

Métissages: Williams Sassine's *Saint Monsieur Baly*,  
*Wirriyamu* and *Mémoire d'une peau*

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While the concept of *métissage* has appeared in numerous discourses throughout history to refer to cultural encounters and the mixing of races, it has also been recognised as a profoundly problematic concept. As Gloria Nne Onyeoziri notes, *métissage* is “a term which [...] still carries significant traces of historical practices of oppression, psychological disturbances, sexual exploitation and struggles for the survival of cultural identities” (43). In colonial Africa, mixed race individuals problematised the relationship between Self and Other, and the figure of the *métis* became inextricably intertwined with colonial histories of domination and exclusion. In the postcolonial era, the objectified figure of the *métis* emerged as a liberated and free-speaking subject, and new models of *métissage* have become available. Françoise Vergès acknowledges that “the continuing contest about *métissage*, its unstable foundations and constant renegotiation, shows how the term remains fundamentally charged with ambivalence” (9). *Métissage* has materialised as a site of purposeful ambiguity, leading Françoise Lionnet to define it as “the site of undecidability and indeterminacy,” a position “from which to challenge hegemonic languages” (6). While the malleability of cultural hybridity is attractive, Shalini Puri underscores the misuses to which theories of hybridity have been put in recent critical literature and reminds us of the power relations with which the term is loaded (1-10). It is with the complex evolution of understandings of *métissage* in mind that this article focuses on three novels by Francophone Guinean writer Williams Sassine, *Saint Monsieur Baly* (1973), *Wirriyamu* (1976) and *Mémoire d'une peau* (1998). This study examines different manifestations of *métissage* in Sassine's fictional work, which highlight the tensions and paradoxes underlying postcolonial identity in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa.

Sassine described his personal experiences of *métissage* in an interview with Landry Wilfrid Miampika:

Je suis métissé. Mon père est arabe. Ma mère est africaine. Je suis même métissé religieusement. J'ai été chrétien. Je suis maintenant musulman. Mon père était chrétien, quand il est mort je suis devenu musulman à cause de ma mère. Et s'est branchée dessus la culture européenne à travers la culture française.

[I am mixed. My father is Arab. My mother is African. I am even religiously mixed. I was a Christian. I am now Muslim. My father was Christian, but when he died I became a Muslim because of my mother. And I encountered European

culture through French culture.] (Miampika, Unpaginated. My translations throughout)

Sassine's experiences reflect what Patrick Corcoran terms, "the ambiguities and dualities inherent within the postcolonial perspective" (7). Born to a Lebanese Christian father and a Guinean Muslim mother, Sassine's life was divided between Guinea and a period in exile, and he combined a literary career with one in teaching. Asked in an interview about different experiences of *métissage*, Henri Lopès remarked: "Je crois que Williams Sassine a souffert de son métissage. Il n'en parle pas dans son œuvre. Il fait comme si le métis n'existait pas. [...] Peut-être nous aurait-il donné un beau texte littéraire s'il avait traduit cette douleur en mots?" ["I think that Williams Sassine suffered because of his *métissage*. He doesn't speak about it in his work. He makes out that the *métis* doesn't exist. [...] Maybe he would have given us a handsome literary text had he translated this suffering into words"] (Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, Unpaginated).

Racially *métis* figures are indeed notable for their absence in Sassine's fictional work. However, a number of characters who share the writer's experiences of cultural and religious *métissage* populate his novels, and this *métissage* always comes about as a consequence of the colonial encounter. The relationship between coloniser and colonised is central to Sassine's first novel, *Saint Monsieur Baly*, in which the eponymous protagonist is informed of his enforced retirement in a letter from the colonial administration, which criticises him not for incompetence, but for initiative. His approach to teaching collides with the colonial vision of education, which is presented as a fraternal gift to the colonised from a more civilised country. Baly has also observed that the encounter between colonised and coloniser has resulted in what Frantz Fanon refers to in *Peau noire, masques blancs* as a process of "lactification" (47), an aspiration towards physical and cultural whiteness: "Je constate avec beaucoup de tristesse et de regret que la plupart de mes anciens élèves s'habillent, mangent, parlent et vivent comme des blancs" ["I remark with great sadness and regret that most of my former pupils dress, eat, speak and live like Whites"] (Sassine *Saint Monsieur Baly* 112).

