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## **Para-Literary Ethnography and Colonial Self-Writing: The Student Notebooks of the William Ponty School**

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# Para-Literary Ethnography and Colonial Self-Writing: The Student Notebooks of the William Ponty School

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## ABSTRACT

Beginning in 1933, West African students at the Ecole Normale William Ponty—the elite French colonial teacher-training college—completed their studies by writing ethnographic monographs on some aspect of their community of origin during their summer vacation. This corpus of nearly eight hundred monographs is collectively known as the “Cahiers Ponty” (Ponty notebooks). Ponty students were encouraged to “avoid false literary descriptions” but in practice many drew heavily on the tropes of novelistic prose—especially those of the *bildungsroman*. This essay examines the rhetorical and narrative strategies Ponty students employ to produce legible accounts of their own socialization as modern subjects, as well as the feedback from teachers that constrained their performances. I argue that the Ponty notebooks exemplify a distinct discipline—para-literary ethnography—that had a role in shaping the contours of colonial modernity and early francophone literature in West Africa.

Beginning in 1933, West African students at the Ecole Normale William Ponty—the elite French colonial teacher-training college—completed their studies by writing monographs known as the *devoirs de vacances* (summer projects). In this assignment, colonized students were required to research some aspect of their communities of origin during their summer vacation and then use the material they gathered to produce formal studies in their final year. Collectively known as the “Cahiers Ponty” (Ponty notebooks), these assignments were a key condition of social mobility and access to educational advancement for several generations of male francophone African elites, many of whom would go on to become teachers, politicians, and writers. Although the assignment lasted until

about 1950 and nearly eight hundred notebooks were produced, there has not yet been a study of the Cahiers Ponty as a corpus in its own right. Existing studies of the Ponty school have focused on its role as an institution that shaped the careers, sociabilities, and politics of African schoolteachers in *Afrique Occidentale Française*—a social group that was an important part of the elite in both the colonial and early postcolonial periods (Sabatier; Ly; Jézéquel, “Les ‘Mangeurs de craies’”). While building on this scholarship, this article focuses more narrowly and deeply on the notebooks themselves.

Drawing on extensive primary research in the Cahiers Ponty archive at the Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN) in Dakar, I focus on how Ponty students made use of literary models in their ethnographic notebooks, even though the assignment itself ostensibly forbade them.<sup>1</sup> As I will show, students were often obliged to use literary models, while having to appear not to be writing literature. I examine the tropes and rhetorical strategies employed by students as well as the feedback from instructors that constrained their performances, all set against the backdrop of the broader context of curriculum reform and literary studies at Ponty.

This article argues that the Ponty notebooks ought to be considered as an example of what I will call the para-literary: narrative modes that are defined by being beside and beyond the literary, but which are nevertheless immanently entangled with it. My use of “para” here is deliberate: it connotes a separation, but also adjacency and even subordination.<sup>2</sup> Para-literary modes are defined, on the one hand, by their non-identification with existing literary genres, but also by their unavowable proximity to them. In the case of the Ponty notebooks, the para-literary came into play in order to negotiate an implicit requirement of the assignment: students were often expected to speak both as ethnographers and native informants, to offer at the same time an ethnographic monograph and an account of their own journey to becoming the modern, colonial subject who could speak as the author of the text. The use of literary models, especially the *bildungsroman* or novel of formation, offered both students and instructors space to engage with this racialized double-bind. I contend that the Ponty notebooks are thus a distinct discipline of self-writing, which I call para-literary ethnography.

In advancing this concept, my intent is not to enter into arguments about what counts as literary, nor to essentialize “literature,” nor even to suggest that ethnography cannot be literary. Rather, my point is simply that what was and what was not literary was absolutely at issue in the negotiations between the students, the teachers, and the institution that produced the Ponty notebooks. So to read these notebooks as literature would actually flatten an important complication that constituted them. I approach the notebooks as a para-literary corpus to attend to the fraught ways in which they interpenetrate with literary genres while retaining a certain distance from them.

Before delving into the notebooks themselves, a brief overview of Ponty and its place in the larger history of French colonial education in West Africa will be useful. The institution that would eventually be known as the *Ecole Normale William Ponty* was founded in Senegal in 1904, as an *Ecole Normale*, specifically designed to train African teachers for the new secular school system. While first established in St Louis, the campus moved to Gorée island in 1913 and finally to Sébikotane near Rufisque in 1938 (Ly 61–84). As schooling came to be viewed as a primary vector of colonization, Ponty assumed an increasingly central role

(Sabatier 10). Although Ponty stood at the apex of French colonial education in West Africa, it was not directly modeled on the French Ecoles Normales. Its curriculum was primarily focused on preparing African teachers to participate in spreading the French language (Sabatier 28–29; Ly 104–108).

The instructors at Ponty were almost always young, French men who had recently arrived from the *métropole*, often with only the level of *instituteur* (graduates of Ecoles Normales themselves, but not qualified to teach in such institutions in France) (Sabatier 31).<sup>3</sup> Training African teachers began as a cost-cutting strategy—Africans were part of a separate cadre and could be paid less than Europeans (Sabatier 27; Jézéquel, “Grammaire de la distinction coloniale” 7–14).

For over fifty years, Ponty drew male students aged 17–22 from across the federation to its campus in Senegal (Sabatier 14). The opportunity to become a teacher seems to have offered young African men a greater degree of social mobility in the colonial period: in addition to the prospect of a teacher’s salary, Ponty was often seen as a prestigious gateway to other careers in administration and educational opportunities abroad (Conklin 85). The school’s notable alumni include several politicians but also quite a number of writers and artists: Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Modibo Keita, Mamadou Dia, and Abdoulaye Wade, as well as Bernard Dadié, Abdoulaye Sadjji, Fodéba Keita, Ousmane Socé Diop, and Paul Hazoumé. This list of names gives an indication of how the school’s graduates are threaded through the politics and cultural production of 20th-century francophone West Africa. But the impact of Ponty may actually be both more far-reaching and subtler than it first appears. To make this case, we need to examine the emergence of the discipline of para-literary ethnography exemplified in the Ponty notebooks.

