“All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother”: Psychoanalysis and Race

Hortense J. Spillers

When I was young and free and used to wear silks1 (and sat in the front pew, left of center, I might add), I used to think that my childhood minister occasionally made the oddest announcement. Whenever any one of our three church choirs was invited to perform at another congregation, our minister, suspecting that several of his members would stay home or do something else that afternoon, having already spent some hours at worship, skillfully anticipated them. Those who were not going with the choir were importuned to “send go.” The injunction always tickled me, as I took considerable pleasure in conjuring up the image of a snaggle-toothed replica of my seven-year-old self going off in my place. But the minister meant “send money,” so pass the collection plate. Decades later, I decided that the “send-go” of my childhood had an equivalent in the semiotic/philosophical discourse as the mark of substitution, the translated inflections of selves beyond the threshold of the fleshed, natural girl. It was not only a delightful but a useful idea to me that one herself

This essay is an excerpt from a longer work to be published under the same title in, first, Boundary 2 23 (Fall 1996) and, second, Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, ed. Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen (forthcoming from University of California Press). Many thanks to Elizabeth Abel. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

1. This sentence alludes to a wonderful collection of short stories by the Barbadian Canadian writer, Austin Clarke, When He Was Free and Young and He Used to Wear Silks (Toronto, 1971).

Critical Inquiry 22 (Summer 1996)
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need not always turn up. One and one did not always make two but might well yield some indeterminate sum, according to the context in which the arithmetic was carried out, indeed which arithmetic was performed. I have been suggesting that we need to work the double in this discussion.

Perhaps this is as factual as I know: In any investigatory procedure concerning African American culture, a given episteme fractures into negative and positive stresses that could be designated the crisis of inquiry that reveals where a kind of abandonment—we could also call it a gap—has occurred. Rather than running straight ahead toward a goal, the positivity (a given theoretical instrument) loops back and forward at once. For example, the notion of substitutive identity, not named as such in the literature of sociocultural critique, is analogous to the more familiar concept of negation. On the one hand, negation is a time-honored concept of philosophical discourse and is already nuanced and absorbed, if not left behind, by linked discursive moves, from Hegel to Marx, from Kojève to Sartre and Lacan. On the other hand, it is a useful concept to “introduce,” alongside the psychoanalytic hermeneutic, to a particular historical order located in the postmodern time frame as a move toward self-empowerment, but in an era of discourse that needn’t spell out the efficacy of either. (The same might be said for the concept of the subject.) We are confronted, then, by divergent temporal frames or beats that pose the problem of adequacy—how to reclaim an abandoned site of inquiry in the critical discourse when the very question that it articulates is carried along as a part of the methodological structure, as a feature of the paradigm that is itself under suspicion, while the question itself foregrounds a thematic that cannot be approached in any other way. If one needs a subject here, with its repertoire of shifts and transformations, and negation, with its successive generational closures and displacements, though both might be regarded as a disappeared quest-object at best, or a past tense for theory at worst, then we have come to the crisis that I have told, the instrument trapped in a looping movement or behind-time momentousness that need jump ahead. One tries in this fog of claims to keep her eyes on the prize. If by substitutive identities—the “send-go”—we mean the capacity to represent a self through masks of self-negation, then the dialectics of self-reflection and the strategies of a psychoanalytic

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hermeneutic come together at the site of a “new woman/man.” That, I believe, is the aim of the cultural analysis.

A break toward the potentiality of becoming, or the formation of substitutive identities, consists in going beyond what is given; it is also the exceeding of necessity. While this gesture toward a theory of the transcendent is deeply implicated in the passage and itinerary of modern philosophy and the Cartesian subject, it is not so alien to the narratives and teachings of overcoming long associated not only with native traditions of philosophy in the lifeworld (via the teachings of the Christian church) but entirely consonant with the democratic principles on which the U.S. was founded (though immensely simplified in the discourses of liberal democracy). But the resonance that I would rely on here is less dependent on a narrative genealogy, whose plot line culminates in an epiphany of triumph, than on a different relation to the “Real,” where I would situate the politics and the reality of “race.” Even though it is fairly clear that “race” can be inflected (and should be) through the Lacanian dimensions, its face as an aspect of the “Real” brings to light its most persistent perversity. In Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen’s reading of Lacan’s “linguisteries,” the “real” is said to be “‘pure and simple,’ ‘undifferentiated,’ . . . ‘without fissure,’” and “always in the same place” (L, p. 192). As these Lacanian assertions seem to match precisely the mythical behavior of “race,” or of any “myth today,” they pointedly refer to the situation of the subject of enunciation—his or her own most “Real,” or the status quo. In the classical narratives of psychoanalytic theory, the status quo, the standing pat, does not by error open onto death’s corridor, inasmuch as it freezes and fixes subjectivity in a status permanently achieved. The outcome breezes by us in the very notion of status, with its play on statue, sto, stant, and so on. In this sense, overcoming is the cancellation of what is given. Borch-Jacobsen offers this explanation: “Thus language, the manifestation of the negativity of the subject who posits himself by negating (himself as) the Real, works the miracle of manifesting what is not; the tearing apart, the ek-sistence, and the perpetual self-overtaking that ‘is’ the subject who speaks himself in everything by negating everything” (L, p. 193). “Speaking” here is both process and paradigm to the extent that signifying enables the presence of an absence and registers the absence of a presence, but it is also a superior mark of the transformative, insofar as it makes something by cutting through the “pure and simple” of the “undifferentiated” in the gaps and spacings of signifiers. If potentiality, then, can be said to be the site of the human, rather than the nonhuman, fixedness; more precisely, if it is the “place” of the subjectivity, the condition of being/becoming subject, then its mission is to unfold—through “words, words, words” (L, p. 193), yes, but “words, words,

words” as they lead us out to the re-presentational where the subject commences its journey in the looking glass of the symbolic.

Thus, to represent a self through masks of self-negation is to take on the work of discovering where one “is at”—the subject led back to his signifying dependence. Freud had thought a different idea—bringing unconsciousness under the domination of the preconscious—while Lacan, Freud’s post-Saussurean poet, revised the idea as the “mapped” “network of signifiers” brought into existence at the place where the subject was, has always been: “Wo es war, soll Ich werden.” We could speak of this process as the subject making its mark through the transitivity of reobjectivations, the silent traces of desire on which the object of the subject hinges. This movement across an interior space demarcates the discipline of self-reflection, or the content of a self-interrogation that “race” always covers over as an already-answered. But for oneself another question is posed: What might I become, insofar as . . . ? To the extent that “I” “signs” itself “elsewhere,” represents itself beyond the given, the onus of becoming boomerangs— Ralph Ellison’s word—as it rebounds on the one putting the question. But what impedes the function of the question?