The assumption that civilization through education is a positive process and that the education system of the colonisers is superior provokes such anger in Baly that he is inspired to seek an alternative. Deciding that he must avoid a future in which his pupils simply become Europeanised civil servants, he focuses on preparing them to take their proper place in postcolonial society. Baly proposes to shake up the colonial education system, rejecting its principles of selectivity and elitism to open up education to all, convinced that "[n]ous devons commencer à leur parler et à les instruire dans notre propre langage" ["We must start to speak to them and to teach them in our own language"] (104). He reasons that this is essential "pour qu'ils comprennent mieux que nous reconnaissons avoir mendé un peu notre liberté et notre dignité, mais que nous sommes décidés à leur transmettre les voix de nos ancêtres pour leur éviter de succomber aux tentations de l'Est ou de l'Ouest" ["so that they better understand our

recognition of the fact that we have begged for our freedom and our dignity, but that we have decided to transmit to them the voices of our ancestors to prevent them from succumbing to the temptations of the East or the West’] (104).

In Sassine’s fiction, cultural lactification is represented as a destructive force that distances the individual from his or her own culture, in turn forcing that individual to view it negatively. The character of Américo in *Wirriyamu*—the only novel set during colonial rule and one in which Sassine offers his most explicit critique of the colonial system—is a case in point: “Lorsqu’il était tout petit [...], il rêvait déjà d’être un Blanc. Mais il ne réussira jamais à changer la couleur de sa peau” [“From a young age he had dreamed of being a White. But he would never succeed in changing the colour of his skin”] (Sassine *Wirriyamu* 80). In the same novel, the poet Kabalango also refers to himself as an *assimilados*, and more specifically, as one of the first in the region:

Ce sont les pères jésuites qui m’ont appris à lire. [...] Mes maîtres m’ont convaincu assez facilement que l’égalité se mérite par le degré de « civilisation ». Grâce à ma naissance et à mon instruction, et après m’avoir fait jurer de m’être totalement débarrassé de toutes nos coutumes, je suis devenu un « assimilados ».

[It was the Jesuit fathers who taught me to read. [...] My masters quite easily convinced me that equality is earned by the degree of ‘civilisation’. Thanks to my birth and my education, and having made me swear that I had completely abandoned all our customs, I became an *assimilados*.] (Sassine *Wirriyamu* 80)

Kabalango recalls his assertion of superiority over other Africans as he looked down on former friends and exploited them on his plantation. Later, when he worked as a clerk at the diamond mine, he helped the Portuguese to capture those who had run away. The *assimilados* is described as “une espèce de batarde [sic] ayant un peu plus de droits que les autres Noirs, mais beaucoup moins que les Blancs” [‘a sort of bastard, with a few more rights than other Blacks, but far fewer than the Whites’] (Sassine *Wirriyamu* 80). Américo’s friends refer to him by the pejorative term “*nègre calcinhas*,” which Sassine translates in a footnote as “nègre à demi civilisé” [“semi-civilised Black”] (22), highlighting the association between whiteness and the “civilisation” to which the *assimilados* aspires. Both Américo and Kabalango fail to achieve the whiteness to which they aspire, and the middle ground that they occupy is portrayed negatively as a barren no-man’s-land, rather than as a productive hybrid space.

