Fieldwork, Style, and Planetary Knowledges: Amadou Hampâté Bâ from Colonialism to Afrofuturism

Anthropologists have lately begun to revisit and transform debates about ethnographic knowledge production and experimental textual form that shook the discipline in the 1980s and 1990s. Now-canonical texts like Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography (1986), edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, and Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences (1986), by George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, famously highlighted anthropology’s proximity to literature and looked often to literary theory for help thinking through the politics of ethnographic representation. These questions resonate again today as anthropologists ask how the future of the discipline is bound up in experimental impulses and in the creation of ethnographic knowledge across and in collaboration with the plastic arts, cinema, literature (in its broadest sense), and fiction.

If the collection Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology (2015), edited by Orin Starn, seeks explicitly to take up the mantle of this earlier experimental moment, other recent books also provoke us to imagine anthropological futures alongside aesthetic experimentation and the ethnographic claims that literature and fiction can make. For example, Fischer’s Anthropology in the Meantime: Experimental Ethnography, Theory, and Method for the Twenty-First Century (2018) surveys terrain where science and technology studies meets fiction and transcultural artistic practices in “multiscale” (or “multimedia”, we might say) experimental fieldwork; by contrast, Stuart McLean’s Fictionalizing Anthropology: Encounters and Fabulations at the Edges of the Human turns more pointedly to the categories of fiction and fabulation to ask what anthropology can learn from imaginative types of world-making.

What is prompting this renewed interest in experimental anthropology and its relationships with creative, imaginative, and fictional media? One answer, I think, is a deep sense of political uncertainty in the twenty-first century and a related sense of anxiety about what kind of epistemological future the category of the human has in anthropology. This helps explain why Fischer argues that “new forms of [biological and social] life” break through in unforeseeable ways as contemporary social structures decouple the past from the future and as ecological futures leave us guessing. For Fischer, “the time of anthropology” in this moment of uncertainty “will be one of constant experimentation” (AM 1-2; emphasis in original). Likewise, McLean insists that anthropology “stands to learn from art and literature...as distinct modes of engagement with the materiality of expressive media—including language—that always retain the capacity to exceed and destabilize human intentions” (FA x). For McLean, a focus on how anthropology can render meaningless the distinction between documentary and fiction actually positions “invention” as a pressing political imperative and response to right-wing populisms plaguing the West today (FA xi). Whereas the “Writing Culture” debates in the 1980s and 90s signaled a crisis within anthropology, in this twenty-first-century context the experience of crisis seems to come from without, pushing anthropology to reinvent itself by opening onto domains of knowledge and modes of expression that have hitherto not coincided with its empiricist purview.

In this essay I want to address this moment of disciplinary reinvention and creative uncertainty by examining how experimental literary fieldwork generates speculative
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global knowledge projects. I want to focus not simply on representations of fieldwork in literature, but more strongly on how style and form create and communicate new kinds of ethnographic knowledge. More specifically, by taking up the ethnographic memoirs of Malian writer, ethnographer, and colonial civil servant Amadou Hampâté Bâ (1900/01-1991), I study how literary stylizations of local African knowledges come to suggest new political understandings of “Global Africa” today.

Hampâté Bâ was a colonial civil servant in the 1920s and 30s who went on to receive formal training in ethnography, studying under the influential Africanist Théodore Monod at the Institut Français [now Fondamental] d’Afrique Noire in Dakar. His writing addresses West African ethnohistory and oral traditions but also, and at the same time, offers a provocative ethnographic look at the French colonial state and its impact on local cultures. Hampâté Bâ wrote more conventional social-scientific studies like L’empire peul du macina (1955) as well as more literary works like his prizewinning narrative L’étrange destin de Wangrin (1973) and his two volumes of memoirs, Amkoullel, l’enfant peul (1991) and Oui mon commandant! (1994). In this latter series of works he offers ethnographic reflections on colonial ideologies and on West African oral cultures, relying on narrative forms that communicate this “field knowledge” to non-African readers. These are documentary texts that are in many ways indistinguishable from literary fiction, and I focus mainly on Oui mon commandant! here in order to highlight how Hampâté Bâ’s epistemological project moves from the colonial moment (and his position in it) to planetary perspectives on Africa and African knowledges that we more readily associate today with Afrofuturism.