The notebook assignment appeared at Ponty during a period of intense political and educational transformation in AOF, in which ethnography played a leading role.<sup>4</sup> The production of anthropological knowledge about African lifeworlds became central to French colonial administration in the interwar period, as policy and ethnography mutually reinforced each other in the works of administrator-ethnographers such as Delavignette, Hardy, and Delafosse. As their writings found favor with a series of sympathetic Governors General, a new political rationality coalesced around the position that replacing indigenous social structures with metropolitan ones was a mistake and that native policy could only be successful if it based itself on the methodical study of local populations and committed itself to maintaining indigenous societies in their authenticity (Wilder 18, 49; Genova 90–94).

This ethnographic turn in colonial policy coincided with a major reorganization of the AOF school system. From its founding in 1903, it had been organized in a pyramidal structure that reflected its priorities, with village schools at the bottom and elite institutions like Ponty at the top (White 62). Early on, the system recruited only a tiny percentage of school age children and was focused on training educated Africans as functionaries for the colonial administration (Ibid. 63). But after the war there was a push to “Africanize” colonial education—i.e., converting a system built to produce a few assimilated individuals into one that targeted the rural masses and was bent on simultaneously preserving and transforming African societies (Wilder 120).

The “Africanization” of AOF’s schools was part of a much larger move toward “adapted education” that spread across the French empire in the 1920s and 30s

(Gamble, "Peasants of the Empire" 776). In principle, adapted education meant a move away from imposing a metropolitan system of education in the colonies and a push to develop pedagogies that were adapted to local societies and "mentalities" (Ibid.). In AOF, the adaptation reforms emphasized decentralization, the importance of rural, village schools, and "cultural training" for elites to reacquaint them with their African cultures (Wilder 129). Although begun under Governor Carde in 1924, adapted education found its most vocal advocates in the 1930s in Governor Brevié and Inspector General of Schools Charton (who would later formalize the notebook assignment at Ponty) (Wilder 129; Genova 111). Charton bemoaned the older style of colonial education, which he faulted for having "practiced the politics of the tabula rasa and considered the young native like the statue of Condillac, apt to receive everything from the teacher who animates him with all his ideas, all his perceptions, all his thoughts." For Charton, what was needed was a new kind of education adapted to the "native mentality which must be known and analyzed in its diverse manifestations in order to transform it and orient it toward a new life" (Charton, "Role social de l'enseignement" 194–95).<sup>5</sup>

The reorganization of the AOF school system also came about during a long-running political struggle between the colonial administration and the French-educated, urban African elite. The election of Blaise Diagne as the first African Deputy in 1914 sent shockwaves through the colonial establishment. By the end of the First World War, the colonial state was forced to confront the rising political power of urban African communities, some of whom had historically enjoyed French citizenship as *originaires* born in the four communes of Senegal (Johnson 154–77; Genova 24–25, 41–42). The temporary stabilization of the *originnaire's* citizenship status through the 1915 and 16 Blaise Diagne laws only deepened the antipathy (Wilder 129; Genova 27–28). In the period leading up to the school reforms of the early 1920s—which followed on the heels of Diagne's reelection—the colonial administration put in place a series of roadblocks to Africans ever becoming "French," no matter their level of culture (Wilder 124–39). For its part, the colonial education system increasingly soured on policies that had formerly valorized assimilation, epitomized by elite institutions such as Ponty. Discourse on colonial pedagogy in this period became fixated on portraying the "*évolués*" as dangerously uprooted from their own communities (Genova 99). Advocates of adapted education sought to transform the school system into one that would teach future elites to be properly, authentically African—and thus possibly incapable of acceding to citizenship, since, in this period, an African applicant for French citizenship had to demonstrate not only French cultural competence, but above all that he had adequately separated himself from his "native customs" (Wilder 131). It was against this backdrop of mounting demands for political representation that the AOF school system began trying to teach Africans to be African again.

At the same time, however, the colonial administration carried on expanding the existing higher levels of education in AOF in the interwar period, with the aim of maintaining the elite it counted on as auxiliaries, collaborators, and intermediaries (Wilder 120–21). Located at the intersection of these competing priorities, the Ecole Normale William Ponty came under heavy scrutiny. It was simultaneously tasked with producing African teachers for the newly "adapted" schools, while also being obliged to train an ever more mistrusted (but politically

effective) local elite. When the time came to reform the Ponty curriculum in the 1930s, the paradoxes of the larger AOF school reforms came to the fore.

To accommodate adapted education at AOF's elite institution, the Ponty curriculum was restructured around what was called "Franco-African culture" (Ly 123). This shift took hold in the 1930s under Charton and was greatly intensified under Charles Béart from 1939 to 1945 (Sabatier 128–29). Charton defined Franco-African culture as a process by which French culture "must descend into the native mentality, to make it intelligible and to transform it." Charton added that it would be up to the "cultivated native to guide the way"; but that in so doing, the native must not break "the bond with his original environment, since that would put him at risk of becoming an errant and aberrant spirit" (Charton, "Role social de l'enseignement" 201). In practice, the Franco-African curriculum at Ponty often meant a simplified one, with less ambitious math and science instruction (Sabatier 135). In their place was an increased emphasis on reacquainting students with their "African culture," or as one teacher put it, to "re-submerge these young men into their [own] milieu" (qtd. in Sabatier 145).