Once posed, the interrogative gesture, the interior intersubjectivity, would fill up the Fanonian abîme, “the great white error . . . the great black mirage.” But might we suggest that a different question could come about with the acquisition of a supplemental literacy, one that could be regarded as alien and for that very reason to be learned and pressed into service? Frantz Fanon assumed that his great positivities (conceptual narratives) were always and constantly equal to themselves, and he was exactly right. But he went further by saying that both of them were “not” in the sense that they were borne on the wings of an illusion and to the extent that they were both unsatisfactory as self-sufficient points of the stationary, and this seems right too. He did not, however, ask of himself and his formulation, So what? Such a question could not have been posed by him because his allegory had not only responded to the “so what?” but had preempted indeed any other impudent intervention. But if we move back in the direction of a “prior” moment, the seven-year-old in the front pew, for instance, we can then go forward with another set of competencies that originate, we might say, in the bone ignorance of curiosity, the child’s gift for strange dreams of flying and bizarre, yet correct, notions about the adult bodies around her—how, for example, her father and brothers bent forward in a grimace when mischievously struck in a certain place above the knees by a little girl, propelling herself off a rollaway

5. For the boomerang effect and an inquiry into it, see Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (1952; New York, 1992), in particular the “Prologue,” pp. 3–14.
bed into their arms. The foreignness had already begun in the instant grasp of sexual and embodied division. But from that moment on, the imposition of homogeneity and sameness would also be understood as the great text of the “tradition” of “race.” The Fanonian abyss requires this ur-text as the “answer” that fosters a two-way immobility. But before “race,” something else has happened both within the context of “race” and alongside it.

Does tradition, then—depositories of discourse and ways of speaking, kinds of social practice and relations—enable some questions and not others? This seems so, but tradition, which hides its own crevices and interstices, is offered as the suture that takes on all the features of smoothness; in order to present itself as transparent, unruffled surface, it absorbs the rejects according to its most prominent configurations. But it seems that the move toward self-reflexivity demands a test of inherited portions of cultural content in order to discover not only what tradition conceals but, as a result, what one, under its auspices, is forced to blindside. What difference did it make that Fanon was a native speaker of French? That he had earned a significant place in French intellectual circles? His response seems appropriate—the sideways glance, the superbly ironical look. It was the effect of scission at the heart of the diasporic utterance. What he could not do, however, was read its outcome in reference to the “Negro of the Antilles,” as well as to “Frantz Fanon.” To have admitted that the diasporic African is cut on the bias to the West and not sharply at odds with it would have involved him in a contradiction that his polemic against the West could not abide. Nevertheless, the problematic that he carved out remains intact, and that is the extent to which the psychoanalytic hermeneutic has the least relevance to African diasporic lifeworlds.

Turning now to another protocol, we have the chance to pose the question again in an altered context. I want to look briefly at aspects of Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues’s Oedipe africain as an instance of psychoanalytic reference to a non-European community of subjects and as a systematic examination of symbolic currency (symbolization) as a response to the riddle that Fanon advances concerning the “Negro of the Antilles.” Again, it is important to my mind to insist that even though diasporic African and continental African communities share “race,” they pointedly differ in cultural ways and means; the contrary view, which flattens out black into the same thing despite time, weather, geography, and the entire range of complicating factors that go into the fashioning of persons, is difficult to put to rest, given, especially, what seems to be the unchanging face of racism. But unless we introduce cultural specificity to the picture, we run the risk of reenforcing the very myth that we would subvert. In that regard, the emphasis that Oedipe africain places on the processes of symbolization not only in the workings of psychoanalytic practice but in the making of human culture more broadly speaking offers a powerful antidote to reductive formulations. I have also examined
aspects of Ibrâhîm Sow’s *Les Structures anthropologiques de la folie en afrique noire* as a francophone reading from “inside” African culture. I try to bring the texts here into dialogue.

*Oedipe africain* is not available in English translation and was originally published in 1964 by French psychoanalysts who carried out clinical practice and observation in Dakar, Senegal from 1962–1966; a redacted version, which text I use for this essay, came out in 1984. While the authors acknowledge that the analyst must attempt to understand the patient in the entire context of his or her lifeworld and that no point of comparison can be sustained between one culture and another along a particular line of stress without an examination of the whole, they do contend that the oedipal complex pertains to all human societies. Its nuances will differ, however, according to one’s standing in the social order and the strategies of acculturation that are available to subjects within a given natal community. The authors suggest here that “a practitioner at work in a society foreign to his own definitely illustrates an essential characteristic of the analytic attitude; that is to say, no proposition can be understood without reference to a familial, social, and cultural context.”

If the knowledge that the analyst has about the total context is not exhaustive, “then what counts above all else is the analytical attitude that seeks to understand the place of the subject in what he says.” It seems to me that all dogmatic pronouncement, *before* and *despite* “what the subject says,” is precisely the way in which traditional analyses, of various schools of thought, have failed, including all brands of nationalist thinking, as well as more informed opinions that have evolved a *template* of values to which “the black man” is supposed to conform, and including, moreover, “the black man” as a formulation itself. This whole vital soul, imagined to be snoring beneath the wisdom of the ages, conveniently poised for the exact liberatory moment, or “leader,” is actually an unknown quantity in this very “soul” we thought we knew. Because the analyst, from the Ortigues’s point of view, *awaits* a content, he has in effect no program to “sell.” But the analyst here does not even do that much; he or she *responds* to a seeker.

Attempting to understand the subject in his or her discourse, the Ortigues address the specificity of illness by way of a number of case studies (references to aggression, the persecution complex and its intricate

7. See Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues, *Oedipe africain* (1966; Paris, 1984); hereafter abbreviated *OA*.
8. “En décrivant dans ce chapitre la situation d’un psychanalyste travaillant dans une civilisation étrangère à la sienne, nous n’avons fait en définitive qu’illuster un caractère essentiel de l’attitude analytique puisqu’aucun propos ne peut se comprendre sans référence au contexte familial, social, culturel” (*OA*, p. 57).
9. “Faudrait-il en conclure qu’une information sociologique poussée doit précéder le travail clinique? Nous répondrons que, si un minimum d’informations est nécessaire, ce qui importe avant tout c’est l’attitude analytique qui cherche à comprendre la place du sujet dans ce qu’il dit” (*OA*, p. 57; emphasis added).
functions, and so on). But in each instance the doctors, in touch with patients who have sought them out or have been referred to them by parents or school administrators, are not treating a single individual alone but an ensemble. Even the latter is not limited to the familial nucleus but may include ancestral and religious figures; in some cases, these might be the rab—an otherworldly figure—and the marabout, both of whom are active cultural figures in the Wolof, Lebu, and Serer communities of Senegal. The unseen seen, the “evidence” of things not seen, the rab, who may be either perverse of conduct “or possessively loving regarding a subject,” is often felt to be responsible for certain facets of the subject’s behavior. In this cultural setting, “illness is not a clinical entity at all” and certainly not foremost, but is “attributed by subjects to magical causality or the intervention of the divine.”

The cultures in question are not only not of the West but are situated on the cultural map of Islam. The Western doctors, then, are attempting to work within the limitations posed by linguistic difference as well as differences of religious and ethnic reference.

If “the element of coherence” or consistency by which illness is represented is embodied in the rab, then this intervention would pose one more reason, among a variety of others, why “the doctors and their consultants might have been derailed in their interrogation.” In any case, however, this complicating factor in the relationship between a speaking subject and the grammar of his speaking brings to focus one of the key differences between tools of Western practice and the African context, as Sow will spell out: Who is the subject of treatment? In the African context, there are no lone subjects of mental illness. A profoundly anthropological reading of subject disorder and its essentially communal and familiar character in traditional (and this distinction is crucial for Sow) African societies defines the project of Les Structures anthropologiques de la folie en afrique noire.

While the Ortigues are aware that their project comes freighted with its own peculiar cultural baggage and bias, they nevertheless take their chances within the framework of certain psychoanalytic assumptions, as we have seen. Sow, on the other hand, locates the subject at last within a global scheme of reading that examines the basic tenets of West African culture. As informative as this method may be, it is in its own way as general and generalist as he claims that the classical descriptions of mental illnesses are to the African field. Too “superficial and artificial” to account for “psychological, social, human, and clinical realities” en-

10. “Et, en effet, ici, la maladie n’est pas une entité clinique. Pour les maladies mentales il n’y a de classification que par la causalité magique ou le destin voulu par Dieu. . . . On se réfère soit à une action contrariante des rab, soit à l’amour possessif de rab liés à une famille, etc.” (OA, p. 40).