Hampâté Bâ’s literary anthropology is both accessible to readers and unmistakably experimental. As such it demands that we consider fieldwork and literary style as mutually constitutive textual elements. But what are the political dimensions and resonances of this relationship? And what kinds of knowledge does this relationship create and circulate? At its broadest level, this essay studies how literary form expresses fieldwork, that seemingly extra-literary methodology that signals the empirical kernel of the social sciences, and the particular epistemological thrust that literature recuperates when it transforms “the field” into a stylistic and formal problem. To take up this series of issues I want first to read Hampâté Bâ and Oui mon commandant! in terms of the twenty-first-century experimental concerns with which I began this essay. I then want to explore how Hampâté Bâ’s literary/ethnographic experimentation intersects with planetary visions of knowledge production in a contemporary moment of political and epistemological uncertainty.

Hampâté Bâ and Anthropology’s Literary Turn

Hampâté Bâ’s memoirs express a deeply instructive thrust that speaks both to his literary prowess and to his anthropological affinities. In his literary works he deftly shows off his skills as a storyteller by developing himself as a literary character possessing a keen sense of style. But he also puts style in the service of ethnography, since he uses his sense of storytelling to communicate knowledge about “traditional” African cultures and the French colonial state to an imagined community of non-African readers. In texts like Wangrin (the story of the wheelings and dealings of the text’s eponymous antihero, an indigenous trickster-figure from the early twentieth century) and the memoirs, Hampâté Bâ speaks authoritatively about African oral traditions and
local histories, on the one hand. On the other hand, he also speaks about French colonialism from the inside since he worked as a clerk and a mid-level civil servant before being forced out of the colonial administration by the Vichy government.

Wangrin and the memoirs are ethnographic fictions in the sense that they offer wonderfully stylized exposition of colonialism and oral cultures while at the same time allowing Hampâté Bâ to develop himself as a literary character. This is a point missed by the executor of Hampâté Bâ’s literary estate, Hélène Heckmann, who appends a defense of the authenticity of his work to the text of *Oui mon commandant*. She upbraids unnamed scholars who have wondered about the veracity of certain interactions with colonial administrators or the representation of certain characters in a short text that gives readers pause and alerts them to textual elements that do not conform to conventional autobiographical narrative. But the play of fiction in Hampâté Bâ’s work does not involve the authenticity of this or that character, detail, or story—all of these are undecidable, anyway. It has to do, instead, with the creative forms of distancing that he instantiates between his writerly self and the self that appears as a literary character and storyteller within the autonomous ethnographic world of the text. It has to do, in other words, with style and the way in which style allows for the creative narrativization of ethnographic knowledge. In what follows, I consider several examples of Hampâté Bâ’s stylistics and writerly virtuosity from *Oui mon commandant!* and consider what it has to tell us about experimental anthropology today.

It is in this second volume of memoirs that Hampâté Bâ puts his penchant for ethnographic storytelling to its most provocative narrative use. Whereas the childhood stories of *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul* transform the text into a colonial-era bildungsroman, we could give *Oui mon commandant* the Joycean subtitle “A Portrait of the Anthropologist as a Young Man” owing to the fact that in this memoir Hampâté Bâ not only documents local cultural histories and oral traditions but also points to his own incurable habit of conducting fieldwork during his displacements in French West Africa. For example, on leaving the historic city of Segou on his way to the colonial hinterland of Ouagadougou, he remarks, “Je m’occupais à retranscrire les récits recueillis dans le grand registre où je consignais jour après jour tous les éléments de tradition orale que je récoltais en cours de route—comme je ne cessai de le faire tout au long de ma vie” (*OMC* 31-32). The reader has a sense of peaking over Hampâté Bâ’s shoulder as he writes up field notes; crucially, though, the reader also buys into the ethnographic expertise underpinning Hampâté Bâ’s stories about local traditions and about the French colonial administration.