Experiments in Franco-African culture at Ponty took a variety of forms, but the best-known aspects of the curriculum were the notebook assignment and the theatrical productions in which students wrote and staged plays in French based on African source material (Ly 124–25). Begun at roughly the same time in the early 1930s, the notebooks and the plays were the heart of Franco-African culture at Ponty. Of these two practices, the Ponty theater has received far more scholarly attention, since these plays were some of the first francophone African theater productions (See Bulman; Conteh-Morgan; Cornevin; d'Aby; Mouralis; Soyinka; Traoré). There does seem to have been some overlap between the plays and the notebook assignment, but the exact nature of this is unclear. Drawing on accounts of Ponty's theatrical activities written by the school's director Charles Béart, Bernard Mouralis concluded that the notebooks were an "important phase" of the theater production process but that "the main thing remained always the drama itself" (Mouralis 134). However, studies of Ponty as an institution generally suggest that the notebooks were a significant assignment in their own right and not subordinated to the theater (Sabatier 137–42; Ly 123–24, 232–33). Based on my own research in the Cahiers Ponty archive, I have come to share Bakary Traoré's view that the plays and the notebooks were undertaken "in the same spirit"—namely, as part of the Franco-African curriculum (Traoré 49). What is clear is that Ponty students drew on the research they conducted over the summer to produce both their plays and their notebooks.<sup>6</sup>

While the scholarship on the Ponty theater has been both productive and comprehensive, one unfortunate consequence has been to sharply delineate the staged performances from the notebooks themselves. To the extent that the notebooks have been studied relative to francophone African literature, it has been in terms of their influence on this dramatic tradition. The notebooks have largely been assumed to be just dusty, ethnographic source material. As I hope to show in what follows, nothing could be further from the case.

In the notebook assignment, Ponty students were usually given a choice of topics and a prompt or a questionnaire to accompany each one.<sup>7</sup> Some of the topics initially sound quite banal—foodways, fishing, agriculture, children's games—but others are quite capacious: the education of the child in a traditional milieu is a

favored topic. Given that these were teachers-in-training, a good percentage of the notebooks focus on traditional modes of socialization in the students' communities of origin. In light of the size of this archive, it is difficult to generalize but there are some common features. All the notebooks are quite literally composition books and the *devoirs* within them range anywhere from twenty-five to sixty pages—although some run considerably longer—and they sometimes feature illustrations and (more rarely) photographs.

In the original description of the assignment, Charton makes it clear that the notebook is a "discipline" with a threefold purpose. First, it is intended to be a self-modernizing project, with the imperative that the student recount a return to his origins. As Charton puts it, the idea is "to turn the gaze of our future schoolmasters toward the rational knowledge of their original environment. . . . In this sympathetic return to the facts of native life, our teachers will discover respect for living traditions as well as the feeling that transformations are necessary" ("Les Etudes indigènes" 199). As another early description of the assignment put it, the Ponty student was supposed to "confront the ideas and opinions that he has encountered at school with those of his illiterate brothers who have remained in the village . . . and revise his memory with total sincerity" (qtd. in Afanou and Togbé Pierre iii). Essentially, a student was enjoined to translate his own lived experience into the terms of an ethnographic monograph, to rewrite his own past and that of his community in a new perspective.

The assignment was also a stylistic exercise. Charton hoped it would improve the students' written expression by regulating any unruly expressivity. The notebooks, he writes, will "oblige our students to use precise observation, and an exact description of known, familiar facts . . . to contain the verbal imagination, to avoid false literary descriptions" ("Les Etudes indigènes" 199). In practice, this did not to exclude the literary, but invited negotiation around it.

Lastly, Charton envisioned a documentary function for the notebooks. "These modest works," he writes, "contain a certain documentary even scientific value" (Ibid.). This is an intriguing claim, because students had little if any formal training in ethnography and in most cases instructors would have had no way to verify the information that their students reported (Sabatier 137).<sup>8</sup> The archive at IFAN suggests that although the assignment varied over time, this three-part structure outlined by Charton was largely conserved.

Despite nominally being about given ethnographic topics, the notebooks are at least as much about the students' relationships to themselves. Students are often at pains to situate themselves with regard to the writing of the notebook and strain to give evidence of having "revise[d] their memory." Indeed, the notebooks seem to have been an occasion for the students to prove that they were themselves sufficiently modern colonial subjects. The assignment had a double function: to write an ethnography, but also to provide the warrant for that ethnography having been written, to tell the story of how the world came to be ethnographable for the student. This is memorably captured by one Lokho Damey, who writes of former students like him "qui ne veulent plus répondre à l'appel du diable dans la forêt, qui n'entend plus dans le cri du hibou le passage d'un mauvais esprit" 'who no longer want to respond to the devil's call in the forest, who no longer hear an evil spirit in the cry of the owl' (21). As Damey's vivid phrase suggests, the notebooks required not only descriptions of seeing the world in new ways, but also a story



about no longer seeing in older ways, about no longer hearing certain voices in the social world. It is critical that we not confuse this dimension of the notebook with its ethnographic aim. The notebooks appear to have had both evidentiary and performative requirements, and we risk reifying the constraints of the assignment itself if we collapse the latter into the former. Put another way, a student was asked not only to see the world with new eyes, but also to tell the story of how those eyes came to be theirs. The assignment demanded not just ethnography, but a mode of justificatory self-writing in which the student narrated the story of how he himself had come to be the modern-enough subject who was the author of the testimony he was providing.