11. “L’élément de cohérence dans la représentation de la maladie c’est le rab. . . . C’est pourquoi nos consultants sont déroutés par nos interrogatoires” (OA, p. 40).
countered in traditional African communities, the nosographical and nosological categories and tables, Sow argues, are themselves less objectionable to him than the inadequate supplement of their means with culture-specific strategies. In Les Structures anthropologiques, he attempts to go beneath the manifestations of Western practice to penetrate its leading premises, to address and correct the problem, except that, in doing so, his chief actors are the macroelements of narrative and belief—the theatics of myth, of ancient tale and report. In that regard, he paints with a broader brush, as it were, and covers a canvass of wider scope, but ironically it seems that we lose the import of the psychoanalytic in the process precisely because, to Sow, it is unimpressively grounded in the messiness of the everyday world, in the utter evasion of the neat and rational category.

For example, madness in Sow’s critique is similarly configured to the way it is sketched in Oedipe africain—as a mishap in an ensemble of sociocultural relations. Sow calls it a “‘sign’” that indicates straightaway that the subject is expressing conflict between himself and the constitutive authorities of his personality that are external to him (SA, p. 42; AS, p. 44). Sow consistently distinguishes between personnalité and personne. It is the role of traditional therapy, then, alongside the interactive participation of family and community, to read and interpret the sign, to determine at what point in the constitutive network of the intimate structure of personality there has been breakdown or rupture in an otherwise highly articulated social function (see SA, p. 42; AS, p. 44). While it is fairly clear that Sow’s “extérieures” look and behave suspiciously like the Lacanian “supports” through which the subject of enunciation is “spoken,” Sow appears to so disjoin particular acts of enunciation from the culturally permissible that the neurosis itself erupts in “oneness.” The double dose of narcissistic desire, therefore, follows from “individuality,” when the neurotic personne behaves as if he were an end within himself:

In effect, what is signified for the neurotic is buried in his individuality and, in the final analysis, “doubles” or duplicates his narcissistic desire, which functions as if he were his own end in himself. For man confronting the sacred, however, what is signified is the Word, Law,


At the time of the work’s publication, the author was apparently a researcher and lecturer at the Laboratoire de Psychopathologie at the Sorbonne, Université René Descartes (Paris V) after having practiced psychiatric medicine in his native Senegal.

13. The French text reads: “En sa lecture la plus profonde, la folie est ‘signe’; elle indique d’emblée que le sujet affecté exprime un conflit: conflit entre lui et les instances constitutives de sa personnalité qui lui sont extérieures, selon la conception traditionnelle” (SA, p. 42).
Tradition—in short, man’s Origin, in the sacrifice of the founding Ancestor, creator of the Law, guarantor of peace and coexistence among present-day human beings. [AS, p. 207]

But the real question for me in light of this formulation is, What is the relationship between Word and the word in which personne, neurotic and otherwise, is orchestrated? It appears that we pass here rather too quickly—dropping the ball is more like it—from a social dysfunction to a coerced repair in the formidable evocation of overwhelming devices, the great di ex machina that silence all before them—the Law, the Origin, the Tradition. “Man confronting the sacred” is a mighty idea, but who can stand before it? And isn’t it quite possible that such standing would be unique? would represent an inimitable moment or an originary and irrecoverable act?

Nevertheless, Sow’s insistence on a constitutive network restores the psychoanalytic hermeneutic to its social coherence, to its intersubjective function. As traditional therapy in his account seeks to transform mental illness into an articulated language, it would repair the broken link in which the individual is not alone located: “Reestablishing order in the subject reconstitutes the loose connection and reinserts the subject into the place from which he has been expelled, cut off from his source of nourishment by an ‘aggressor’” [AS, p. 44].

An “affliction” in the structure of communication implies an aversive meeting of paroles, and, to that extent, the anthropological elements of madness in African society do not deny, at the very least, conflict at the heart of human relations. Sow’s “answer,” however, by deferring or displacing the source of illness onto a global abstracted Outer, envisages an absolute otherness, whereas the struggle for meaning appears to “reduce” the absolute by dispersing its centrality. In other words, the subject, in a different order of things, must discover the degree to which he has engendered his own alienation. Consequently, the Western subject, it seems, sprouts guilt and big shoulders in taking on responsibility for an outcome, whereas his African counterpart, at least if Sow is right, does not acquire a discourse for the guilty conscience inasmuch as his ultimate ground of social and moral reference is situated “outside” himself.

14. En effet, on pourrait dire que le signifié du névrosé est enfoui dans son individualité et, au bout du compte, “double” son désir narcissique qui fonctionne comme s’il était, en lui-même, sa propre finalité; alors que le signifié de l’homme face au sacré, c’est le Verbe, la Loi, la Tradition, en un mot: l’Origine, dans le sacrifice de l’Ancêtre fondateur, créateur de la Loi, garant de la paix et de la coexistence entre les humains actuels. [SA, p. 162]

15. “Rétablir l’ordre dans le sujet affecté, victime, veut dire, en même temps, reconstituer le lien rompu, réinsérer le patient dans la place d’où il avait été exclu, coupé de ses instances constitutantes par ‘l’agresseur.’ Ainsi, tout d’abord, il faudra transformer l’affection en structure de communication” [SA, p. 42].
In a sense, the universe projected in *Les Structures anthropologiques* is vestibular to both the historical and posthistorical insofar as it is finished and elegantly arranged according to an immemorial Law and Order that Sow elaborates at length. We can do no more than sketch some of its prominent features here. In West African cosmography, human and social order is based on an imbricated, yet hierarchical, grid of functions marked according to three levels of stress: (1) the sensible, given world of the *microcosmos*—the world that is immediate and given, the world of the social; (2) “the intermediary world of the genies, the spirits, and a repertoire of malevolent and beneficent forces of the *mesocosmos*”; and (3) “the *suprasensible* world of the Spirits elect, the Ancestors, the Godhead” (SA, p. 45; AS, p. 48). But there are ancestors and the Ancestor(s), as it seems apparent that the capitalized *Ancêtre* is the equivalent of the Godhead, if not exactly synonymous to it. Given this elaborate schematization, there is, in effect, “no one”—in a rather different sense from the *nothing* and *no one* of Western philosophical/psychoanalytic discourse—with its eye trained, finally, on an eclipsed God, or the One about whom silence is in order. In African discursive and social practice, as Sow narrates the scene, *one* is nothing more nor less than a link through which the three great valences of order reverberate. Therapy thus consists in bringing one back to harmonious relations with a cosmogonic principle whose intent can be teased out in various mythic narratives. There, “the prescriptions, rules, interdictions, and models of conduct” aim toward a definitive suggestion: that “cultural order and coherence repose on a delicate, subtle balance of the *differentiated* identity of each and all” (SA, p. 154; AS, p. 159), primarily the continuity of the generations in the passage of the biological age group, wave on wave of horizontal confraternities in progression toward the status of ancestry. In such a system, the strategies of rapprochement between God and human appear in language—“in speech, prayer, and dream, as the dialogue between distant interlocutors must pass through the privileged intercessory office of the Ancestors” (AS, p. 210 n. 9).16

From this perspective, mental illness is read as the interrupted circuitry between carefully delineated parts (see SA, pp. 10–11; AS, p. 6). But the texts of role and agency are not discoverable, inasmuch as they are already known from a transmitted structure of articulated cause and effect. Moreover, this symbolic economy, which rests in a transcendent signifier, generates a Story, unlike the discourse that breaks up into the atomized particles of evasive meaning, or a meaning delayed in the “effects” of the signifier. We would regard the latter as a symptom of modern social analysis that follows the trails of fragmented social objects—in

16. "Parmi les moyens du rapprochement, il y a la parole, la prière et le rêve... mais, comme toujours en Afrique, le dialogue entre Dieu et les hommes passe par l’intercesseur privilégié qu’est l’Ancêtre*” (SA, p. 164 n. 27).
short, a world defined by the loss of hierarchy, privileged moments, and ineluctably declarative—ambiguity expelled—utterances. We know this world as our own—the scene of scission and displacement.

