decades than male writers. In this context I find it worthwhile to take a look « back » at the authors' society of origin, and to see how gender affects their reception there.

Choice of corpus and method

My study draws on material from two daily newspapers and two culture magazines that are or were published in Cameroon. The research period covers 20 years, from 1996 to 2016. I selected the state-owned newspaper *Cameroon Tribune* and the privately-owned newspaper *Mutations* because of their different political orientations, but also because they both regularly report on literature and have been functioning throughout the examined period. Whereas

² For example : HUGGAN (Graham), *The Postcolonial Exotic : Marketing the Margins*. London ; New York : Routledge, 2001, 352 p. ; BROUILLETTE (Sarah), *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 206 p. ; DAVIS (Caroline), *Creating Postcolonial Literature : African Writers and British Publishers*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 255 p. ; PONZANESI (Sandra), *The Postcolonial Cultural Industry : Icons, Markets, Mythologies*. Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 272 p. ; DUCOURNAU (Claire), *La Fabrique des classiques africains : écrivains d'Afrique subsaharienne francophone*. Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2017, 442 p.

³ Under this label I have included authors who were born to one or two Cameroonian parents, and who have also spent several years of their lives in Cameroon.

⁴ ADESOKAN (Akinwumi), « New African Writing and the Question of Audience », *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 23, n°3 (Fall 2012), p. 1-20 ; p. 4 ; and DUCOURNAU (C.), *La Fabrique des classiques africains...*, *op. cit.*, p. 377-392.

Cameroon Tribune publishes articles in both English and French, *Mutations* is entirely published in French. With a maximum circulation of 23 000 copies⁵ (in a country with a population of almost 25 million people), *Cameroon Tribune* is the newspaper with the greatest circulation. It was founded in 1974 and leans towards the political regime. With a print-run of 5 000 copies⁶, the second newspaper I chose is one of the largest dailies in the private sector. *Mutations* was founded in July 1996 by Haman Mana and is owned by the South Media Corporation. According to Atenga, it was distinctly modelled after the French left-liberal daily *Libération*⁷. Although *Mutations* was quite critical of the political regime in its beginnings, its proclaimed aim is to report « neutrally » and to contribute to the formation of public opinion⁸.

The culture magazines I selected are *Patrimoine* and *Mosaïques*, both of which are published in French. *Patrimoine* was founded in 2000 by Marcelin Vounda Etoa, a professor of French and former director of Éditions CLÉ. It was published monthly with the support of the French cooperation⁹ until 2007, the year Vounda Etoa joined CLÉ. *Mosaïques* was founded in 2010 by the journalist Parfait Tabapsi, and has been published monthly until today. It receives occasional help from foreign cultural institutions, but relies mainly on its own funds and voluntary contributors. *Patrimoine* and *Mosaïques* see themselves in the tradition of earlier Cameroonian and diasporic culture magazines such as *Abbia*, *Le Cameroun Littéraire*, *Ozila* and *Présence africaine*. Whereas *Patrimoine* had a strong literary focus, *Mosaïques* reports more widely on the different arts in Africa and the African diaspora. The print runs varied from 500 to 1 000 copies for *Patrimoine*, and from 1 000 to 2 000 copies for *Mosaïques*¹⁰.

⁵ According to one of the archivists.

⁶ Email from the editorial department, 09-05-2018.

⁷ ATENGA (Thomas), « Cameroon's private daily press: In search of a viable economic model », *Ecquid Novi : African Journalism Studies*, vol. 33, n°1, 2012, p. 13-29, p. 15.

⁸ ESSOUSSE (Erik), *La Liberté de la presse écrite au Cameroun : ombres et lumières*. Paris : L'Harmattan, 2008, 366 p. ; p. 236.

⁹ VOUNDA ETOA (Marcelin), « Littérature camerounaise du terroir : l'impossible bilan critique », *Africultures*, [online] : <http://africultures.com/litterature-camerounaise-du-terroir-limpossible-bilan-critique-3505/> (posted 14-09-2004 ; retrieved 07-11-2018).

¹⁰ Personal correspondences with Marcelin Vounda Etoa and Parfait Tabapsi.

I based the evaluation of my material on the approach of qualitative content analysis¹¹. It is suitable for organizing, structuring and comparing different kinds of textual data. Qualitative content analysis notably includes the compilation of a set of « categories » that are relevant to the research subject, and the association of passages with the different categories, a process that is called « coding ».