At other moments in the memoir, however, he incorporates ethnographic asides and excurses explicitly addressing Western readers who are presumed to lack the requisite cultural fluency to make sense of certain beliefs or traditions. At one point, Hampâté Bâ tells the story of the time he spent working with an interpreter named Moro Sidibé, the great adversary of Wangrin. Readers of *L’étrange destin de Wangrin* easily remember Moro Sidibé as the hapless indigenous civil servant who fell prey to some of Wangrin’s most memorable schemes. Little did the former know, Hampâté Bâ remarks in his memoir, that he would soon be delivering a moving funeral speech for Wangrin in which he would formally forgive his rival and ask him for forgiveness in turn. Hampâté Bâ reproduces this speech and explains, “Une telle attitude, tout à l’honneur de Moro Sidibé, peut paraître étonnante pour les Européens ; en réalité elle était conforme à une antique tradition qui voulait que ‘la mort efface toute querelle et tout différend’ ” (*OMC* 31-32).
This pedagogical clarification directly addresses Western readers and allows Hampâté Bâ to step outside the memoir form and play the role of a literary character/storyteller. The explanatory aside also evinces the kind of narrative relationship with an imagined readerly public that emerges through Hampâté Bâ’s literary ethnography: this relationship is predicated on the virtuosity of the storyteller and on Hampâté Bâ’s sense of the fundamental communicability of traditional African cultures and of everyday life under French colonialism in West Africa.

This didacticism-cum-virtuosity is especially striking in Hampâté Bâ’s reflections on and narrations of events and stories dealing with his work as a clerk, accountant, or assistant administrator in the French colonial bureaucracy. As he travels from post to post, he related significant happenings from early in his career and takes care to situate these major events in the day-to-day life of the colonial administration. This strategy provides readers with a perspective on the French administration as a social space possessing its own cultural logic, one that Hampâté Bâ is in a privileged position to observe since he works for the colonial state while remaining nonetheless a colonized subject.

We might consider the episode from Oui mon commandant! titled “Une conversion inattendue”, which describes how Hampâté Bâ, now no longer on the lowest rung of the colonial administrative order, arrives as a clerk in the Upper Volta town of Tougan and finds that his reputation as an Islamic scholar has preceded him. The other indigenous civil servants, all lapsed Muslims forced by the colonial state to convert to Catholicism, look on him as a marabout, a religious teacher, a designation that displeases our hero since “Le titre de marabout comportait en effet plus d’épines que de fleurs” (OMC 322). He explains that at the time the French considered marabouts to be zealots bent on converting colonized subjects to militant Islam: “aussi l’administration coloniale leur faisait-elle chasse ouverte, surtout dans les pays où cette religion n’avait pas encore beaucoup pénétré. Or à l’époque, les Samos, comme les Bobos, les Gourmantchés, les Mossis et presque tous les peuples voltaïques tatoués, ne pratiquaient pas l’Islam” (OMC 323). Hampâté Bâ opens his story with a gesture of ethnographic contextualization, but his keen sense of pedagogy pushes him to take his explanatory narrative much further.