To accommodate this double function, the official assignment had to be stretched. While the use of “false literary descriptions” may have been explicitly discouraged, many of the notebooks themselves are structured on a deep level by the tropes of novelistic prose. A common generic trace is the *bildungsroman*, or novel of formation. Some students, particularly those writing about the socialization of children, write their notebook almost as if they were *éducations sentimentales*. Those who do this often employ a fictional double, usually a young boy from their community of origin who serves as the negative image of the author’s own “modern” education that has culminated at Ponty.

In his notebook on Fulani education, Ibrahima Sow uses a character named Mamadou as a cautionary tale that parallels his own. Unlike Sow himself, Mamadou is sent to study with a Quranic teacher, where he acquires “aucune notion de sciences, d’histoire, de géographie” ‘not even the smallest idea of science, history nor geography’ and ends up an itinerant practitioner of “maraboutage” (48–49). Another student, Amadou Sakhir Cissé, employs a similar foil in his study of the education of Gourou children in Côte d’Ivoire. Cissé uses a character named Oka to caution against a traditional Gourou upbringing: “Cette vie fait d’Oka un méchant garçon, et plus tard un homme très dur, sans pitié, pour bien dire, un barbare.” ‘This life has made of Oka a wicked boy, and later a hard man, pitiless, in other words, a barbarian’ (A. S. Cissé 15).

In other notebooks, the fictive double is a child who was at one time on the same educational track as the author, but who for various reasons has slid “backwards.” Joseph Batiéno, writing about a Mossi community, contrasts his own personal story with the character of Manéguedo, who leaves primary school to return to his village. Upon crossing paths with Manéguedo later in life, the author complains of the regression he observes in this young man: “[Manéguedo] était intelligent, sympathique et toujours gai. Qu’est-il devenu, cet ami aux yeux brillants qui suivait attentivement les leçons des maitres?” “[Manéguedo] was intelligent, kind and always gay. What has become of this friend with the shining eyes who followed his teachers’ lessons so attentively?” Batiéno continues, mournfully, “Parle-t-il encore français? On le dirait pas.” ‘Does he still speak French? It would seem not’ (27–29). Students seem to employ such narratives of failed formation to legibly enact their own socialization as modern subjects.<sup>9</sup>

But no matter how closely some of the notebooks resemble novels at the level of form, they almost always follow altogether predictable trajectories at the level of structure: each is divided into subsections that follow from the choice of topic itself. Each topic seems to have come with a defined list of questions that students had to answer and around which they had to structure their notebooks. Thus any

notebook on education, no matter how creative its emplotment, tends to follow the same arc. Students work through subsections including the child's education in the family, moral education, physical education, social education—almost always in exactly this same order. Any room for inventiveness at a formal level seems to have coexisted with rather strict structural constraints that served to discipline these texts into something resembling works of social science. This dynamic produces rather strange results, almost as if novelistic batter had been poured into an ethnography-shaped container. While ambivalence toward literature has long been a defining feature of the French anthropological tradition, this tension operates slightly differently in the Ponty notebooks.<sup>10</sup> The literary traces at the level of style and form give substance to the notebooks as works of “personal experience,” while the structural restrictions ensure that each one still has “a certain documentary value.”

Bending the notebook toward the novel also affords some students a greater repertoire of representational strategies. For instance, some students employ the more porous voicing of free indirect discourse to follow their protagonists into intimate situations and interior thoughts, which would be beyond the reach of an ethnographic observer. Edouard Aquereburu, in his study of *évolués*, focuses on a character he calls François. “Nous allons voir François partout, chez lui, dans son ménage, dans sa petite famille, chez ses parents demeurés paysans. Nous allons le voir avec les Européens, nous allons le voir dans son village, nous allons le voir Instituteur à l’Ecole urbaine, fonctionnaire d’élite.” “We will see François everywhere, at home, with his family, with his relatives who have remained peasants. We will see him with Europeans, we will see him in his village, we will see him as a teacher in an urban school, as an elite functionary” (10). Inviting the reader to “see” François “everywhere” implies a kind of surveillance function for these notebooks, but the reach of these student-ethnographers was often quite limited. Many notebooks open with a preface addressed directly to the reader/grader, and in these para-texts students often complain of the difficulties they faced in gathering the information that was required of them.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes they report that they had no rights of access to topics that they were supposed to have studied.<sup>12</sup> This is often the case with the expertise of social groups other than their own—from bodies of knowledge belonging to secret societies or endogamous “castes” to practices associated with occult practitioners or gendered labor.<sup>13</sup> Other students complain of even more elemental challenges: sometimes the basic demography of their home region is said to be elusive. Students report that individuals and family units withhold information for fear it could be used for purposes of taxation or military conscription—a detail that reminds us that inhabiting the position of the ethnographer may also have shifted the ways in which these newly nosy students were perceived by their own communities.<sup>14</sup> In such circumstances, fictional conventions for ventriloquizing other peoples’ traditions and lived experiences became a strategy: students write fictions when sociological “information” cannot be obtained.

But was this turn toward the literary always a pragmatic one on the part of the students? What was literary form doing in these notebooks after all, since it was never supposed to have been there in the first place? One possibility would be that the students themselves initiated this turn and that the literary constituted a space for them to subvert the original assignment. This would be an attractive

argument, but the literary dimensions of these notebooks are pervasive enough that it simply cannot be a case of overt resistance. Furthermore, an examination of the comments that survive in the margins—written by teachers at Ponty—tells a different story. While there may have been officially no literary dimension to the assignment, in practice graders' comments reveal that teachers would sometimes penalize students whose compositions fell flat stylistically. Amadou Arona Sy, for instance, received this tepid accolade for his work: "Documentation assez abondante mais sèchement présentée" 'Fairly abundant documentation but dryly presented' (1). In the very same year, Baffa Gaye was rather sharply criticized for a study that demonstrated the opposite tendency. His notebook was found to be too attached "aux apparences, aux faits extérieurs, au côté pittoresque du sujet" 'to appearances, to exterior facts, to the *pittoresque* side of the topic' (1). Such comments indicate the fine line students had to walk.