(Trans)national positionings

From 1996 to 2016, *Cameroon Tribune*, *Mutations*, *Patrimoine* and *Mosaïques* reported on 17 different emigrant authors of Cameroonian descent. The five authors that were most frequently reported on are Calixthe Beyala, Léonora Miano, Gaston-Paul Effa, Patrice Nganang and Eugène Ébodé¹². The occasions for an article on a certain author are usually (in descending order) the publication of a new literary work, an author's visit to Cameroon or the awarding of a literary prize. The overwhelming majority of the books discussed have been published in France¹³, the author's visits have often been arranged by French institutions, and the literary prizes that are reported on have usually been awarded in France¹⁴. To put my findings into perspective, it has to be mentioned that the widely-read dissident newspaper *Le Messager* differs from this pattern by privileging local or politically outspoken authors (like Patrice Nganang) over renowned but politically reserved authors living abroad (like Miano). However, it also greatly favors music – a popular genre – over literature¹⁵. *Le Messager* is therefore the only major newspaper to contest – or ignore – French literary norms.

¹¹ KUCKARTZ (Udo), *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Methoden, Praxis, Computerunterstützung*. Weinheim : Beltz Juventa, 2012, 240 p. ; MAYRING (Philip), *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken*. Weinheim : Beltz Verlag, 1983, 152 p.

¹² The list is completed by Imbolo Mbue, Élizabéth Tchoungui, Jean-Roger Essomba, Werewere Liking, Nathalie Étoké, Hemley Boum, Georges Yémy, Max Lobé, Jeanne-Louise Djanga, Grégoire Nguédi and J. Honoré Woungly.

¹³ Two exceptions are : NGANANG (Patrice), *Le Principe dissident*. Yaoundé : Interlignes, 2005, 48 p., and ID, *Apologie du vandale*. Yaoundé : CLÉ, 2006, 79 p.

¹⁴ Exceptions are the prizes awarded to Effa, Ébodé and Nganang by the Cameroonian Association des urgentistes bénévoles de l'éducation (Aube), which Nganang declined (EKWÉ (Dorine), « L'Aube des romanciers », *Mutations*, 16-06-2005 ; EKWÉ (D.), « Patrice Nganang ne se réveille pas à l'Aube », *Mutations*, 28-06-2005), the Prix de l'excellence camerounaise for Beyala (« Reines au cœur de la nuit », *Mutations*, 09-07-1999) and the Prix Nyonda that Jean-Roger Essomba was awarded in Gabon (NTOGUE (Paul Armand), « J. R. Essomba plebisité et primé au Gabon », *Patrimoine*, 12-2002, p. 11).

¹⁵ HIMCO FODJO (Flora), *La Réception de Marcel Kemadjou Njanke et de Léonora Miano dans quelques journaux de la presse écrite au Cameroun et en France de 2004 à*

In the journals I have analysed, all of the expatriate authors are associated with Cameroon, regardless of where they live or which nationality they hold. Their works are incorporated into Cameroonian literature. As regards the authors themselves, their choices of identity are more varied. Beyala not only insistently identifies as Cameroonian, but even as a member of a specific ethnic group. Concurrently, journalists point out her cultural hybridity and her advocacy of the African diaspora. It is important for Beyala to harmonize her ethnic and cultural roots with her activity as a writer and activist in metropolitan France :

[Beyala :] Je suis Eton, je travaille beaucoup [...] J'ai adapté l'esprit de paysannerie eton à un monde autre, beaucoup plus moderne, qui est un monde littéraire [...] [Interviewer :] De quoi se nourrit votre créativité, votre inspiration ? [Beyala :] Du quotidien, des contes. Des contes d'Afrique, contrairement à ce que vous pouvez penser. De la mémoire eton, de la narration bété. Je suis à la fois très moderne tout en étant très traditionaliste ¹⁶.

C'est vrai que je m'occupe énormément de la diaspora en France. Mais dans un objectif très précis parce que je suis sûre que plus cette diaspora deviendra forte, plus le Cameroun sera fort et tous les pays d'Afrique également [...] ¹⁷.

Beyala's positioning resembles a constant balancing act. By contrast, Nganang unambiguously calls Cameroon, and Cameroon only, his country : « [son] pays » ¹⁸. He further insists on the fact that he comes from Yaoundé (« Yaoundéen » ¹⁹), but has since adopted a predominantly ethnic identity (*Bangangté*) ²⁰.