But where would this buzz of the harmonious leave the culturally “illiterate,” the one who misreads the traffic signals? In the opening chapter of Les Structures anthropologiques, Sow treats at length the occurrence and frequency of mental illness in West African communities. As he adopts nosographical categories of description familiar to Western psychiatric practice, he is convinced that the categories themselves are ill-equipped to treat key questions, such as “the problem of the stain, of the pure and impure, that dominates Swedish psychopathology, for instance” (SA, p. 31 n. 36; AS, p. 32 n. 10), or the phenomenon of “la bouffée psychotique”: the most characteristic formal aspect of African psychiatry (SA, p. 31; AS, p. 31). If the “bouffée psychotique” is a characteristic form in African medicine, then persecution is the most frequently and meaningfully recurrent thematic of Continental practice (see SA, p. 34; AS, p. 35). He claims that it not only colors the entire field of practice but that it also occupies a privileged place in the anthropological system of representations across Black Africa. The ensemble of premises against which Sow leads up to his reading of the African conception of cosmos and its signifying role in the mental theatre might be summarized according to two binarily opposed tables of value. Traditional African institutions, in their preventive or prophylactic capacity, effectively maintain personal, interpersonal, and communal equilibrium. The psychological defenses are cultural and collective and may be compared with what we spoke of earlier as the Western implantation or interiorization of guilt.17 In other words, the persecutor in African culture embodies the externalization of guilt, whereas in Western culture, the guilt function is assumed by the person. Sow evaluates the internalizing of guilt as (1) “the origin of the morbid structure” and (2) “the sociocultural context of sin and blame” (SA, p. 25 n. 20; AS, p. 24 n. 7). But is it possible that the binary disposition is less than dispositive, even in a traditional African setting? Is it possible that traditional structures, precisely because they are time honored, do not always respond to a particular demand?

Among the case studies presented in Oedipe africain, the Ortigues’s Samba C., a fourteen-year-old Wolof Muslim, might raise interesting problems for Sow’s scheme. “According to the psychotherapeutic material presented to them,” the authors believe that Samba did reach the internalization of conflict, which process Sow identifies as the origin of morbidity in Western disorders, and that a dream reported to them by the

17. “Factors that are often cited are . . . effective psychological—in effect, cultural—defenses, such as the externalization of conflict, with precise group identification of a persecutor” (AS, p. 38) (“On souligne souvent, en effet . . . des défenses psychologiques—en fait, culturelles—efficaces telles que extériorité du conflit avec nomination collective précise d’un persécuteur” [SA, p. 36]).
analysand not only signalled such internalization but announced it as the onset of a series of psychotic episodes. The dream, which led him to the Western doctors, is described this way: "The baobab tree [the renowned tree of African lore and legend] of Samba’s initial vision, at the time of this dream . . ., cried out that the dead must be buried at his feet and not in the cemetery; the terrifying persona of Samba’s hallucinations was transformed into a man who declared these words: ‘It is the father of fathers.’” 18 Samba’s confrontation with representative instances of the paternal image—in the baobab tree and the transformations that it induced—suggested to the doctors that Samba’s troubles were related to the ancestors. In attempting to retrace the trajectory of the Ortigues’s conclusions, which follow below, we hope to see at least the divergence of interpretation between two styles of analytic practice and assumption. We can only guess how Sow might have read Samba’s case.

Samba C. first encountered trouble, when, passing under a baobab tree on returning to school one day, he heard a voice that called out to him by his family name three times. Samba does not answer, for responding would have been incorrect, but he does not continue on his way, and quite frightened, turns back toward home. He takes to his bed, trembling, vomiting during the night. For the rest of the following day and for some months afterward, Samba keeps his eyes closed, as if he feared a terrifying vision, “like children, something big, a devil.” He suffered from migraine headaches in the course of things, refused to eat, and in any case only imbibed small amounts of food and drink. He remained inert, prostrate, arms bent in moaning. His groans would intensify for hours at a time, in extended and monotonous plaint. The words that escaped from him came torn, babbled, barely audible and were accompanied by an involuntary shaking of the head.

Samba’s parents reported that the outbreak persisted for several months, and he was eventually led to neurological consultation and hospitalized. All the tests administered to him proved negative. During hospitalization, Samba’s state was unchanged three weeks later; he left the hospital after insisting upon it, having attempted escapes daily. Shortly thereafter, he was hospitalized in the psychiatric unit. In the course of a year, he was hospitalized three times and during interim periods was treated as an outpatient, subjected, during each term of hospitalization, to a series of electroshocks at the same time as psychotherapy. A neuroleptic treatment was pursued as well.

18. Le matériel de la psychothérapie montre qu’arrived au seuil d’un affrontement assumé personnellement, Samba . . . situe l’image paternelle et la castration dans le rapport aux ancêtres: le baobab de la vision initiale, lors d’un rêve (il figure dans le nombreux rêves), réclame que l’on entre “le mort” à son pied et non au cimetière; le personnage terrifiant des hallucinations s’est mué en un homme au regard bon qui prononce ces seuls mots: “C’est le père des pères.” [04, p. 101]
In Samba’s case, it is legitimate to speak of psychoanalytic psychotherapy in the most classic sense of the term. Samba’s demand was clear: He came “to talk in order to get well.” A rich transference relation was quickly established, as his treatment lasted a year and included some fifty-one sessions with the doctors. Samba was regarded as intelligent and sought to verbalize everything that he lived.19

Summarizing, we can make the following observations: (1) After two months and nine sessions of treatment, Samba barely got beyond the hallucinations that haunted his nights. “The visual representations ranged from children, to snakes, to a very large black man, who frightened him.” Samba reported auditory and visual hallucinations that included “snakes invading his body, drinking his blood, and the attacks made him feel that he would die soon.”20 The doctors were caught by the binary equation in Samba’s description—“fear”/“bliss-happiness” (“peur”/“bonheur”)—as they came to discover “that the voice of the baobab, which was the voice of the devil, was actually the projected persona of an older companion of Samba’s, one Malik, who, in Samba’s eyes, incorporated at once the

19. Les troubles de Samba ont commencé le jour où, passant sous un grand baobab en revenant de l’école, il entendit une voix qui l’appela trois fois par son nom de famille. Heureusement, il ne répondit pas car “quand on répond ce n’est mauvais, on devient fou, ou on est sale et seul dans la brousse” (comme un homme que Samba a vu jadis); il ne s’est pas retourné non plus. Il a eu très peur et est rentré chez lui en courant, s’est couché tremblant et a vomi dans la nuit. Depuis ce jour et des mois durant, Samba tient ses paupières closes comme s’il redoutait une vision terrifiante: “comme des enfants, quelque chose de gros, un diable.” Il souffre de céphalées intenses, refuse de s’alimenter et en aucun cas ne porte lui-même à ses lèvres le peu de nourriture ou de boisson qu’il absorbe. Il reste inerte, prostré, le dos voilé, en geignant. Ses gémissements peuvent, des heures durant, s’amplifier en de longues plaintes monotonès. Les quelques mots que l’on parvient à lui arracher sont murmurés, à peine audibles et accompagnés d’un mouvement de négation de la tête.