But the push and pull of teachers' comments went well beyond a concern for style. Some were called out for not having made more use of literary models, while others were chastised for going too far. Yapi Kouassi was condemned for not drawing more on "the good La Fontaine" in his study of animals (1), but Lompolo Koné was raked over the coals for producing too literary a text in his remarkable notebook, "*L'Ancien tirailleur revenu au village.*" Koné's notebook comes much closer to being an elegantly realized novella than most. It follows a former soldier who returns to his native village. There is a clear arc of character development and a wonderfully cheeky narrator who gently mocks the ex-soldier's vanity. The grader at Ponty was unconvinced: "Malheureusement ce genre de travail à forme romancée incite au verbiage, au remplissage, aux développements filandreux: mieux vaut une étude précise qu'un sujet aussi flou" 'Unfortunately this kind of work with a novelistic form seems to incite verbiage and padding, overwrought development: a precise study is far better than such a formless topic' (1). These marginal comments suggest that colonized students at Ponty were not to write novels, but they were also not permitted to do away with a concern with style and literary expression. The slide toward the literary, then, appears to have been an unavoidable but nevertheless tacitly understood requirement: students often actually *had* to use some literary techniques in their notebooks, though they could not appear to be writing literature.

One place to look to understand this curious hybridity is in the prompts for the notebooks themselves. A common one that was used in the 1940s begins with a citation from Hubert's *Traité de pédagogie générale*: "There is no human society, be it the most simple of all, without a pedagogical system; every society renews itself indefinitely by the accession of young members." The prompt itself continues by asking students to describe "the traditional education system of a society that you know well" in order to show that the "traditional formation of the child 'has as its goal and function the maintenance of the constitutive type of the society under consideration'" (I. B. M. Cissé 2). There is little space here for articulating any alternative account of the socialization of children. This is because the prompt was not an invitation to open-ended research, but rather an occasion for students to conclude that traditional education reproduced a society's constitutive "type." The word "maintenance" (*maintien*) here is crucial, because in the dozens of notebooks that respond to this prompt, all manner of "traditional" socializations are reduced to the simple maintenance of a static, timeless African society.

Not surprisingly, the other side of this coin is a good deal of praise for French colonial education. A few representative examples will help clarify the terms of this binary: Ibrahim Ben Mady Cissé draws the contrast starkly: “la tradition est sacrée dans ce groupement. . . . La plus forte empreinte est la mécanisation qui attaque tout, englobe tout et l’éducation semble être sa victime la plus éprouvée.” ‘tradition is sacred in this group . . . the strongest evidence is the mechanization that infects everything, envelops everything and education seems to be its most time-tested victim’ (4–5). Mahélor Diouf N’Doféne’s notebook provides another telling example: “Le dressage qui y est employé comme méthode d’éducation noie l’individu dans la masse fabrique des enfants d’un rouage de machine, tue la personnalité et la curiosité intellectuelle” ‘The training [*dressage*] that they use as a method of education drowns the individual in a mass production of children as merely cogs in a machine, killing their personality and intellectual curiosity’ (25). French education, on the other hand, is usually lavishly praised. As Habibou Bâ writes, “Cette personnalité, cette souplesse d’esprit, cette plasticité, en un mot cette expansion totale des virtualités et des facultés de l’enfant qui saurait mieux la favoriser que l’Ecole française?” ‘this personality, this suppleness of spirit, this plasticity, in a word this total expansion of the possibilities and faculties of the child—who knows better how to promote it than the French school?’ (25).

The educational contrast these notebooks are (seemingly obliged) to draw can often be summed up by the opposition between a young mind (*esprit*) that is merely furnished (*meublé*) with received ideas versus one that is properly formed (*formé*) with critical faculties of its own.<sup>15</sup> Whatever falls under the banner of “traditional education” in the notebooks is most often linked to mental furnishing and characterized as stasis, rigidity, the maintenance of a machine, and even *dressage*, a term generally reserved for the training of animals. French education by contrast typically is about the formation of a student’s personality, the unfurling of character, and *esprit critique*. It is not especially surprising that a large number of notebooks reproduce this contrast. It is exactly what one might expect would have been required of colonized student-teachers. And yet the critique of *dressage* and the ensuing praise for enlightened colonial *formation* appears over and over again as regularly as clockwork. Typically it happens in the preface or the conclusion and often in very similar terms across a broad sampling of notebooks. In other words, the trope itself is a sort of refrain. This suggests that it was actually Ponty that was engaging in a certain mechanistic training of its students: in this case eliciting very generic narrative accounts of their becoming modern, colonial subjects. And in order to produce such generic accounts, a certain recycling of literary tropes appears to have been quite useful.

But while the notebooks are obliged to praise the French school for cultivating the student’s critical faculties, in the rare instances when students actually took a stand they were rather quickly tamped down. One illustration of this is the extraordinary preface to Jacques-Marie Ndiaye’s notebook, written in the late 1930s. The prompt Ndiaye appears to have been writing on was “Your Race” (*Votre race*). However, Ndiaye begins his notebook by explaining the difficulty of applying the concept of race to himself—he notes that his immediate ancestry is a mixture of Wolof, Sérère, Diola, and Portuguese. Furthermore, he points out, some of these groups trace filiation through patrilineal kin while others privilege the matrilineal line. Then Ndiaye states, “in my personal opinion, the theory of

race is inexact. In this moment, it is almost impossible to find a pure race without any mixing of foreign blood." None of this goes over well with the grader, who underlines, crosses out, and even vents his annoyance in the margins. Here is a reproduction of the textual mise-en-scène that ensues:

Votre race ???