2014. Mémoire de maîtrise, sous la direction de Pierre Fandio et de Yves-Abel Feze, Université de Dschang, 2016, 102 p. ; p. 49-51.

¹⁶ Calixthe Beyala interviewed by Marie-Claire Nnana, « Les Camerounais trouvent ailleurs la reconnaissance que leur pays leur refuse », *Cameroon Tribune*, 12-08-1999, p. 6.

¹⁷ Calixthe Beyala interviewed by Stéphane Tchakam, « Calixthe Beyala en toute franchise », *Cameroon Tribune*, 08-01-2004, p. 18-19.

¹⁸ Patrice Nganang interviewed by Marcelin Vounda Etoa, « Il est fondamental, au Cameroun surtout, de rompre l'évidence de la langue et de la culture française », *Patrimoine*, 05-2003, p. 8-9 ; p. 8.

¹⁹ Interview with Patrice Nganang, « Les caniveaux des "grandes ambitions" plombent notre destin », *Mutations*, 24-03-2005, p. 10-11 ; p. 10.

²⁰ For example : NGANANG (Patrice), « Lettre de Patrice Nganang après son expulsion du Cameroun : "un noble Bangangté refuse l'esclavage !" », [online] : <https://www.lebledparle.com/les-chroniques-du-bled/1103977-lettre-de->

For their part, Gaston-Paul Effa and Werewere Liking see themselves first as Africans. Miano and Ébodé are described or describe themselves as Afro-Westerners (« Afro-occidentaux »²¹), thereby underlining their cultural hybridity.

If we take Cameroon on the one hand and France and the U.S.A. on the other hand as the two poles between which emigrant writers situate themselves, Patrice Nganang is the author who gravitates most strongly towards the Cameroonian pole. His vision of literature is also the most national. He sees himself as the « psychiatrist » of the Cameroonian nation²², as the one who has to alert about impending human tragedies. He is of the opinion that it is important to write about Cameroonians who live *in* Cameroon (as opposed to Cameroonians in the diaspora), and dissociates himself from the French language and the French literary field. He is the only one who promotes independency from the French literary infrastructure, taking King Njoya of the Bamoun as an example²³. In reality, most of his books are published in France. Nevertheless, he is one of the few emigrant authors who has *also* collaborated with a publisher in Cameroon. Due to his critical positions vis-à-vis the Cameroonian government, he is rarely featured in *Cameroon Tribune*, and if he is, his writing is taken less seriously than in *Mutations*, *Patrimoine* or *Mosaïques*.

Beyala's, Miano's and Effa's relationship with the French language is much less troubled. For Miano, French is her language : « le français est [sa] langue, et [elle vit] en paix avec lui [sic] »²⁴. For Effa,

patrice-nganang-apres-son-expulsion-du-cameroun-un-noble-bangangte-refuse-l-esclavage (posted 29-12-2017 ; retrieved 30-05-2018).

²¹ DONGMO (Stéphanie), « Forte tête sur fond d'Afrique », *Mosaïques*, 01-2014, p. 9 ; Eugène Ébodé interviewed by Parfait Tabapsi, « Yambo représente le rebelle et l'inclassable », *Mosaïques*, 03-2012, p. 2.

²² *Mutations*, 24-03-2005. Nganang has since replaced the phrase « the nation's psychiatrist » (« psychiatre d'une nation ») by the more proletarian « caretaker of the republic » (« concierge de la république »). See : NGANANG (P.), « Lettre de Patrice Nganang », *art. cit.*, which bespeaks his growing politicization as well as his wish to appeal to the lesser educated parts of the Cameroonian population.

²³ At the beginning of the 20th century, Ibrahim Njoya invented an alphabet and a writing system for the Bamoun language, he wrote literature using the Bamoun script and had his own printing press (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, « Bamun », *Encyclopædia Britannica*, [online] : <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bamun#ref39755> (posted on 20-07-1998 ; retrieved on 05-07-2018). Nganang dedicated his novel *Mont Plaisant* (2011) to the Bamoun culture.

²⁴ Léonora Miano interviewed by Marcelin Vounda Etoa, « On peut traverser les ombres pour trouver la lumière, au lieu de s'y installer », *Patrimoine*, 10-2006, p. 4.