Sassine’s concern with cultural *métissage* is echoed in his interest in religious *métissage*. Patrick Manning argues that “[w]hile colonial rule itself had ended, the spectre of Western discrimination against Africa remained. [...] In religion, the meanings of Christianity and Islam were widely debated. Did Christianity make one less African than before? More African than before? Was Islam more African than Christianity?” (166). Sassine engages in this debate, arguing that “[w]e have lost the meaning of myth in Africa. I don’t mean superstitions and legends, but something larger, bigger than life, something of epic dimensions [...] I mean religion [...] We have changed gods and

religion too many times” (Diawara 45-46). This sense of confusion and loss is echoed in *Saint Monsieur Baly*, in which Western religion is described by the protagonist as a form of lactification, with the introduction of foreign gods in front of whom the colonised willingly kneel:

Le poison du colonialisme, que nous avons déjà avalé, est d’avoir accepté de nous prosterner devant des dieux étrangers qui continuent d’étrangler le nôtre, dont chacun des râles d’agonie nous rend plus pitoyables en attisant notre désir forcené de gratter notre peau ou de décrêper nos cheveux.

[The poison of colonialism, which we have already swallowed, is to have accepted that we bow down before foreign gods who continue to strangle our own, whose cries of agony make us more pitiful by stirring up our frenzied desire to scratch at our skin or to straighten our hair.] (Sassine *Saint Monsieur Baly* 199)

Chevrier observes that the Sassine who attentively read the Christian Bible and studied the Koran encounters the Sassine who cannot forget the tales he heard during his childhood in Kankan (*Williams Sassine* 136). In *Wirriyamu*, the meeting of traditional beliefs and Western religion is embodied in the figure of Père Fidel, who is troubled by “un double système spirituel” [a double spiritual system]. Unable to make the choice between traditional beliefs and the Christianity to which he was converted, the priest is preoccupied with and defined by his fundamental inability to opt for one or the other.

Despite the different focuses of *Wirriyamu* and *Saint Monsieur Baly*, a number of similarities become apparent in their treatment of religion and belief. Most notably, the symbolism of Sassine’s second novel *Wirriyamu*, in which the young Condélo is portrayed as a Christ-like figure, is echoed in a number of biblical parallels throughout the narrative of *Saint Monsieur Baly*. Ngandu points out that Baly’s disciples, François and Mohamed, defend him with their lives; Baly is tested morally and physically, he is falsely accused, betrayed by Gaoussou and Bana, and cries out “mon Dieu, pourquoi m’as tu abandonné?” [“My God, why have you abandoned me?”] (156). Whereas *Wirriyamu* focuses on the conflict between traditional beliefs and Christianity, *Saint Monsieur Baly* questions more broadly the adequacy of organised religion to deal with the realities faced by individuals such as Baly. Despite his repeated plea, “do not abandon me,” Baly’s prayers are unanswered, leaving him frustrated that “je Lui ai tout demandé et Il ne m’a rien donné” [“I asked Him for everything and He has given me nothing”] (196). Baly eventually comes to realise the hollowness of his beliefs when he is betrayed by Soriba, one of the most highly acclaimed *marabouts* in the region, who steals his life savings. Soriba’s act of dishonesty makes Baly reconsider his beliefs. He turns his back on Islam in favour of the ecumenical “Dieu de la Sainte Afrique,” transforming Allah and the Christian God into one who identifies with the experiences of black Africans, linked to the ancestors and African mythical beliefs. Baly explains to the doctor who is treating his leprosy: “Je prie toujours comme un musulman, mais dans mes prières je m’adresse à un autre Dieu qui un jour fera accomplir des miracles pour la race noire; je suis

convaincu que ce Dieu existe et qu'il commence à se manifester" ["I still pray like a Muslim, but in my prayers I speak to another God who will one day accomplish miracles for the black race; I am convinced that this God exists and that he is beginning to show himself"] (Sassine *Saint Monsieur Baly* 189). Throughout the latter part of the narrative, Baly spreads his gospel to those around him, becoming a prophet-like figure as he accomplishes his promises to build both a new school and a new community. The narrator of the Epilogue looks back on the "miraculous transformations" accomplished by Baly and urges the reader to undertake a pilgrimage to the place in which he lived his life, where his school now stands.