Ce tableau persistant plusieurs mois, au dire des parents, Samba est conduit à la consultation de neurologie et hospitalisé. Tous les examens pratiqués sont négatifs. Son état étant inchangé trois semaines plus tard, Samba sort sur sa demande insistante, après de quotidiennes tentatives de fugues. Il est hospitalisé peu après en psychiatrie. En un an il y sera hospitalisé à trois reprises et suivi entre-temps à titre externe. A chaque hospitalisation une série d’électro-chocs est pratiquée parallèlement à la psychothérapie. Un traitement par neuroleptiques est poursuivi également.

Dans le cas de Samba, il est légitime de parler de psychothérapie psychanalytique au sens le plus classique du terme. La demande de l’enfant est claire: il vient “parler pour être guéri.” Une relation transférentielle riche s’établit rapidement. A ce jour le traitement dure depuis un an et a comporté 51 séances. Samba est intelligent et cherche à verbaliser tout ce qu’il vit. [O4, pp. 96–97]

manhood virtue of boldness, physical force, and endurance, as well as the temptations to fall that led to Samba’s madness” (OA, p. 98). (2) “La folie” was understood by the doctors to have conformed to “désocialisation,” into which Malik had led his younger companion over a few years—disobeying and deceiving parents, insolence toward authority, thievery, and the violation of a fundamental prohibition, “going out at night.” The latter activity was strictly forbidden to children, especially treks into the bush or the countryside, those reputedly dangerous places thought to be inhabited by evil figures. This crossing the bar, we might say, manifested in various antisocial behaviors that challenged authority, was accompanied by gross misconduct toward Malik’s and Samba’s female peers. The doctors observed that “Malik’s ‘leadership’ was exercised in a decidedly sadistic tonality” and that none of the authority figures, including parents and teachers, were ever able to bring him in line. “Above all, Malik embodied for Samba an element of undeniable fascination” (OA, p. 98). (3) Samba, then, “was frightened by his desire to look like Malik, to be Malik [d’être un Malik]. The temptation was projected as the ‘devil”—the “saytané.” The attending marabouts, preceding consultation with the Western doctors, believed that the problem was the “devil,” who wanted to harm Samba. But as it turned out, Samba’s family, “his entourage,” had themselves had similar experiences, “since childhood, with the evidentiary presence of djinns and devils” (“Pour le père et la mère de Samba, pour tout l’entourage, l’existence des djiné et saytané est une évidence quotidienne depuis l’enfance; chacun a une ou plusieurs expériences personnelles les concernant”) (OA, p. 98).

4) “Samba finally arrived on the threshold of an interiorization” of guilt. The “devil” was Malik, wanting him to do ill, yet “he realized that he admired the older boy and that the latter was a thug” (“celui-ci était un voyou ignorant”) (OA, p. 99). Over time, “his fantasies concerning the persona of the devil . . . terrifying and attractive at once, were doubled and divided among three or four persons, as this game of doubling, coupling, and dividing allowed Samba ever greater suppleness in projecting himself into variable positions regarding his desire and its related anxiety.”

Even though Samba’s condition was ameliorated by treatment, the authors maintain that his state, for all that, proved irreversibly psychotic. To the question, What if the prognosis were inept, or unrelated to the strategies of cure available in Wolof society, the Ortigues respond with

21.

Dans ses fantasmes le personnage du diable, monolithique au départ, terrorisant et fascinant, s’est progressivement dédouble puis scindé en un groupe de 3 ou 4 personnes, ce qui permettait à Samba un jeu de plus en plus souple où il se projetait dans des positions variées à l’égard de son désir et de son anxiété. [OA, p. 99]
what is, for all intents and purposes, a question of their own: “Did not Samba’s culture impose on him, or propose to him in a privileged way the solution to his hallucinatory psychosis, vis-à-vis the theme of persecution?” The doctors believed that Samba had “jumped”—my word—his circumstance by internalizing his dilemma, by seeking to resolve it at the level of personality. In a sense, cutting loose from certain communal beliefs, feeling himself driven to the wall, he had sought other means of address and “become a stranger to himself while doing so, according to the level of personal conscience that had situated him ‘well ahead of the fathers.’”

In the culture in question, one did not reach for advancement beyond or away from the group, as they read the picture. At best, Samba’s condition in the end “appeared fragile, as the ‘devil’ remained discretely present” (OA, p. 100).

What I have interpreted in the foregoing paragraphs as declarative assertions are advanced as inquiries in the text, and this is important to note, inasmuch as the doctors are themselves aware that their speculative instruments are adopted from a very different cultural framework. For instance, they question whether or not it is thinkable that Samba has arrived at the interiorization of the conflict that he clearly expressed and whose implications he could explain—“Est-il pensable qu’il parvienne à intérioriser sa culpabilité?” (OA, p. 99). Furthermore, they handle certain conclusions that they have tentatively reached in a subjunctive appeal: In effect, Samba’s assumption of guilt would suppose that he had disconnected himself from certain communal values, and is such delinking not only possible but even desirable? The Ortigues go on to say that everything during the course of initial treatment happened “as if” Samba, feeling no way out, had placed all his hope, had articulated all his demand in the opening dialogue of the first interviews and as if “he assumed the risk of an unknown outcome” (“il assumait le risque de l’issue inconnue”) (OA, p. 100). His parents, “feeling anxious, powerless, and overwhelmed by Samba’s auto-aggressive conduct,” following the failure of traditional treatment, “sought to turn him over to ‘the doctors’ and also accepted the risks.” During the course of the doctors’ treatment, Samba’s family consulted “un marabout ‘plus fort’ que les précédents,” since the doctors

22. “Mais cela ne peut empêcher de se demander si la culture qui est celle de Samba ne lui impose pas ou ne lui propose pas de manière privilégiée la solution de la psychose hallucinatoire à thème de persécution” (OA, p. 100).

23. Il est en effet bien difficile d’imaginer Samba guéri grâce à un traitement psychanalytique, après avoir intériorisé ses tensions, les avoir résolues “personnellement.” Cela supposerait que, seul de son milieu, de sa famille, il se désolidarise des croyances communes, qu’il se singularise d’une manière telle qu’il deviendrait comme étranger chez lui, qu’il aurait accédé à un niveau de conscience personnelle qui le situerait bien “en avant de ses pères” (il se trouve que l’on ne peut attendre aucune évolution du groupe familial). Est-ce possible? Est-ce souhaitable? [OA, p. 100]
were in accord with the decision. “This procedure, no more than prior consultations with the marabout, did not interrupt the psychoanalytic course,” as the differing strategies were simultaneously pursued (OA, p. 100).