French eventually became the language he adopted and elected (« une langue d'adoption et d'affection »²⁵), and he even speaks of it as his motherland (« patrie »²⁶). The three authors insist on the universality of their writing, and do not wish to be confined to a national literature.

Whereas Beyala and Miano emphasize that they write first of all for themselves, Effa puts forward a strong sense of responsibility towards the African continent :

[...] je suis extrêmement exigeant parce que je n'écris pas seulement pour moi. Je sais qu'il y a toute une histoire derrière moi, l'histoire de tout un peuple qui me regarde, et je serai lu à travers ce peuple [...] Chaque livre doit être pour moi l'occasion de redessiner le visage du Cameroun, le visage du continent africain²⁷.

We can state that Patrice Nganang and Calixthe Beyala are the writers who most carefully nurture their relation with their country of origin. However, their approaches differ in what we might call « class consciousness ». While Patrice Nganang shows his solidarity with the majority of the Cameroonian population by criticizing the regime in power, Calixthe Beyala is cautious not to spoil her relations with the Cameroonian elite. She avoids to side with either the ruling party or the opposition, but she simultaneously downplays the responsibility of political leaders and even recommends that African intellectuals should restrain from criticizing their leaders abroad. As a laureate of the Académie française as well as of the Cameroonian state (Prix de l'excellence camerounaise), she is an intellectual leaning towards the conservative elite, no matter the radically feminist content of some of her works. On the other end of the spectrum, we have writers like Léonora Miano and Jean-Roger Essomba who show little investment in their country of origin, who make little effort to accommodate their Cameroonian interlocutors and therefore seem rather detached from their country of origin. For example, they openly admit that they like or read very few other Cameroonian, or even African, authors. Miano presents herself as a transnational author who even transcends the axis between Cameroon and France. Gaston-Paul Effa and his notion of « conti-

²⁵ EFFA (Gaston-Paul), « Écrire d'ailleurs », *Patrimoine*, 05-2002, p. 8-9 ; p. 8.

²⁶ EFFA (G.-P.), « Écrire d'ailleurs », *art. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁷ Gaston-Paul Effa interviewed by Alain B. Batongué, « L'écrivain doit rester celui qui permet à la société de progresser », *Mutations*, 26-06-2010, p. 14-15 ; p. 15.

mental responsibility » could be positioned somewhere in-between the two groups.

The « recameroonization » of emigrant writers

Concerning the criticism of the writers' works, I noticed that aesthetic judgments and references to their country of origin often coincide. In Beyala's case, the quality of her work that is most appreciated is her manipulation, in other words her « africanization »²⁸, of the French language. However, this perception is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, journalists are grateful to Calixthe Beyala for « desecrating » the language of the former colonizer : she is praised for her manipulation of syntax and her lexical innovations. On the other hand, Beyala's language is celebrated as an enrichment of the French language, consistent with the logic of the Francophonie. In this sense, thanks to her, French can stay alive as a language : « avec Beyala, le français ne risque pas de mourir »²⁹. The reviewers seem torn between the wish to take revenge on the colonial language and the wish to be part of a powerful global alliance.

The appropriation and africanization of the French language is also appreciated in other writers. Patrice Nganang is considered as having inaugurated a new era in the Cameroonian novel by elevating the language of the lower-class areas or suburbs (« sous-quartiers ») to literature. Élisabeth Tchoungui's first novel *Je vous souhaite la pluie* is principally praised for its ample use of camfranglais, a Cameroonian urban variety of French. But whereas Tchoungui, like Beyala, is inscribed and inscribes herself in a discourse of « francophonie », Nganang's relation to this discourse is a negative one. Apparently, the same literary strategy can serve opposing ideologies – it either fosters the « appropriation » (as in affirmation / enrichment of), or the « disappropriation » (« désappropriation »³⁰ ; as in negation / dispossession) of the French language.

Other writers whose language is generally recognized as closer to the French norm are appreciated for tackling so-called African subjects, and indeed expected to write about such themes. Léonora Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* is thus greeted as a welcome return to

²⁸ SALE (Charles), « Une écriture originale », *Cameroon Tribune*, 27-11-1996, p. 9.

²⁹ BIKELE (Yvette), « Quand les arbres parlent à Calixthe Beyala », *Cameroon Tribune*, 16-01-2002, p. 18.