Sassine's personal experience of *métissage* translates into a more general preoccupation with marginality in his narratives:

Écrivain de la marginalité, ainsi que nous l'avons défini [...], Williams Sassine fait en effet vivre sous nos yeux un petit monde de marginaux nés, pour une large part, semble-t-il, de sa propre expérience de métis et d'exilé, une double situation à la fois biologique, sociologique et politique qui a laissé en lui des traces indélébiles.

[A writer of marginality, for that is how we have defined him [...], Williams Sassine brings to life before our very eyes a world of marginality, born, in large part it seems, of his own experience of *métissage* and exile, a situation that is at once biological, sociological and political, which has left in him its indelible mark.] (*Williams Sassine* 13)

Although Chevrier too easily conflates the writer and his fiction here, a preoccupation with extremes of normality and difference is certainly evident in Sassine's novels, and the lepers, albinos and madmen that populate his novels are defined or define themselves in relation to what is accepted as the "norm," whether bodily, racial, religious or political. Among these characters is the protagonist of *Saint Monsieur Baly*. The elderly school teacher sets out to overcome the idleness that he fears awaits him in retirement by working for the good of the community, giving meaning and direction to his life once again. He dedicates his retirement to founding a new school and rebuilding the society in which he lives. However, in so doing, he isolates himself from the community in which he has lived for much of his life, who consider his social death complete when he associates himself with the poor and destitute.

The protagonist of *Wirriyamu* is also a marginalised character. Focusing on the days preceding the massacre of the inhabitants of the village of Wirriyamu by Portuguese soldiers in December 1972, the narrative follows the albino Condélo as he is pursued to his death.<sup>1</sup> The objectification of Condélo's body in repeated references to the ancestral practice of blood-letting and the value attached to his albino skin define him as a tragic sacrificial victim. Although Condélo is aware of the beliefs surrounding his albinism and their consequences, he is trapped in his marginality, hopelessly seeking refuge in dreams and solitude. While Sassine skilfully evokes Wirriyamu as an ordinary Portuguese colony, he traces the extraordinary events that take place over the three days preceding the massacre. The inhabitants are

trapped, powerless as they are drawn inexorably towards the massacre, and the violence of the last ten years of colonial rule in Mozambique is echoed in the relentless march of the Portuguese soldiers towards the village. The sense of inevitability that pervades the narrative is compounded by the fragmentation of the book into short sections marking the progression of time over a period of just three days.

*Mémoire d'une peau* offers an unsympathetic view of postcolonial society through the eyes of another, very different, albino protagonist. The narrative follows Milo Kan's journey of self-discovery over the period of twenty four hours after his mother's revelation that she had adopted him at birth. Chevrier remarks that, "comme Sassine, à des degrés divers, ses personnages vivent en effet l'expérience de l'ambiguïté, de l'exclusion et de l'errance—qui en est souvent la conséquence—mais comme lui, ils refusent de s'abandonner au désespoir" ["like Sassine, to varying degrees, his characters live the experience of ambiguity, of exclusion and of wandering—which is often the consequence of it—but like him they refuse to give in to despair"] (*Williams Sassine* 15). Rather than simply portraying his characters as tragic figures, relegated to a marginal, axiomatic existence, Sassine uses them to underscore relations between different racial and cultural groups, and to explore the issue of identity in the colonial and postcolonial worlds of his novels.