As readers going back and forth on this, grappling in another language, about a vastly different culture, not Western, French, English, or diasporic for that matter, trying to see through other eyes to the truth of the matter or even gain some clarity concerning it, we are confronted with mutually exclusive questions. Perhaps all the doctors and theorists are right, or more precisely, know how to be, within the particular parameters of insight and blindness that frame their discourse. But the affecting line “tout son espoir, toute sa demande” (OA, p. 100) sketches a face before us whose details are unreadable, except that we hear in its trace of the paraphrase the stunning bafflement of one at pains to know why he suffers, and it seems that we are captivated there—in the inscription of particular address. There is the society, doubtless so, but what about Samba? Another way to ask this question is the impossible, What does he say he wants? Unless I have misunderstood the matter, the “hermeneutic demand” of the psychoanalytic itinerary unfolds from each of the Sambas’ articulated wannas-be, but in what world? Is it thinkable that a Samba was raising, in the depths of his being, a question that his culture could not answer, even though the latter had opened the place of the question by giving it its props, its materiality? Is the quest conditioned by the epistemic choices available to the want-to-be of the subject? And if the subject “overreaches” the given discursive conditions, does madness attend, no one quite knowing what he is saying, as indeed was reported to have happened at the onset of Samba’s psychotic course? For the Ortigues, Samba’s dilemma raises the question of recognition by the brothers, which they contend is routed through “Oedipe africain.” It is at heart an inquiry concerning status and the variable positions through which it is expressed.

In Samba’s society, “the search for status recognition by the ‘brothers’ is a dominant mode of manhood affirmation” (“la recherche d’une reconnaissance de mon statut par les ‘frères’ est un mode dominant de l’affirmation virile” [OA, p. 135]). As we observed before, the brothers are the progressive, or processual, confraternity of age-mates precisely linked by the time of birth. “The wish to be a man expresses itself here in a form and content different from the ones that we know in European societies,” say the Ortigues. “In Europe, young Oedipus wishes to be a rival in tasks, actions, and realizations; it is a rivalry that is manifest by objective sanction,” or we could say that the objectifiable nature of goals acts to mediate the rivalry—making a better boat, for instance, or hurling a discus farther than another. In brief, it seems that the socal of the objectifiable aim may be called competitive. In the Senegalese field, rivalry
stress on status, on prestige. It has to do with demonstrating or showing a certain image of the self to the “brothers,” or of doing what they believe conforms with the image in the eyes of the brothers. . . .

For the young Dakarois whom we saw, plans for the future . . . were hardly based on performance or personalized activity, as it was in small measure a question of inventing something, or exceeding some achievement, but was tied up with the theme of giving oneself to be looked at. A subject might have said, for instance, that he wanted to wear beautiful clothes, or have a good position, but the precise activity, the métier, the vocation that supported the good position or the beautiful clothes was not considered in and for itself. The wish, then, had less to do with a more interesting or efficacious performance of some task, but more to do with achieving higher visibility for socially prominent reasons. . . . To improve one’s status, one might say “I did this or that,” or “such and such admires me,” or “such and such said that I was intelligent” [or] . . . “great.” . . . If a subject reported: “I have more success with the females than my buddies,” he was appealing less to his relationship with the girls in question than reflecting on the admiration or the jealousy of his comrades.24

It is difficult to decide from what the authors report about such assertions whether or not bragging among the young is common across cultures. I actually think that it might well be, but one is nevertheless struck by the importance of the specular and the spectacular here, which is precisely where Du Bois placed the significance of the look regarding the “seventh son,” albeit for radically different historical reasons.25 Yet, I be-


Pour les jeunes Dakarois que nous avons vus, les projets d’avenir, le “quand je serai grand,” ne portent guère sur des performances ou des activités personnalisées: il est peu question d’inventer quoi que ce soit, ou de dépasser qui que ce soit, sinon en se donnant à regarder. On dira que l’on veut porter de beaux vêtements, que l’on veut avoir une bonne situation, mais l’activité précise, disons le métier, que suppose la bonne situation ou l’acquisition des beaux vêtements, est peu considérée pour elle-même. Le vœu est moins celui d’une activité plus intéressante ou plus efficace que d’une place plus en vue, d’une raison sociale plus éminente. Le fantasme sous-jacent est d’imaginer ce que les autres pensent en vous regardant. Pour se valoriser on dira autant: “J’ai fait ceci ou cela,” que: “Un tel m’admire . . . Un tel a dit que j’étais intelligent . . . Un tel a dit que j’étais un grand” (ce sont là paroles d’étudiants). Si l’on dit: “J’avais plus de succès féminins que mes camarades,” ce sera moins pour évoquer ses relations avec les filles que pour renvoyer à l’admiration ou à la jalousie des camarades. [04, pp. 101–2]


After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only
lieve that this stunning thematic running through a milieu of West African society is well worth keeping in mind. Though far too quick a thought, as it were, to be considered for more than a passing moment, the concern about “how’s it hanging”—which would mark an especially male anxiety—may actually “translate” into diasporic communities as the analogous stress on looks, prestige, success, and the entire repertoire of tensions that have to do with the outer trapping, that is, one’s appearance. The Ortigues suggest that with all their subjects, “references to fathers and uncles bore the character of spectacle, witness, and display offered to the look of others. The child felt empowered by the father, loved by the father, when he was well-dressed by him, when he imagined others looking at him well-dressed.” Among Europeans, they contend, “a boy of a certain age might think: ‘My father is stronger than a lion . . . my father has the biggest car . . . my father is rich and commanding,’” whereas among the young Dakarois, “the boy thinks: ‘My father is going to buy me a beautiful shirt, a beautiful suit.’” The instances could be multiplied, they tell us, but they sum up the point: “The desire for better clothes, for more beautiful clothes, was the first desire expressed by the young men, the desire to show their father, and for those who suffered his indifference or estrangement, it was not rare to encounter an obsessive concern about appearance to the extent of seeking homosexual engagement in the search for ostentation.”

By “the look . . . the subject decides if he is mocked, held in contempt, thought to be disagreeable,” and so on. “The frequency with which distressful sensations were triggered by the look of another, or perceived at the level of the skin or the superficial musculature” because of another’s “regard,” was considerable in their estimation. Relatedly, the Ortigues evolved from the cases a veritable “grammar” of the look: “formidable,” “contemptuous,” “masked,” “averted,” “eyes turned sideways,”

lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.

26.

Chez tous nos sujets la référence au père ou à l’oncle a le caractère d’un spectacle, d’un témoignage offert au regard des autres. Avoir un père, c’est être habillé par lui . . . L’enfant se sent en puissance de père, aimé du père, quand il est bien habillé, quand il imagine les autres le regardant bien habillé. Il n’est guère de cas où cette donnée ne soit présente. Chez nous, selon son âge, un garçon pensera: “Mon père est plus fort qu’un lion . . . mon père a la plus grosse voiture . . . mon père est riche et commande . . .” Ici, l’enfant pense: “Mon père va m’acheter une belle chemise, un beau costume . . .”

Le désir d’habits meilleurs, plus beaux, est le premier désir exprimé par les jeunes garçons, désir de montrer leur père. Et chez ceux qui souffrent de son indifférence ou de son éloignement, il n’est pas rare de rencontrer un souci obsédatant de leur apparence jusqu’à évoquer l’homosexualité dans la recherche apportée aux colifichets. [OA, pp. 102–4]
“looks and laughs,” “looks down (or lowers head)” (“formidable,” “méprisant,” “est masqué,” “détourné,” “les yeux de côté,” “regard et il rit,” “garde la tête baissée”). Prominently placed in the discourse of “the first interviews was the subject’s concern about the troubling look; from instances of hysteria, having to do with a transient evil eye [d’un mal aux yeux passager]... to fantasies surging up in the here and now, we were always told: ’Je ne me donne pas le droit de voir.’” Because one’s own look is disabled, or because one cannot seize the right to look, as I understand this, which frequently occurs in one’s own bad dreams, perhaps we bear this rubric away from the scene: “The sight appears as a privileged place of castration” here (OA, p. 105).