³⁰ MWENYE (Wilfried), « De la dissidence comme acte citoyen », *Mosaïques*, 05-2013, p. 5.

her origins : « un retour aux sources salvateur »³¹. The African scenery of her novels is supposed to make her an advocate and representative of African culture abroad : « une défenseuse de la culture africaine sous d'autres cieux »³². Further, it is with great relief that Effa's narrative *Yaoundé instantanés* (2003) is received, as in this work, Effa describes his emotions on rediscovering his native city after more than twenty years of absence.

Emigrant authors are not only expected to write about Africa, but also to visit their country of origin regularly. A recurring first question in interviews is why the author has taken so long to come back to Cameroon. In response, some authors adopt a strategy of reassessing their absence, as does Patrice Nganang in an interview : « Je crois que je n'ai jamais aussi clairement vu le Cameroun que depuis que je l'ai quitté »³³. Jean-Roger Essomba concurs : « [...] pour voir que la terre est ronde, il faut s'en éloigner »³⁴. Gaston-Paul Effa is of the same opinion : « [...] il faut s'absenter des choses afin qu'elles reprennent leur droit »³⁵. What these remarks have in common is that they view exile as a resource rather than a flaw. Nganang and Essomba claim that distance enables them better to apprehend Cameroonian society, while Effa compares his affection for his native country to the desire for an absent loved one. However, the authors do not contest the journalist's expectation that they should somehow be involved with their country.

A recurring concern of journalists is that emigrant writers actually write for others (« pour les autres »³⁶), for another readership, whether white or not African, with a taste for the exotic : « [qu'ils ciblent] davantage un public blanc ou non-africain, en quête d'exotisme »³⁷. Whereas the reviewers in *Cameroon Tribune* tend to smooth out contradictions resulting from the great inequality bet-

³¹ NKODO (Monica), « Léonora Miano, lauréate du prix Femina », *Cameroon Tribune*, 07-11-2013, p. 15.

³² NKODO (M.), « Léonora Miano, lauréate du prix Femina », *art. cit.*, p. 15.

³³ Interview with Patrice Nganang, « Les caniveaux des "grandes ambitions" plombent notre destin », *art. cit.*, p. 11.

³⁴ Jean-Roger Essomba interviewed by Marcelin Vounda Etoa, « Lorsque j'ai reçu le prix Nyonda, il y avait en compétition : Kourouma, Mongo Beti, Calixte Beyala, Boubacar Boris Diop, pour ne citer que les plus connus », *Patrimoine*, 05-2004, p. 4-5 ; p. 5.

³⁵ EFFA (G.-P.), « Écrire d'ailleurs », *art. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁶ Eugène Ébodé interviewed by Parfait Tabapsi, « Il ne faut souhaiter le génocide à aucun peuple, à aucun État, à aucune espèce vivante », *Mosaïques*, 05-2015, p. 6-7 ; p. 7.

³⁷ Calixte Beyala interviewed by M.-C. Nnana, « Les Camerounais trouvent ailleurs la reconnaissance que leur pays leur refuse », *art. cit.*, p. 6.

ween the Cameroonian and the French literary fields, *Patrimoine* and *Mosaïques* have published numerous and diverse essays dealing with the Francophonie.

While journalists continue to suspect authors of writing for the « others », they are simultaneously aware that in Cameroon, these same authors are not granted the recognition they deserve : « [...] [E]n Afrique, et c'est bien dommage, écrivains, hommes de lettres et artistes ne sont que rarement prophètes chez eux »³⁸. Thus writes Marie-Claire Nnana, the publishing director of *Cameroon Tribune* shortly after Calixthe Beyala received the Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française. Cameroon obviously cannot compete with the honours the French literary field is able to bestow on emigrant authors. The press tries to compensate this weakness by the creation of a dichotomy between a reassuring, motherly homeland, and a rough competitive country of adoption. In Beyala's case, the French literary field is described as a hostile environment where the author constantly has to grapple with racist prejudice. The accusation of plagiarism serves as a case in point. As a counter-image, Cameroon is explicitly or implicitly imagined as a peaceful haven where the author recovers from her struggles and finds new strength and inspiration. Several authors comply with this narrative, and speak of Cameroon, or more generally of Africa, as their source of inspiration, as does Élizabéth Tchoungui : « [c]'est le Cameroun qui me nourrit [...] C'est au Cameroun que je puise mon énergie »³⁹. Effa associates his native country – often referred to as the land or the soil (« la terre ») – with a nurturing ground and a font of inspiration : « un vivier », « une ressource », « la grande source »⁴⁰.