While Sassine's fictional work consciously draws attention to the constructed boundaries between races, religions and social groups, it is preoccupied with the negotiation of these boundaries. In an essay on *métissage* in contemporary France, Jean-Loup Amselle observes that "pour penser la question du métissage, il faut postuler une pureté première" ["in order to think about the question of métissage, it is necessary to conceive of an original purity"] (41) and Jean-Luc Bonniol contends that "l'idée de métissage procède du même argumentaire essentialiste que la 'race'" [the idea of métissage proceeds from the same essentialist arguments as 'race'] (59). Indeed, any attention to racial, cultural and religious mixing cannot fail to draw attention to the very boundaries that it breaks down or challenges. However, boundaries have long been described in metaphorical and symbolic terms, and taken to refer variously to spaces "in-between," to holes, meeting places, interfaces or sites of exchange.<sup>2</sup> These descriptions have a wealth of meanings attached to them, but what is significant is that collectively they signal a movement away from the notion of the boundary as a dividing line; the same movement reflected in postcolonial theory in its consideration of the boundary as a space that can be negotiated, inhabited or broken down from within. Homi Bhabha defines such sites as "connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white" (4). These sites are located at the border between one condition or place and another, lodged between stable categories. Following Bhabha, Pnina Werbner suggests that such "liminal spaces [are] betwixt-and-between tropes that render authority structures ambivalent" (141). Representing porous boundaries at which commonplaces collide and the stability of

categories is subverted, the margins become the locus of ambiguity and indeterminacy, opening up as a space of agency.

It is not insignificant then that Sassine's protagonists are defined by their otherness, set apart from society and placed firmly at the margins. The visible physical difference of the albino protagonists of both *Wirriyamu* and *Mémoire d'une peau* sets them apart from those around them.<sup>3</sup> However, Chevrier signals the possibilities of the margin, suggesting that it is "une sorte d'espace interstitiel, entre l'ici et l'ailleurs, espace que l'on peut aussi qualifier, sans que la formule soit nécessairement péjorative, de 'non-lieu'" ["a sort of interstitial space, between the 'here' and the 'there,' a space that may also be qualified, without any pejorative meaning being attached to the term, as a 'non-place'"] (*Le Lecteur des Afriques* 295). Sassine succeeds in resisting the tendency to portray the marginal space occupied by his protagonists as a purely negative one. Preferring to portray the margins as a space removed from the constraints of society, he presents the margin as, to use Bhabha's term, an "interstitial passage," a locus of agency in which identity can be performed and contested (4).

The negotiation of the margins is most evident in the manipulation of identity by the albino protagonist Milo who "passes" for *métis* in *Mémoire d'une peau*. While Sassine portrays the figure of the albino as a character who inhabits a liminal space on the boundaries of society, physical acceptability and race, he also explores the possibilities inherent in this ambiguous body. Throughout *Mémoire d'une peau*, the protagonist Milo attempts to hide his albinism, switching off the lights when he sleeps with his lovers so that his albinism will be forgotten. More controversially he "passes" for *métis*, moderating his visible difference in an attempt to be accepted. He describes how: "Je me teins les cheveux en noir, j'ai des crèmes pour ma peau et j'utilise même des trucs pour mes lèvres, alors au lieu de rester ce que je suis, je ressemble de loin à un métis" ["I dye my hair black, I have creams for my skin and I even use stuff for my lips, so that rather than remaining as I am, from a distance I resemble a person of mixed race] (Sassine *Mémoire d'une peau* 146). Usually a movement across colour boundaries from black to white, by contrast, Milo's acts of "passing" are a move in the opposite direction, towards blackness and the racial identification of his parents.

Milo's manipulation of the ambiguity associated with the albino body in this act of "passing" challenges the notion that an individual's racial identity can be discerned by sight, an idea Linda Schlossberg terms the "logic of visibility" (1). "Passing" calls attention to the constructed nature of race, revealing its fallacy. However, as long as races are perceived to constitute biologically distinct groups, the constructed borders that distinguish one from another remain to be "passed" through. The consequences of such manipulation of racial boundaries take on added significance in the colonial and postcolonial worlds of Sassine's novels, as the inability to recognise, identify and distinguish between colonised and colonisers, or between blacks and whites, contrasts sharply with the administrators' classification of their subjects in the colonies. In this context, the act of "passing" enables

the “passer” to slip through the very boundaries designed to exclude him or her, representing an undermining of the power relations that enabled these boundaries to be created in the first place. Elaine Ginsberg argues that racial passing should be recognised as a means of allowing an individual creative subjectivity (11). Certainly, in *Mémoire d'une peau*, Milo's fictive *métis* identity represents a contesting of racial, social and spatial boundaries in order that he might establish an identity that is not merely defined in terms of his albinism.