Ma race !!!

Question à laquelle il m'est très difficile de répondre.

Mon aïeul maternel, Malamine Ndiaye, est originaire du Cayor. Il est donc Ouolof. Il fit "gadaye" c'est à dire qu'à la suite d'une querelle, ou d'un malentendu de famille, il laissa tous ses biens, abandonna ses parents et s'exila. Il se fixa en Casamance, y fit fortune et épousa mon aïeule, M'Lomp Da Sylva, de sang Diola et métisse portugaise. Quant à ma mère, elle est de père Sérère d'où son nom N'Dour.

? On ne  
comprend  
pas

Du côté paternel, mon aïeul est Ouolof et ma grand-mère Sérère.

Dire que je suis de telle race, plutôt que de telle autre serait une erreur. Car, si les Ouolofs acceptent la parenté par la voie paternelle, les Sérères, les Diolas et même les Lebous ne la reconnaissent que par la voie maternelle. Pour ceux-ci, le sang maternel est plus sûre [sic] que le sang paternel.

Je serais donc Ouolof dans le premier cas et Diola pour les autres.

En résumé, je suis un métissé qui a ~~encore~~ conservé les traits du quarteron, la taille petite du Diola, la fierté du Ouoloff et le caractère mystérieux et défiant du Sérère.

!

A mon avis ~~personnel~~, la théorie de race est inexacte. Actuellement, il est presque impossible de trouver une race pure, sans aucun mélange de sang étranger.

Your race???

My race!!!

A question that is very difficult for me to answer.

My maternal ancestor, Malamine Ndiaye, is originally from Cayor. He is therefore Wolof. He was "gadaye," which is to say that as the result of a quarrel, or a family misunderstanding, he left all of his belongings, abandoned his relatives, and exiled himself. He settled in Casamance, made his fortune there, and married my ancestor, M'Lomp Da Sylva, of Diola blood and a Portuguese métisse. As for my mother, she is of a Sérère father from which she gets her name N'Dour.

? I do not  
understand

On the paternal side, my ancestor is Wolof and my grandmother Sérère.

To say that I am of this race rather than that one would be an error. Because, if the Wolofs trace descent through the paternal line, the Sérère, the Diola, and even the Lebou recognize it only through the maternal line. For these groups, the maternal blood is more certain than the paternal blood.

I am therefore Wolof in the first case and Diola for the others.

To sum up, I am mixed race boy [un métissé] who has ~~still~~ conserved the traits of the quarteron, the small size of the Diola, the pride of the Wolof, and the mysterious and defiant character of the Sérère.

!

In my ~~personal~~ opinion, the theory of race is inexact. In this moment, it is almost impossible to find a pure race, without any mixing of foreign blood. (1)

The student's assertion that it is his "personal opinion [that] the theory of race is inexact" is quite literally put under erasure by the grader. On the one hand, one can understand the grader's gesture here as a simple correction of a piece of awkward phrasing—the phrase "personal opinion" is clearly redundant. However, the rest

of the marks on this page suggest another interpretation. The exclamation point in the margin beside this sentence seems to indicate surprise, possibly even outrage, and the underlining beneath the phrase “the theory of race is inexact” suggests that whatever the grader’s sentiments were, they were not limited to Ndiaye’s use of a redundant modifier. Furthermore, Ndiaye’s mistake here is not a grammatical error but a stylistic blunder—and the Ponty graders do not typically intervene to correct every one of these. But above all, the larger context of the assignment itself must be taken into account if we are to understand these corrections. Ndiaye is dissenting from the very premise of his assignment (“Your Race”). He does so on the grounds of a lived, embodied history (his own and that of his family) that is felt to be incompatible with the reductiveness of the category of “race.” Instead of a portrait of a timeless ethnic group, Ndiaye opens with his own origins (Wolof . . . Diola . . . Sérère . . . Portuguese), which, he explains, cannot be smoothly shoehorned into the prompt.<sup>16</sup> The grader appears to find this incomprehensible—*on ne comprend pas*. In this context, then, Ndiaye’s superfluous modifier is not *merely* redundant, but also a kind of added emphasis, with “personal” serving as an extra layer of possessiveness attached to an opinion on race, which, the grader’s comments suggest, is out of place in this context.

Ndiaye’s preface illustrates that there were limits to the notebooks as narratives of formation in which an individual comes to discover his own “critical spirit.” It is precisely when the student claims subjective experience as a warrant for the production of knowledge and critique that the corrector steps in. My claim here is not that the notebook assignment functioned to destroy or oppress individual expression. Quite the opposite: like many other colonial humanist initiatives of the period, the notebooks had to “produce yet proscribe individuality” (Wilder 116). Ponty students were *encouraged* to write as individuals, but they had to stage their self-making in a largely stereotypic way that would not exceed the parameters of the prompts nor trouble the ideological foundations of French colonialism.

What was the place of literary form, then, when the terms in which a colonized student was authorized to speak of himself were suggested in advance and sometimes corrected later? What did literary form make possible for these students, and what did it foreclose? To explore these questions, it helps to understand how literature itself was taught at Ponty.

Much like its use in the notebooks themselves, literature had an ambivalent place at Ponty. Some exposure to literary texts was seen as necessary for students, but mainly to properly cultivate French expression. A Ponty education was by and large intended to result in what Boubacar Ly calls a “just enough” education, namely a certain level of French for these future teachers (111). In a commentary on the place of literature at Ponty, one Director declared that it was desirable for students to know the works of “major writers” such as Molière, Corneille, Shakespeare, Hugo, Flaubert, and Proust, but that there would be no need to teach “a course in French literature.” The goal of any literary study at Ponty was to gain a “better knowledge of French” through “a greater penetration of the ‘genius’ of the language” (qtd. in Ly 111–12).