However, the image of Cameroon as an inspiring retreat stands in stark contrast to some of the authors' other remarks on their country of origin. In interviews, Léonora Miano and especially Werewere Liking complain about the inertia and even destructiveness they encounter as visiting artists. They say that whenever they try to launch an initiative in Cameroon, there is always someone who will put as many obstacles in their way as possible. Beyala regrets that Cameroonian artists are forced to emigrate in order to gain the recognition they deserve. She talks of a disappointed love of

³⁸ NNANA (M.-C.), « Calixthe Beyala : l'itinéraire d'une consécration », *Cameroon Tribune*, 27-11-1996, p. 8.

³⁹ TCHAKOUNTÉ (Alain), « J'ai un besoin viscéral de rentrer au pays », *Cameroon Tribune*, 12-04-2006.

⁴⁰ Gaston-Paul Effa interviewed by Alain B. Batongué, « L'écrivain doit rester celui qui permet à la société de progresser », *art. cit.*, p. 14.

her country, a country that turned out to be devouring her own children : « une terre cannibale pour ses enfants »⁴¹.

Effects of gender

My analysis shows that of all the authors, Calixthe Beyala's treatment in the Cameroonian press is by far the most gendered. On the one hand, Beyala is portrayed as a women's rights activist : « [...] ces gratifications ne tarissent en rien sa volonté première : militer en faveur des femmes et des droits des minorités visibles »⁴². On the other hand, she is evoked as a « femme fatale » and as a sex symbol, for example by reprinting a nude picture of her which was part of an anti-HIV campaign⁴³, or by captioning a review « Calixthe Beyala's wild passions » (« [I]es amours sauvages de Calixthe Beyala »⁴⁴). The publication of Beyala's erotic novel *Femme nue, femme noire* (2003) further spurred fantasies about her promiscuous love life. The author presents herself as a fervent feminist, but simultaneously maintains a margin where she caters to men's sexual fantasies. As Nicki Hitchcott pointed out, Beyala constantly shifts between the image of « assimilated » and « rebel » author⁴⁵. This holds for her self-presentation in France as much as in Cameroon. There is a period in which *Mutations's* reporting on Beyala is particularly hostile and sexualized. In one case, the combination of the author's militancy and her imagined sexual prowess confers a certain gender ambiguity on her. An article from 2000 is subheaded using a pun that allows for such a blurring : « Calixthe Beyala : Mâle dans sa peau » ; it further describes her as a woman who speaks a lot in a low voice and stands out for what she refuses to comply with : « une femme qui parle beaucoup avec une voix grave et qui s'arrange autant que possible à [sic] dire "non" là où presque tout le monde dit "oui" »⁴⁶. The article represents Beyala as a deviant woman who aspires to be a man and (groundlessly, it is implied) questions the social consensus.

⁴¹ Calixte Beyala interviewed by M.-C. Nnana, « Les Camerounais trouvent ailleurs la reconnaissance que leur pays leur refuse », *art. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴² ESSOMBA (Pierre Rostand), « Pieuse Calixthe Beyala », *Cameroon Tribune*, 04-03-2014, p. 20.

⁴³ « Calixthe nue jusqu'à la lie », *Mutations*, 15-07-2003.

⁴⁴ BIKELE (Y.), « Les "Amours sauvages" de Calixthe Beyala », *Cameroon Tribune*, 20-03-2002, p. 19.

⁴⁵ HITCHCOTT (Nicki), *Calixthe Beyala : Performances of Migration*. Liverpool : Liverpool University Press, 2006, 190 p. ; p. 36.

⁴⁶ « Onanisme », *Mutations*, 18-09-2000.

On the other side, there is a tendency on the part of journalists to try and tease out the vulnerable feminine part of successful women writers. This practice is in line with the journalistic habit of asking provocative questions, but it takes on a gender-specific expression here, which I propose to call « gender policing ».