The complexity of identity formation for the protagonists of Sassine's novels is echoed in the intricacy of his narratives. Maryse Condé's analysis of textual *métissage* highlights the importance of this complexity:

Chacun reconnaître avec moi qu'un des exemples les plus frappants de métissage est l'existence physique d'un livre, la production d'un texte écrit par un Nègro-africain, qu'il soit texte de poésie ou texte de fiction.

[Everyone will share my recognition that one of the most striking examples of métissage is the physical existence of a book, the production of a text written by a Black African, whether poetry or fiction.] (210)

Condé recognises the problems and possibilities associated with the fusion of oral and written traditions, and the appropriation of the language of the coloniser by African writers. Like other Francophone writers such as Henri Lopès, Ahmadou Kourouma and Sony Labou Tansi, Sassine manipulates the French language in order to more carefully describe the African worlds of his novels. He frequently uses a play on words to deform the meaning of the French by playing on their pronunciation, connects specific words to recognisable local events like *coups d'état*, and provides footnotes for Malinke terms, bringing an additional layer of meaning to his fictional work. However, what is most interesting about Sassine's fiction is the formal inventiveness with which he re-shapes the novel form to more carefully describe the African worlds of his fictional work.

The narrative chronology of *Saint Monsieur Baly* is more conventional than that of Sassine's other novels, but the way in which Sassine experiments with the novel form here is a precursor to the narrative intricacy of his later works. Two key dream sequences occur in periods of crisis when Baly is faced with practical difficulties or impossible decisions; the first at the moment at which Baly takes the decision to build a school and the second when this same school has been vandalised by those who oppose his project. The narrative is also punctuated by a series of interior monologues, which provide the reader with a deeper understanding of Baly's motivations, and by Baly's memories as he returns repeatedly to interrogate past events and encounters, using the powerful metaphor of a bug that forages in his mind. The inclusion of lengthy entries from Baly's highly personal diary, in which he records his repeated examination of his conscience, gives an insight into the protagonist's hopes, aspirations and obsessions. The preoccupation with the act of writing which is seen in Baly's regular diary entries brings another level to Sassine's fictional



work, and characters that write or re-write an identity are found at the centre of each novel. In *Wirriyamu*, Kabalango records his thoughts in the poetry and songs he creates while the protagonist of *Saint Monsieur Baly* keeps a *journal intime* in which he records his thoughts and fears. In *Mémoire d'une peau* Milo works away at a manuscript for a novel by the same name, which he will never complete, and in *Le Zéhéros n'est pas n'importe qui* (1985) the protagonist regularly blows the dust from his typewriter so that it might not retain any trace of the material it has been used to record.<sup>4</sup>

In *Wirriyamu*, as Pius Ngandu Nkashama remarks, the complexity of the narrative is found in “la multiplication des points de vue, le télescopage du temps et de l'espace romanesques, et surtout le jaillissement lyrique qui donne à ce texte insolite l'aspect d'un roman-poème” [“the multiplication of perspectives, the telescoping of narrative time and space, and especially the lyrical flow that gives this unusual text the appearance of a poetic novel”] (144). In *Mémoire d'une peau*, by contrast, the intricate narrative structure reflects the protagonist's state of mind as he relentlessly questions his situation and attempts to come to terms with his difference. The narrative functions on three levels: the novel *Mémoire d'une peau* with Milo as the protagonist, the romantic novel Milo attempts to write, which is also entitled *Mémoire d'une peau*, and the letters exchanged between Milo and his lovers, which reflect retrospectively on the events we have witnessed as readers.