The drama occurs when Hampâté Bâ helps the commandant’s indigenous interpreter renew his Islamic faith, drawing the ire of local French missionaries who convince the authorities in Upper Volta to open an official inquiry on the interpreter’s “conversion”. It so happens that, imbued with the spirit of republican secularism, the French commandant in question resents the church’s involvement in local affairs and sharply criticizes church leaders in his report on the incident. But what is more important for my purposes here is the way Hampâté Bâ accounts for his commandant’s actions and religious liberalism, which deserves to be quoted at length:

À l’époque, aucun commandant de cercle ou de subdivision ne pouvait espérer mener une enquête valable à l’insu de son interprète et de son commis ; aussi le commandant nous demanda-t-il d’être francs avec lui et de l’aider à mener son enquête sans parti pris...Dans l’histoire de l’administration coloniale, il ne fut pas le seul à oser prendre cette attitude. De tels comportements méritent d’être signalés et prouvent, s’il en était besoin, que l’on ne saurait mettre tous les administrateurs coloniaux dans le même panier. La généralisation, quelle qu’elle soit, n’est jamais le reflet de la réalité. (OMC 328)

Two forms of didacticism emerge in this passage. First, the object of Hampâté Bâ’s didactic discourse has a broad political scope, and he comments authoritatively not only on the everyday activities in his own administrative locale, but also on how these
activities are representative of certain humanizing and liberal trends in the administrative culture of French colonialism understood in its broadest sense. Second, this ethnographic didacticism is both informative, intended to fill out the cultural knowledge of well-meaning readers, and openly persuasive in that it seeks to disabuse readers of the idea that they might angrily paint all white French administrators with the same brush.

Hampâté Bâ is not interested here in offering any sort of naïve apology for certain strains of colonial paternalism. At stake in his commentary is the creation of an anthropological persona who can speak with as much authority about the intricacies of colonial social relations as he does about his own cultural traditions and customs. In this sense, we can view this passage as Hampâté Bâ demonstrating his own ethnographic virtuosity, since he is clearly fluent enough in the culture of French administrative life that he is able to anticipate the potential reactions of imagined anticolonial (implicitly Western) readers and critique them with moralizing ethnographic rhetoric. The textual creation of this authoritative and trustworthy persona, a character in the work in his own right, allows us to link the virtuosity of the storyteller to didacticism as an epistemological project that, for Hampâté Bâ, is thoroughly transcultural. This exercise of virtuosity provokes us to add an additional layer of textual complexity to Walter Benjamin’s reading of storytelling as pure use value, in which he suggests that “the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers.” As Oui mon commandant! shows, the literary horizons of this didactic use value are expanded when the relationship between storyteller and reader is triangulated through the representation of the storyteller as a character in their own work.

Fieldwork for Hampâté Bâ, as well as the knowledge it generates, is inseparable from its literary stylization. From this perspective, anthropology and literature work in tandem to produce new kinds of ethnographic knowledge and new relationships between the ethnographer, the reader, and the storyteller/character. But how does Hampâté Bâ’s approach to ethnographic didacticism allow us to push twenty-first-century work on experimental anthropology in new directions? And what does it have to say about knowledge production at the interface of anthropology and literature?

To take up these questions, let us return to Fischer’s and McLean’s recent books that seek (among other things) to theorize experimental anthropology today by placing the discipline in close contact with inventive forms of textual world-making. Fischer turns explicitly (though not exclusively) to literature and fiction as ethnographic field sites, as social repositories where new forms of life are worked out and against which anthropology can productively push back with its empirical grounding in “real-world” social forms. As he puts it with respect to provocative speculation in science fiction, “I am interested here in Asian hard science fiction and artworks as ethnographic registers of long standing as well as new imaginaries that anthropology can read for access to ways of thinking about forces beyond the individual’s or local communities’ control [...]” (AM 28). Because they set in motion imaginative life-worlds, literature and fiction for Fischer are ethnographic data that also act on the world outside the text and push anthropology to sharpen the claims it can make on the future. His reasoning is worth quoting at length:

"Literature, film, and arts can provide ethnographic registers as well as being themselves material-cultural forms that not only have their own circulatory channels, publics or social audiences, political economies, and class or status positions but can also affect how we
feel, think, and act to make futures come about. I read them in juxtaposition with ethnographies written by anthropologists, to explore the anticipations and imaginaries of possible, realistic futures, tempered by the ethnographies of the here and now, looking ahead. (AM 300)

Literary imaginings have material effects that speak to and engage real publics. For Fischer, these are processes alongside which anthropology can study and imagine new social forms; but they are also processes that anthropology can ground in actually-existing social contexts since its disciplinary hallmark remains fieldwork outside the imaginative text.