Sentez-vous [sic] assez solide pour mener à bien toutes ces reformes [sic] ? [Beyala :] Pensez-vous que je suis [sic] une femme faible ?⁴⁷

Est-ce que vous vous êtes sentie diminuée après la polémique qu'il y a eu autour de votre roman, *Les Honneurs perdus* ?⁴⁸ Est-ce que vous vous êtes dit : on m'en veut parce que je suis Noire, par exemple ? [...] Est-ce que c'était pour leur prouver que vous saviez écrire des romans, que vous avez publié tout de suite après deux autres romans ?⁴⁹

Vous semblez finalement avoir beaucoup souffert de l'incompréhension du public venu à votre rencontre au CCF de Yaoundé et de Douala ! [Miano :] Rassurez-vous, je m'en remets très bien [...].⁵⁰

This maneuvering on the part of journalists serves to put influential women in their place, and to restore the heteronormative gender order. I suggest that compliance with the gender order in Cameroon makes it easier for journalists to integrate authors into the canon of Cameroonian literature. For example, in an interview with Werewere Liking from the year 2000 it becomes manifest that the interviewer (a man) is principally interested in Liking's deviant sexual behavior and gender performance⁵¹. However, at this advan-

⁴⁷ Calixthe Beyala interviewed by B.M.B. [Bertille Missi Bikoun ?], « Calixte Beyala : Je veux reformer la Francophonie », *Mutations*, 19-05-2010.

⁴⁸ In 1997, Pierre Assouline accused Beyala of having plagiarized Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* in *Les Honneurs perdus*, a novel that had won the *Grand prix du roman de l'Académie française* the year before.

⁴⁹ Calixte Beyala interviewed by M.-C. Nnana, « Les Camerounais trouvent ailleurs la reconnaissance que leur pays leur refuse », *art. cit.*, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Léonora Miano interviewed by Marcelin Vounda Etoa, « Le seul problème qui soit particulier à l'Afrique et peut-être aux Afro-descendants, c'est une conscience de soi extrêmement dégradée qui pousse les gens à ne revendiquer que le statut de peuple le plus souffrant de la terre », *Patrimoine*, 04-2006 ; p. 2-3.

⁵¹ Werewere Liking and Ganthier Niepa Niepo interviewed by David Ndachi Tagne, « Mon nouveau mari et moi », *Cameroon Tribune*, 29-12-2000, p. 16. The interview revolves around Liking's previous long-time celibacy, her considerably younger husband and her alleged sexual involvement with her former collaborator and friend Marie-José Hourantier. In Cameroon, homosexuality is prohibited.

ced stage of her career, Liking is eager to shed all doubts one might have had in regard to her « normal » sexual behavior.

Notwithstanding what might be seen as attempts at taming or disciplining authors, what I rarely encountered was criticism of Calixthe Beyala's works as « too feminist ». Beyala's first novel has been vehemently attacked in the Cameroonian media⁵², but her growing international recognition seems to have pacified the critics. One of the few faults that are found with her writing is that it is too sexually explicit⁵³.

In the case of Miano, journalists recognize that women play an important role in her novels. But references to the author's gender are scarce, not least because Miano keeps a low profile during interviews, and often refuses to answer questions she considers too intimate. In one interview, she admits that she did not identify as a woman until the age of 40⁵⁴. Consequently, she talks about feminism and women's oppression with a certain degree of sympathy, but also with detachment.

In the case of Gaston-Paul Effa, critics remark on the strong presence of female characters in his works, and his introspective narrative style⁵⁵. Traditionally, intimate writing has been associated with women and the private sphere. Effa's appearance is also described as somewhat « unmanly » :

*La voix fluette, le ton volontairement lent mais fluide, le vocabulaire à la fois simple et recherché, Gaston Paul Effa parle comme un livre*⁵⁶.

⁵² NDINDA (Joseph), « Femmes camerounaises en littérature : images, discours, écriture », in : VOUNDA ETOA (Marcelin), ed., *La Littérature camerounaise depuis l'époque coloniale. Figures, esthétiques et thématiques*. Yaoundé : Presses Universitaires de Yaoundé, 2004, 275 p. ; p. 171.

⁵³ In *Patrimoine* for example, several female authors living in Cameroon discuss *Femme nue, femme noire*, and most of them agree that pornography has no place in literature – BONONO (Angeline Solange), ENGAMA (Virginie Stella), MPOUIDI NGOLLE (Evelyne), NJOYA (Rabiatou), DATI SABZE (Marie Claire), « Femmes, sexe et littérature », *Patrimoine*, 07-2003, p. 12-13.

⁵⁴ Léonora Miano interviewed by Parfait Tabapsi, « L'écriture, le jazz, l'esclavage et moi ! », *Mosaïques*, 01-2017, p. 2-3.