By a detour off the customary path, the oedipal problematic travels in this instance through the peer group, snared in the coils of looking and being seen. The Ortigues do not pause to elaborate on what is, to my mind, a point of saturation in their itinerary that could possibly bridge across Old and New World African cultures in a consideration of unconscious material, but I am not, for all that, claiming that there would be good reason on that basis to pose or even anticipate moments of a trans-historical (black) collective psyche. Nevertheless it seems to me that any sustained investigation along these lines might usefully isolate the gaze in its discrete cultural property as a route of organization for a comparative reading of intersubjective signals in divergent lifeworlds. But I should try to be clear about this. The inquiry that I am describing would occur under some other auspices than the psychoanalytic, even though it might be informed by its protocols. In any case, the look and its dynamics would bring to focus several topics that come together in the name of subjectivity, that is, the extent to which self-formation is authored elsewhere, in the split between the wanna-be and its objectivations in the place of another. The eyes in this case are nothing more nor less than the crucial relay of a “message” that either proffers or denies, though denial, as we know, is also a most powerful offer. The tales of the young Dakarois reenforce the unthinkable—it is all too often up to someone else—and for my money, we have little idea what this particular exchange of subtextual motive, “choreographed” in the rise and fall of the eyelid, actually “sounds” like in cultural theory concerning black communities. Relatedly, is there not this conundrum: If the young male consultants of the Ort-

27.

La fréquence avec laquelle le déclenchement de sensations douloureuses, perçues au niveau de la peau ou de la musculature superficielle, est attribué au regard des autres. Dans bien des cas, l’angoisse paraît être secondaire à la douleur perçue, à la crampé, comme si l’éprouvé corporel était directement modelé par le regard d’autrui. ...

L’attention portée au regard dans les descriptions de comportement qui nous sont faites: il a un regard formidable; il a un regard méprisant; il est masqué; il a un regard détourné; il ne te regarde pas; il tient les yeux de côté; il regard et il rit, ce n’est pas l’enfant réglementaire; il garde la tête baissée. [OA, p. 104; my emphasis]
tigues’s “récits” are bound to the “look” of others—as feminist film theorists have suggested that the female “star” is—then what revisionary notions might be introduced to the conceptualization of the gaze as heterosexual currency? At least to the extent that it induces more questions than it disposes of, the “récit” of the consultation expands the genre of narrative art.

The coil of the looks for the Ortigues, however, is entirely related to the psychoanalytic aims of Oedipe africain, and that is to explore how the oedipal crisis—finding one’s place in the social order—is resolved in a cultural context where the symbolic function of the father remains tied to the ancestors. We can only sketch out a few more details of this running narrative: (1) In the case where the father mediates between the dead ancestors and the living sons, the sons cannot think of themselves as the equal of the ancestor (and therefore not of the father either) and certainly not as his superior. What one must confront instead is the right to claim one’s place within the group, as castration here is based on the collective register of obedience to the law of the dead, the law of the ancestors. To be excluded from the group or abandoned by it is the equivalent of castration (see O4, p. 75). When Samba, in the case that we have examined, was confronted by the baobab tree in his disturbing dream, he was essentially coming face to face, as it were, with a representative ancestral figure, as the baobab holds a privileged place in the culture as the site of the wisdom of the dead and of the living fathers. It is, therefore, collectively possessed. The appearance of the tree in the young man’s dream apparently signalled his arrival on the threshold of manhood.

In contrasting the European Oedipus with its African equivalent, the Ortigues suggest that the youth in the latter setting does not imagine killing the father but must be referred to the ancestors through him. Thus a second detail is added to the narrative: (2) Because the ancestor is “déjà mort” and “inattaquable,” the sons constitute their own brothers in rivalry, the group that they must enter. This horizontal social arrangement yields two crucial representations—“the collective phallus and the unbeatable ancestor,” which conduces to “the game of rivalry-solidarity between the brothers.” In this setup, everything that the brothers do regarding one another acquires profound weight, inasmuch as one’s successful achievement of status is predicated on it. “Rivalry, then, appears to be systematically displaced onto the ‘brothers’ who polarize the aggressive drives,” as “aggression itself is primarily expressed under the form of persecutive restructurings.” “The network of intersubjective relations would be strongly colored here by the fact that everyone is easily perceived as both vulnerable to persecution” and capable of serving its ends through the medium

of a superior force or talisman. “Under all circumstances, it is appropriate to protect oneself against harmful intentions,” against apparently aggressive moves in the other, which energy, the authors observe, is deflected away from self-affirmation through action toward self-defense. “Blame, then, is barely internalized or constituted as such,” since the material cause of the harm “lies outside oneself,” where the “badness” reigns: “Everything happens as if the individual cannot bear to be perceived as internally divided and driven by contradictory desires.” Les Structures anthropologiques and Oedipe africain seem to strike a common chord on this point. We would also read Samba’s predicament in this light.29

“To the extent that the aggressive drives are not projected onto another, the subject remains conscious of them, but represses them, tries to control them.” “Aggressive fantasies and emotions might then take the route of the secretive, muted, destructive, unacknowledgeable material about which silence is deemed appropriate,” because mouthing it might “discourage my parents,” or “they would count against me,” or expressing it would expose one’s vulnerability, one’s “locution,” as it were. “Often, somatizations appeared as a means of inhibiting the instantaneous expression of fantasies and aggressive impulses.” What might occur in the event of a repression is the dissimulation of mistrust and suspicion under the guise of an “imperturbable gentilesse” that is aimed at warding off a blow. But such a “separate peace” might not yield the expected “detente,” but could well result in “immediate depression” or the “emergence of aggressive fantasies.”

Unless a subject sought solitude in order to protect himself against anxiety reactions that had become overwhelming, the young consul-

29.

Dans le modèle européen du complexe d’Oedipe, le fils s’imagine tuant le père. Ici la pente typique serait plutôt: le fils se référant par l’intermédiaire du père à l’ancêtre déjà mort donc inattaquable et constituant ses “frères” en rivaux. C’est pourquoi les représentations que nous avons utilisées, phallus collectif, ancêtre inégalable, ne peuvent se comprendre qu’en fonction du terme où elles conduisent, le jeu de la rivalité-solidaire entre les frères.

La rivalité nous paraît tout d’abord être systématiquement déplacée sur les “frères” qui polarisent les pulsions agressives. . . . L’agressivité s’exprime principalement sous la forme de réactions persécutoires. La culpabilité est peu intériorisée ou constituée comme telle. . . . L’ensemble des rapports interpersonnels est fortement coloré par le fait que chacun se perçoit facilement comme persécuté. On pourrait dire qu’une partie de l’énergie qui, dans un autre contexte, serait employée à s’affirmer en agissant, est ici consommée à se défendre. En toutes circonstances, il convient de se protéger des intentions menaçantes. . . .