In their courses, Ponty students mainly encountered excerpts—apparently taken from Philippon’s *Les Lectures littéraires de l’école* early on—with occasional readings of longer works such as *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Emile* (Sabatier 81).<sup>17</sup> More sustained engagements with literary texts seem to have been introduced

by the 1920s, but it was not until well after World War II that studies on the level of a *lycée* were formalized (Ly 111). The curricula reproduced by Ly indicate that the readings were a mix of French classics (Zola, Colette, Balzac) and “colonial literature” (André Demaison, Jérôme Tharaud, and Pierre Loti) (Ly 112–14). Early francophone African texts by authors such as Ousmane Socé appear never to have been taught.<sup>18</sup>

This curious corpus came to constitute the basis of a kind of para-literary education, one that conditioned the forms of expression that appear in the notebooks. Occasionally, there was quite a direct feedback loop between the teaching of literature at Ponty (and other elite institutions) and the notebooks that were produced. Students at Ponty were sometimes “forced . . . to make comparisons between various elements of [a literary text] and some aspect of native life” (Sabatier 145). A vivid example is the use of Molière’s *Les Femmes savantes*, which was taught to provoke students’ reflections on the education of women in their communities (Sabatier 145). An echo of this exercise is evident in at least one notebook, by Mamadi Diakité. Although Diakité’s notebook was written at the Ecole Normale in Katibougou, he uses the play in precisely the same way that Ponty students would have been taught.<sup>19</sup>

Citing extensively from Chrysale’s monologue in Act 2, Scene 7, Diakité uses Molière to warn of the dangers of over-educating women. In the scene, Chrysale is complaining that his servant has been chased off by his *précieuses* female relatives, who have been offended at the servant’s incorrect French. In the passage cited, Chrysale holds that:

*Il n’est pas bien honnête, et pour beaucoup de causes,  
Qu’une femme étudie et sache tant de choses.  
Former aux bonnes mœurs l’esprit de ses enfants,  
Faire aller son ménage, avoir l’œil sur ses gens,  
Et régler la dépense avec économie,  
Doit être son étude et sa philosophie. (42–43)*

For a hundred reasons, it’s neither meet nor right  
That a woman study and be erudite.  
To teach her children manners, overlook  
The household, train the servants and the cook,  
And keep a thrifty budget—these should be  
Her only study and philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

Chrysale’s speech, Diakité observes, contains “general truths that concern our country” (Diakité 43). Diakité seems mainly to mine from Molière a certain misogynistic critique of female intellectuals who foolishly “*veulent écrire, et devenir auteurs*” ‘wish to write, and become authors.’ But the scene he quotes is also about a dangerous obsession with overly perfect French. The debate between Chrysale, Philaminte, and Bélise in the play itself turns around what it means to be learned and literate and how true learning can easily be mistaken for a careful deployment of rhetoric and citation. In the very scene Diakité quotes, Chrysale counsels Philaminte to burn her library, referring to books themselves as just useless furniture (a “*meuble inutile*”). But in Diakité’s uptake of *Les femmes savantes*, the *meuble* in question is Molière’s text itself. Molière becomes the means by which this student

demonstrates his own learned credentials. Diakité has to, as it were, do a bit of furnishing to show the success of his formation as a (implicitly masculine) modern colonial subject.<sup>21</sup> He does this with a citation from Molière, but other students use other literary referents and models. The proof of successful colonial self-making in the notebooks often seems to be the literary trappings—these *meubles inutiles*—that become both the medium through which the formation is realized and the means by which it is recognized. This is not to say that Diakité misses the point of Molière, nor even that there cannot be something subversive in the way he quotes this particular scene; rather, his use of citation animates a contradiction at the very heart of the para-literary mode in which he is working. In the notebooks the literary is supposed to be the nearly invisible naturalistic architecture of a certain disposition of a modern subject. But wherever it appears, the para-literary is at risk of being merely the furniture around which the subject itself is rather too conspicuously arranged.

Such ingrown paradoxes of para-literary education seem to have been acute in other writing exercises at Ponty, in use well before the notebook assignment came to be. For example, the instructions on teaching composition that were given to teachers at Ponty from 1913 to 1924 called for students to be given a “topic with an essentially practical character” to “teach [them] to observe and describe with method the objects and the phenomena that surround them . . . the values of the people in the environment in which they live” (qtd. in Ly 110). But, these instructions added, “let us insist, in all their work, on simplicity, on clarity, on sincerity.” The last word—sincerity—is worth pausing over. On the one hand, students writing these compositions were expected, just as they would be in their notebooks, to look on their communities “with method” and speak as native informants. On the other, how would a Ponty teacher possibly know when a colonized student was being sincere? What could sincerity mean in colonial schools, where the elicitation of discourse from students went hand in hand with attempts to tightly police the contours of what could be said?

Para-literary ethnography at Ponty emerged in part to allow students to prove that not only were they modern enough, they were also sincere in their desire to be modern. Para-literary ethnography was not instituted unidirectionally “from above” by colonial commandment, nor was it entirely a work of *détournement* by students. Rather, it was an emergent practice of self-making, a compromise formation that appeared in the negotiations between colonial teachers and colonized students. Ponty students drew on their para-literary studies to inhabit what was for them an impossible, in-between position of ethnographer *and* colonial subject. Para-literary forms allowed students to individualize their Ponty notebooks, albeit in a largely stereotypic way, by transforming a predictable account of coming to consciousness over and against the forces of tradition into the story of the development of an individual personality. They allowed students to convey the socialization, interiority, and affect that they were meant to display and offered ways of being recognizable and believable as newly modernized colonial subjects.