⁵⁵ TCHAKAM (S.), « Entre Blanchés et Noirs », *Cameroon Tribune*, 10-04-2007 ; AWONO (Jean-Claude), « Cheval-Roi, un roman sans fin », *Patrimoine*, 05-2002, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Gaston-Paul Effa interviewed by Alain B. Batongué, « L'écrivain doit rester celui qui permet à la société de progresser », *art. cit.*, p. 14 ; emphasis mine.

Ce personnage à l'apparence fragile, qui parlait « comme un Blanc », et qu'on soupçonnait évidemment d'être totalement déconnecté des réalités de son pays ⁵⁷.

Interestingly, this perceived weakness is evoked in the context of his assimilation into French society. Familiarity with French « high » literary culture seems to go hand in hand with a loss of physical strength, and thus of manhood, and with an alienation from the majority of the Cameroonian population. Effa further encourages this « feminization » by suggesting that as a writer, he is driven by a « feminine force » : « Tout écrivain, Proust, Biancotti [sic], Quignard, Flaubert, etc., lorsqu'il est en acte d'écriture, c'est la femme en lui qui travaille. C'est elle qui va réitérer ce don de soi à l'Autre et à soi-même » ⁵⁸. Effa constructs masculinity and femininity as opposing concepts that can inhabit both men and women, whereby femininity is of particular importance for the writer. However, writing about Effa's novel *Mâ*, Marcelin Vounda Etoa criticizes the fact that the author does not let the female narrator express her anger, and thus unjustly confines her to a docile form of femininity ⁵⁹.

My article has shown that Cameroonian emigrant authors are positioned and position themselves at different places in what I have termed an unequal transnational literary field, that has also been theorized as a world literary space (« espace littéraire (mondial) » ⁶⁰), or system (« système littéraire » ⁶¹). African literary spaces lack autonomy, but, as Ducournau states, the stakes are nevertheless high in the local debates about how to define what is an African writer, and subsequently about the latter's relation to Africa : « [I]es auteurs et les éditeurs s'y disputent toutefois deux enjeux principaux : la définition légitime de l'écrivain africain et, en

⁵⁷ ATANGA (Yves), « Cahier d'un retour à la ville natale », *Cameroon Tribune*, 24-09-2003.

⁵⁸ EFFA (G.-P.), « Écrire d'ailleurs », *art. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵⁹ VOUNDA ETOA (M.), « Larmes et armes de femme », *Mutations*, 17-08-1998.

⁶⁰ CASANOVA (P.), *The World Republic of Letters*, *op. cit.*

⁶¹ HALEN (Pierre), « Notes pour une topologie institutionnelle du système littéraire francophone », in : *Littératures et sociétés africaines. Regards comparatistes et perspectives interculturelles. Mélanges offerts à János Riesz à l'occasion de son sixième anniversaire*. Edited by Papa Samba Diop and Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink. Tübingen : Günter Narr Verlag, 2001, 596 p. ; p. 55-67.

corollaire, celle de son rapport à l'Afrique »⁶². The emigrant authors who appear in the Cameroonian press aspire to and embody different forms of literary legitimacy. Whereas Calixthe Beyala presents herself as a « franco-Cameroonian » writer by emphasizing her rootedness in both Cameroonian and French society, Patrice Nganang seeks credibility as a dissident « grass-roots » writer who turns his back on the Francophonie. Werewere Liking and Gaston-Paul Effa prefer the Pan-African to the national referent, and Léonora Miano for her part replaces the continental focus with the trans-atlantic notion of the African diaspora.

The Cameroonian press makes an effort to reappropriate successful expatriate authors to Cameroonian literature. Their « re-camerounization » is achieved by a strong focus on the « African » element in their works and by an emphasis on their personal and emotional ties to their country of origin. I have further illustrated how non-conforming gender performances can to some extent disrupt this process of re-naturalization. Justifiably, the relationship of the press towards the literary authority of the former colonial power shifts between a desire for autonomy and the wish to have a share of its glory. However, if not for ideological reasons (as in the case of *Le Messenger*), this desire for autonomy is never so great as to lead the press to reject the French consecration of a Cameroonian emigrant writer. The successful emigrant writer is *necessarily* Cameroonian because s/he has been consecrated in France and because s/he thereby enhances the prestige of Cameroonian literature.

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⁶² DUCOURNAU (C.), *La Fabrique des classiques africains*, op. cit., p. 22.

⁶³ Humboldt-Universität, Berlin.