McLean, for his part, asks similar questions with a rather different goal in mind. He interrogates the relationship between anthropology and fictionality (he often understands fictionality in terms of Deleuze’s idea of fabulation) so as to question the confidence with which we associate anthropology with representations of “reality”. Like Fischer, he insists on the material effects of fiction, literature, and art: these are social phenomena that act on the world and that spur us to imagine new forms of lived experience on the outer fringes of what we typically think humans can perceive. McLean lingers, for instance, on the example of Danish anthropologist Kirsten Hastrup’s uncanny encounter with a spirit realm in rural Iceland to ask how anthropology should render such phenomena that are both materially present and unreal at the same time.

The indistinguishability of the real and the unreal, of truth and fictionality, for McLean gets to the heart of what anthropology should be doing today. As he puts it, he is drawn to speculative textual worlds not to dwell in any kind of “self-absorbed textual experimentation” but to argue for “a different of worldly engagement” as anthropology confronts imaginative world-making. “This would demand, however, that the imagining of alternative worlds and their expression through writing be accorded the status of material practices capable of challenging and extending the parameters of what is understood to comprise reality” (FA 152). Whereas Fischer sees ethnographic fieldwork as “tempering” literature’s most speculative desires, for McLean these desires are beacons that signal where anthropology should direct its attention and help break down extant divisions (which persist even after the “crisis of representation” of the Writing Culture moment) between logos and mythos (FA 153). “Descriptive fidelity to the actual is routinely prioritized over poetic invention”, he notes, “which is, in contrast, denied any direct purchase upon the real” (FA 153). He points to the “all too fictional separation between truth and fictionality” and situates anthropology alongside art and literature as a “channel” for “insurrectionary, real-worldly ghosts of the not yet actual” (FA 153-54).

The upshot here is that anthropology for McLean must be in the business of imagining alternative realities rather than remaining stuck in the realm of descriptive representation.

My reading of Hampâté Bâ’s literary ethnography highlights its material effects: his exercises in virtuosity seek to generate a community of readers who can assure the cosmopolitan circulation of local African knowledges. In other words, his ethnographic didacticism is always already bent on actualizing new epistemological relationships. As such, this is the kind of literary/anthropological writing that Fischer and McLean both draw on and call for in their work on experimental anthropology. But the case of Hampâté Bâ also provokes us to inflect this conversation differently. For one thing, although anthropologists turning to literature is already a provocative gesture that can lend a speculative edge to ethnographic fieldwork, this should not necessarily imply that
literature can be too readily assimilated to anthropology. Fischer speaks of sci-fi novels or other fictional forms as offering ethnographic “registers”, but we should view the ethnographic as coexisting with a literary register that is obviously also at work in fictional texts. Novels are, of course, not just detailed plots to be mined for speculative social or political symptoms. They are formal and stylistic worlds, as well, and any material effects of literature cannot be separated from literature’s formalizing gestures.