La culpabilité est peu intériorisée ou constituée comme telle. Tout se passe comme si l’individu ne pouvait pas supporter de se percevoir divisé profondément, mobilisé par des désirs contradictoires. Le “mauvais” est toujours situé à l’extérieur de moi, il est du domaine de la fatalité, du sort, de la volonté de Dieu. [OA, pp. 79, 92, 93, 94]
tants described to us the high degree to which they felt compelled to be with their friends... to be part of the group, of the crowd. Even if nothing of particular importance accrued from a sporting event, a dance outing, an interminable round of talk... the real thing was the presence of others—necessary and reassuring—in keeping the latent aggressive fantasies in the background.90

Could it be that male bonding or confraternity is based on keeping the latent aggressive fantasies at bay? In that sense, perhaps, the solidarity piece of the rivalrous relations would sheath, at all times, a decidedly violent possibility, all the more so for what it covers over. The “gang” in diasporic communities may well replicate this pattern of repression and closure.

We recall that the social formation of the brothers, banished in the Freudian myth for the crime of patricide and other impressive infamies, is the triggering mechanism of the incest taboo and the cut into human community. But Freud’s exiled issue have the opportunity to “return” with the boon of guilt. As we think about the African Oedipus, according to the Ortigues’s sketch of it, several half-formed, obscure questions crowd in: Did African Oedipus show a break in the fabric of narrative, in the incontestable roll and continuity of generation after generation, reaching the shores of death and the “full fatherhood” (“père à part entière” [OA, p. 110]), by way of the Atlantic slave trade? The question springs to mind from a suggestive passage in Claude Meillassoux’s Maidens, Meal, and Money, wherein Meillassoux, in elaborating the role of elders and juniors in the African “domestic community,” cites other historical research on the matter: Populations that had been “brutally subjected to the effects of the European slave trade” often used the juniors not only as producers, “but ultimately commodities as well.” Their severity toward them exaggerated by greed, the elders banished the ju-

Dans la mesure où les pulsions agressives ne sont pas projetées, on peut constater qu’elles sont conscientes mais réprimées, contrélées, non exprimées. Les fantasmes ou émous agressifs sont présents comme une longue souffrance, sourde et secrète, écrasante, inavouable qu’il convient de taire “pour ne pas décourager mes parents”... “parce qu’ils comptent sur moi” et aussi pour ne pas montrer vulnérable. Bien souvent des somatisations apparaissent comme le moyen d’inhiber dans l’instant l’expression des fantasmes ou impulsions agressives. Le comportement de ces sujets est de méfiance dissimulée sous une imperturbable gentillesse visant à ne pas donner prise aux attaques... À moins qu’ils ne recherchent la solitude pour se protéger des contacts devenus trop anxigènes, les jeunes gens décrivent tous comment ils sont poussés irrésistiblement à aller avec les amis, comment pour eux être “bien” (heureux, dynamique) c’est être partie d’un groupe, d’une foule. Peu importe souvent qu’il s’agisse d’une réunion sportive, danseante, de palabres interminables (“faire la nuit blanche”)... La présence des autres est rassurante, nécessaire; elle désamorce ou repousse à l’arrière-plan les fantasmes agressifs latents. [OA, pp. 95–96]
niers “for real or imagined crimes,” as the young “were transformed into goods for the slave trade.” The slave trade, of course, bears none of the advantages of myth, but shows some of its earmarks, as the Atlantic trade might be thought of as one of the founding events of modern history and economy. But for our purposes here, the execrable trade, in radically altering the social system in Old and New World “domestic community,” is as violent and disruptive as the never-did-happenstance of mythic and oneiric inevitability. In other words, this historical event, like a myth, marks so rigorous a transition in the order of things that it launches a new way of gauging time and human origin: It underwrites, in short, a new genealogy defined by a break with Tradition—with the Law of the Ancestors and the paternal intermediary.

From my perspective, then, African Oedipus is the term that mediates a new symbolic order. It allows us to see that “father” designates a function rather than, as Meillassoux points out, a “genitor”: the father is “he who nourishes and protects you, and who claims your produce and labor in return.” In that regard, the African Oedipus removes the element of sentimentality from the myth and exposes it as a structure of relations instead. The riddle of origin that the Oedipus is supposed to constitute, first, as a crisis, then as a resolution of order and degree, was essentially cancelled by the Atlantic trade, as the “crisis,” for all intents and purposes, has continued on the other side, the vantage from which I am writing. In the essay from which this writing is excerpted, I spoke about a subject in discourse, crossed by stig mata, as the psychoanalytic difference that has yet to be articulated. In the longer essay, I define the stigmatized subject as one whose access to discourse must be established as a human right and not assumed. I am referring specifically here to the history of slavery in the Americas and not only its traditions and practices of “chattel property,” but, related to it, the strictures against literacy imposed on the bonded. Inasmuch as classical psychoanalytic practice works to transform symptomaticity into a narrative, I take it that discourse constitutes its primary value. The raced subject in an American context must, therefore, work his way through a layered imperative and impediment, which deeply implicates History in any autobiographical itinerary. I think that I am prepared to say that those markings on the social body of New World Africanity are the stripes of an oedipal crisis (for male and female children) that can only be cleared away now by a “confrontation” with the “scene” of its occurrence, but as if in myth. In other words, the discontinuity that the abandoned son demarcates here must be carried out as a kind of new article of faith in the non-Traditional, in the discovery of the

32. Ibid., p. 47.
Law of the living, not the dead, and in the circulation of a new social energy that confronts the future, not the past.

Carrying out that line of thinking, we might be able to see in an apposite psychoanalytic protocol for the subjects of “race,” broken away from the point of origin, which rupture has left a hole that speech can only point to and circle around, an entirely new repertoire of inquiry into human relations. Perhaps I come out here where I least expected: Fanon, to that extent—my history must not imprison me, once I recognize it for what it is—might well have been right.

2

Among all the things you could be by now if Sigmund Freud’s wife were your mother is someone who understands the dozens, the intricate verboseness of America’s inner city. The big mouth brag, as much a sort of art form as a strategy of insult, the dozens takes the assaulted home to the backbone by “talking about” his mama and daddy. It is a choice weapon of defense and always changes the topic; bloodless, because it is all wounding words and outrageous combinations of imagery, and democratic, because anyone can play and be played, it outsmarts the Uzi—not that it is pleasant for all that—by re-siting (and “reciting”? ) the stress. The game of living, after all, is played between the ears, up in the head. Instead of dispatching a body, one straightens its posture, instead of offering up a body, one sends his word. It is the realm of the ludic and the ludicrous that the late jazz bassist Charlie Mingus was playing around in when he concocted, as if on the spot, the title of the melody from which the title of this essay is borrowed. Responding to his own question—“What does it mean?”—that he poses to himself on the recording, he follows along the lines of his own cryptic signature, “Nothing. It means nothing.” And what he proceeds to perform on the cut is certainly nothing we know. But that really is the point—to extend the realm of possibility for what might be known, and, not unlike the dozens, we will not easily decide if it is fun.

We traditionally understand the psychoanalytic in a pathological register, and there must be a very real question as to whether or not it remains psychoanalysis without its principal features—a “third ear,” something like the “fourth wall,” or the speech that unfolds in the pristinely silent arena of two star witnesses—a patient and he or she “who is supposed to know.” The scene of assumptions is completed in the privileged relations of client and doctor in the atmosphere of the confessional. But my interest in this ethical self-knowing wants to unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from its rigorous curative framework and try to recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might
decentralize and disperse the knowing one. We might need help here, for sure, but the uncertainty of where we’d be headed virtually makes no guarantee of that. Out here, the only music they are playing is Mingus’s or much like it, and I should think that it would take a good long time to learn to hear it well.