Adding to the complexity of Sassine's narratives, all three novels refer back to the pre-colonial and colonial past, to the difficult period of independence, and forward to the possibilities of an African future. Juxtaposed with this “real” time is that of the fantastic, plunging the characters into a mythical past and a utopian future. In *Saint Monsieur Baly*, Sassine draws on the Greek myths, notably the myth of Sisyphus, the absurd hero who must struggle perpetually and without hope of success. This comparison with Sisyphus is made explicit when, on the eve of his retirement, Baly looks back on his life:

En même temps que le poids des ténèbres la terrible image du néant l'oppressait. Tout cela ressemblait à une immense lassitude, au sentiment d'avoir raté toute sa vie, comme s'il venait brusquement de découvrir après un jeu intéressant, l'absurdité de ce jeu [...] Il se réfugia quelques instants dans l'inquiétant plaisir de se comparer à Sisyphe.

[Both the weight of the darkness and the terrible image of nothingness oppressed him. Everything gave him the feeling of an immense weariness, of having failed in his life, as if, after an interesting game, he had suddenly just discovered its very absurdity [...] He took refuge for a few moments in the troubling pleasure of comparing himself to Sisyphus.] (53)

Baly's efforts to build the school are indeed reminiscent of Sisyphus' struggle as its construction is repeatedly halted as the buildings are damaged or destroyed, meaning that Baly must re-start his work several times over. Yet, just as Camus suggests that we must consider Sisyphus ‘happy’ in his struggle, so Baly takes a certain pleasure in the challenges with which he is faced.

Sassine's preoccupation with cultural and religious *métissage*, and the textual weaving or "*tissage*" that characterises his writing, highlight the struggle to define and to express postcolonial identity in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, these characteristics of his fictional work demonstrate the symbolic value that *métissage* retains in the context of narrative strategies and the aesthetics of representation in postcolonial literatures. In his study of power and identity, Francis Nyamnjoh warns that it is sometimes too easy to speak of *métis* or hybrid identity as a positive outcome of encounters between different cultures, highlighting the risks of defining African identity in terms of over-simplified understandings of *métissage*, given the risk of losing some of the richness in the continent's experience in the encounters of cultures (28). While I accept Chevrier's view that a major theme of Sassine's fictional writing is marginality, the critic does not consider the concept of *métissage* as flexibly as its treatment in the work of this writer deserves. This article has set out to demonstrate that Sassine's novels avoid reductive understandings of *métissage*, representing instead its multiple manifestations in a critique of the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser in sub-Saharan Africa. In its representation of characters who overtly challenge the power structures that are the legacy of colonialism, Sassine's fictional writing undoes the (colonial) concept of identity as a fixed and immutable essence to portray it as a construct shaped by various elements that are in constant flux, and always in the process of definition and redefinition.

## Notes

1. The Portuguese denied the existence of such a village in Mozambique, but a massacre was reported to have taken place on 16 December 1972 in Wirriyamu, spreading to Chawola and neighbouring villages. See Adrian Hastings, *Wirriyamu* (London: Search Press, 1974).

2. The notion of the margin as a hole is perhaps the most negative of these, for a hole implies a void, a space that must be filled, or more subversively perhaps, suggests a fissure or an outlet. Further discussion of these terms can be found in Monika Reif-Hulser, *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Post-Colonial Writing* (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999).

3. In this sense *Wirriyamu* and *Mémoire d'une peau* can be seen as representative of fictional writing about albinism since, irrespective of the background of the writer, the cultural context of the work or its subject matter, writers of fiction insistently locate the albino at the margins, as a mysterious, excluded figure.

4. This echoes Sassine's own preoccupation with his role as a writer. Sassine protested against being regarded as an intellectual preferring, like Sembène, to consider himself a storyteller.

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