As I have shown in this reading of Oui mon Commandant!, Hampâté Bâ comfortably and consciously inhabits literary and ethnographic registers at the same time, playing with the expectations readers bring to both anthropology and fictional storytelling. Moreover, these registers appear inseparable in his work: literary stylization is what makes his ethnographic vignettes so communicable, and characterology is what drives the anthropological rapport he wants to establish with his readers. It is not enough, then, for Hampâté Bâ to recount episodes from his days as a colonial functionary or to give readers a taste of the local oral histories he collected during his travels throughout French West Africa. This epistemological work must also be stylized in his writing, such that epistemology and virtuosity go hand in hand in the transcultural communication of ethnographic knowledge. This helps explain why, in the middle of a story about a French commandant recognizing the children he had with his African mistress (meant to illustrate “la puissance des administrateurs coloniaux dans les colonies françaises” (OMC 201)), Hampâté Bâ shows off his storytelling prowess by leaving the formal French in which he has recreated the event in order to reproduce the imperfect français des tirailleurs spoken by low-level African functionaries who try to dissolve tensions between two administrators. We are suddenly confronted with “Ô vous deux grands chefs ! Vous n’a pas honte bagarrer devant deux nègres qui regarder vous comme deux coqs y faire corps à corps sans baïonnettes ?” (OMC 203). This linguistic irruption shifts the scene’s perspective, gives readers a sense of what this kind of French looked like at the time, and crucially reminds readers that Hampâté Bâ the storyteller is still in control. Stylistic virtuosity here is part and parcel of Hampâté Bâ’s cosmopolitan knowledge project.

This observation returns us to McLean’s claim that anthropological research favors description over “poetic invention”. This is an epistemological priority that he wants to break down. As forceful as McLean’s diagnosis is, though, and as keenly aware as he is of the stakes involved in its articulation, he is less clear on what a more equal relationship between description and poetics might look like, or on what kinds of knowledge such a relationship might produce. It is on this level, however, that I seek to intervene in my reading of Hampâté Bâ’s work. If literary writing is to offer more than just a narrative register for anthropology then it must do so in experimental texts that highlight the ways in which ethnographic narrative is not easily extricated from formal innovation or stylistic virtuosity. These two elements are part of what makes up the very stuff of the literary, and as such cannot be set aside in a new anthropological turn to literature. This is, of course, not to argue that anthropologists must become literary critics. It is to argue, however, that the kinds of epistemological work that experimental texts do are imbued with questions of style and form. Hampâté Bâ’s ethnographic didacticism presumes the fundamental communicability of local African knowledges and imagines these knowledges on a global scale by using his virtuosity to imagine and address communities of non-African readers. This is a powerful example of the kinds of knowledge that texts experimenting between anthropology and literature can generate,
and I want to turn to its planetary dimensions in the next section of this essay. This is also a turn to its political dimensions, since the literary stylization of field knowledge mobilizes a corresponding experimental politics of knowledge production.

**Speculative Universalism and Experimental Knowledges**

As I suggested at the outset, the turn toward literature and fiction in anthropological experimentation today seems to spring in no small measure from perceptions of ecological, political, and democratic crisis. The contemporary conjuncture seems to demand that imaginative art forms serve as touchstones for new critical knowledges that are both speculative and grounded. Hampâté Bâ’s work pushes us in this direction as well, since it is invested in the speculative dimensions of local African knowledges. These dimensions have a global reach, and I want to suggest that the planetary scale at which he ultimately arrives pushes us to imagine new epistemological responses to a time of crisis. To do so, I want to highlight a key moment of transition in *Oui mon commandant!* that sees Hampâté Bâ move from a colonial to a planetary field of vision.

As Achille Mbembe argues in his 2016 book, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, this zooming-out is possible because the colony is the constitutive flip side of modern democracy: colonization is the “corps nocturne” of modern democracy, at once part of its genealogy and its anti-democratic condition of possibility. He goes on to argue that our experience of politics and democratic crisis today is planetary; ecological crisis and the end of a certain anthropocentrism mean that “Nous sommes donc passés de la condition humaine à la condition terrestre” (*PI* 23; emphasis in original). Mbembe situates afrofuturism in this planetary space beyond the category of the human, and he goes on to imagine, alongside Frantz Fanon, a political ethics of responsibility and detachment from nativist logics of belonging. Hampâté Bâ’s work provokes us to ask what kinds of knowledge operate in this *condition terrestre* opened up by the same crisis that has pushed anthropology toward literary experimentation.

Afrofuturism for Mbembe involves a surpassing of Western humanism that privileges humans’ extensions into technological objects by thinking this categorical extension in terms of histories of Black subjugation (*PI* 146-47). It even suggests a *condition cosmique* beyond our already overwhelming *condition terrestre*. Hampâté Bâ is, of course, not a futuristic sci-fi author, and the shift in his writing that I describe is a movement toward rather than a conscious embrace of Afrotuturism. That said, this shift opens up an entirely new scale of analysis and puts forth speculative Africanist knowledges with a planetary reach. Whereas the planetary for Mbembe signifies a gesture beyond the human, for Hampâté Bâ it indexes a speculative epistemological universalism with African roots.

Toward the end of *Oui mon commandant!*, Hampâté Bâ’s carefully honed narrative link between virtuosity and didacticism gives way to two brief expository meditations on the history of colonialism in which he pulls back from microlevel ethnographic considerations of his relationship to French colonial bureaucracy in favor of a sweeping look at the colonial project writ large. In these essays, titled “Du ‘commerce muet’ à la colonisation économique” and “Face nocturne et face diurne”, he lays bare the far broader stakes of his didactic project via reflections on the colonial situation and its linguistic legacy. These pages are devoted to Hampâté Bâ’s increasingly keen awareness of the structural subtleties of colonial social relations, but they do not resemble the other
anecdotes that punctuate his narrative and instead are characterized by a loftier, more detached tone. In the first meditation he explains his understanding of exploitative colonial economics, but he shifts his perspective in “Face nocturne et face diurne” to account for why he is unable to reject colonialism out of hand: “Il faut accepter de reconnaître que l’époque coloniale a pu laisser des apports positifs, ne serait-ce, entre autres, que l’héritage d’une langue de communication universelle grâce à laquelle nous pouvons échanger avec des ethnies voisines comme avec les nations du monde” (OMC 416-17). For Hampâté Bâ, the colonial era left behind not just a language (French) but also a universal mode of communication that allows for dialogue between African societies and between former colonized subjects and individuals the world over.

An unspoken implication and corollary of this idea is that Hampâté Bâ’s vast ethnographic knowledge might not even be available to non-African readers had it not been for the spread of the French language. This linguistic universalism is part and parcel of his broader ethnographic project, begun in earlier works such as L’Étrange destin de Wangrin, which investigates the ways in which writing remains faithful to orality and oral traditions during the act of transcription. This project sees Hampâté Bâ situate himself as an intermediary in a process of transtextual translation, one involving both linguistic conversion in the conventional sense and translation of and between disparate textual forms that are also distinct forms of textual world-making. The historical layering that takes place in the text is what makes this form of translation possible, since Hampâté Bâ’s linguistic universalism reroutes colonial histories through postcolonial, utopian imaginings of the planetary communication and consumption of Africanist ethnographic knowledge.

“Face nocturne et face diurne” begins with the admission, “Certes, la colonisation a existé de tous temps et sous tous les cieux”, a rhetorical gesture that might appear as a curious act of moral dilution if it was sequestered from the principal argument of the meditation. Hampâté Bâ draws this act of recognition back into his larger project and, by extension, back into his didactic relationship with his readers. He ends this opening paragraph by asserting colonialism’s legacy of communicative universalism: “À nous d’en faire le meilleur usage et de veiller à ce que nos propres langues, nos propres cultures, ne soient pas balayées au passage” (OMC 416-17). From this perspective, what is at stake in the transcultural preservation and communication of African oral traditions is the inevitability of wrestling with the contingencies of French colonialism’s linguistic heritage: this is a sort of linguistic débrouillardise that opens up the ethnographic potential of universal communication without, for all that, obscuring or explaining away its colonial origins. The didacticism of Oui mon commandant! actualizes this “making do” with colonialism’s linguistic legacy, and Hampâté Bâ’s expository essays on the colonial situation function as methodological expedients, designed to reveal to readers the goals of his didactic project (i.e., the preservation on a planetary scale of African cultures and traditions through their expression in a universal language) and the colonial cultural history of his approach.

These meditations represent the epistemological climax of the project Hampâté Bâ undertakes in his memoir. Speculative universalism is linked through language to African colonial histories: this is how Hampâté Bâ reckons with colonial legacies and transforms them into experimental knowledge forms. But this shift toward a planetary epistemological scope has political dimensions, as well. Let us return to Mbembe’s argument here. He writes that
À peu près partout... la démocratie est en crise. Elle éprouve, sans doute plus qu’hier, d’énormes difficultés à reconnaître à la mémoire et à la parole leur pleine et entière valeur en tant que fondements d’un monde humain que nous aurions en partage, en commun, et dont l’espace public aurait à prendre soin... Du coup, les flux incessants d’événements qui frappent nos consciences ne s’inscrivent guère dans nos mémoires comme histoire... (PI 169)

The crisis of democracy is also a crisis of historicity, of the failure to experience the present and its political stakes as history. Hampâté Bâ’s project suggests that we might respond to this double crisis by imagining speculative knowledges, alternative ways of knowing the world, that emerge from but are not limited to earlier, circumscribed historical moments. These types of knowledge would be always already experienced as historical but at the same time would require universal communicability that would see them shift and morph as they extended across the planet. This, at least, is how Hampâté Bâ imagines the planetarization of Africanist knowledges without giving up their colonial histories. The task that remains now for critics who engage with these kinds of experimental anthropologies is to define new vocabularies capable of naming and describing what these historicized, speculative, yet planetary knowledges contain.

It is in this vein that I want to conclude this essay, by taking this call for new epistemological vocabularies and circling back to the literary turn in twenty-first-century anthropology with which I began. The case of Hampâté Bâ shows us that any ethnographic turn to literature today must reckon with the literary itself, with the imaginative gestures of style and form that make literature and fiction aesthetically distinctive. The risk here is that if anthropology misses the literary in an all-too-eager effort to transform itself then this experimental drive boils down to an act of translation, an act of converting imaginative narrative into ethnographic data that will then lend a fictional edge to anthropology proper. This risk rather deflates the critical richness of the anthropology-literature interface. What I have sought to highlight here are the ways in which the literary helps to generate new forms of speculative knowledge, alongside questions of narrative but distinct from them, as well. For Hampâté Bâ, style and form are inseparable from his fieldwork experiences in colonial West Africa, but they are also tools for imagining new ethnographic ways of knowing the world. The shift or opening that occurs in Oui mon commandant! moves his project from a colonial to a planetary scale, and in so doing it provokes us to imagine new types of historicized universal knowledge as responses to political crisis. This is a speculative, even utopian, gesture, to be sure, but speculation is at the heart of the contemporary anthropology-literature nexus. It is what links the literary to the ethnographic in the imagination of experimental forms of political knowledge.

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NOTES

1 See Orin Starn (ed.), Writing Culture and the Life of Anthropology, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015; Michael M. J. Fischer, Anthropology in the Meantime: Experimental Ethnography, Theory, and Method for the Twenty-First Century, Durham, Duke University Press, 2018 (hereafter cited as AM); and Stuart McLean, Fictionalizing Anthropology: Encounters and Fabulations at the Edges of the Human, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2017 (hereafter cited as FA). To this list we could also add scholars outside anthropology who work on the discipline and on its experimental relationship with literature and fiction. See Vincent Debaene, Far Afield: French Anthropology between Science and Literature, Chicago, University of Chicago


7 Achille Mbembe, *Politiques de l’inimitié*, Paris, La Découverte, 2016, p. 35 and p. 35-50 generally (hereafter cited as *PI*).