I want to be clear here that I am not saying that the notebooks necessarily accomplish the transformation they enact. There is a certain looseness of fit between the author and the account given. Sometimes this is performed in a dissident way, but more often it is not. In reading the Ponty notebooks, then, it behooves us to insist on this distance between what students perform on the



page and what they may have really felt, thought, etc. The notebooks are less a window onto subjectivity than a scene of subjection enacted in relation to the assignment itself.<sup>22</sup>

Although the emergence of para-literary ethnography can be seen most clearly in the notebook assignment that developed during the “Africanization” of the Ponty curriculum in the 1930s, we find traces of it well beyond this school and this decade. From the late 1920s and early 1930s on, para-literary ethnography appears across a variety of discursive networks associated with the educational apparatus of Afrique Occidentale Française—including the writings of former students, the debates about pedagogy between colonial teachers, and the questions that were asked on exams. In the 1930s, *Education Africaine*—the journal for the colonial education system in AOF—printed a series of surveys on aspects of “native life” that were circulated to teachers in AOF. The topics for these surveys overlapped in many cases with the prompts for notebooks.<sup>23</sup> As the newly minted Ponty teachers dispersed, many of them continued to contribute studies of the regions to which they were assigned. For its part, the larger colonial education system in AOF continued to grapple, well into the 1940s and 50s, with the pedagogical paradoxes that had conditioned the emergence of the notebook assignment in the first place.<sup>24</sup> And in order to receive diplomas and access to higher education, many newer students were being asked exam questions that interpolated them into responding from the position of an observer, looking back at their community of origin from a remove.<sup>25</sup> The eight hundred plus Ponty notebooks are thus not so much an origin point as a particularly concentrated example of a broader form of knowledge production. Para-literary forms appear to have been useful in many areas of the colonial school system in this period for their sincerity effects, for the ways in which they could convey the narrative arc of a subject’s conscription to the colonial modern.

This diffuse presence of para-literary ethnography in and around colonial schools may help explain why we also find traces of the mode in early francophone African novels. Many of the first African novelists working in French—Ousmane Socé, Abdoulaye Sadj, Paul Hazoumé, Bernard Dadié—were Ponty graduates themselves, a fact that caused Senghor to observe in 1947 that, “our new literature is a literature of schoolteachers.” (Senghor 233) Examining the connections between the notebooks and early francophone African literature will be an important direction for future research. It will require careful, further study that approaches para-literary ethnography not as a genre, since its very functioning depended on not being recognized as a genre as such, but rather as a discipline in its own right.

To study the persistence of the rhetorical modes that were cultivated by this discipline, we need to consider the life of literary forms beyond their production and consumption in recognizably literary ways. The Ponty notebooks point the way toward an analysis of the more hidden ways literary forms circulate: as models for expression, as the waypoints through which one passes if one has to give a certain kind of account of oneself. If we look to the para-literary diffusion of literary forms, it becomes clearer that sometimes it is quite important that certain modes of expression, although rooted in literary training, must not be seen as literary at all in order to present themselves as the narrative emanations of a newly modernized subject.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to the Director of IFAN for welcoming me into the Ponty archive and to the staff—especially Elhadji Birame Diouf—for their support. During my two periods of research, the collection was in the process of being recatalogued. The citations here should reflect the new catalogue system. Ponty students did not always specify the year in which they were writing, so it is not always possible to identify exactly when certain notebooks were written. A guide to the Cahiers does exist (Afanou and Togbé Pierre) but it only covers the Senegalese section of the notebooks. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. Vincent Debaene has been a generous and insightful reader of this material in a variety of forms.

2. My use of “para-literary” here draws on Stephanie Newell’s analysis of “para-colonial” literary networks in Ghana (Newell 29).

3. Lamine Guèye was the only exception. Africans did hold the disciplinary post of *surveillant général/moniteur* beginning in the 1920s (Ly 36; Sabatier 99–100).

4. Genova, Wilder, and Gamble have studied various aspects of the long-running “crisis” of the colonial education system (Genova 111–22; Wilder 119–29; Gamble, “La crise de l’enseignement”). For a recent overview of the historiography of French colonial education, see Barthélémy, “L’Enseignement dans l’Empire colonial français.”

5. The centerpiece of adapted education was to be the Rural Popular School. With a curriculum focused on farming techniques and manual labor as well as the study of local history, art, music, and customs (Genova 121; Gamble, “Peasants of the Empire” 781), these schools had “the paradoxical task of creating traditional Africans” (Wilder 120).

6. One student declined to describe in his notebook a particular festival held in his village because “the students [at Ponty] put it on as a play” (Saguiza 32).

7. There are a number of possible precedents for the Ponty notebooks, from the monographs that Henri Labouret asked future administrators at the Ecole Coloniale to write in the 1930s, to the regional studies written by student-teachers at the Ecoles Normales of the French Third Republic in the late 19th century (Wilder 70; Thiesse 10–15). (I am grateful to Vincent Debaene for suggesting this latter parallel.) What sets the Ponty assignment apart from these models is its colonial double-bind: Ponty students had to simultaneously establish their own authority as ethnographic observers while supplying information as native informants.

8. However, some students appear to be familiar with Maurice Delafosse (Diack 2; Ouattara 4).

9. Students also draw on other narrative forms besides the realist novel. Mbaye uses an epistolary structure to relate his experiences as a soldier in the Second World War.

10. For a genealogy of this tension, see Debaene, *Far Afield* 1–22.

11. Serigne Seck begins with an appeal to his “lecteurs et correcteurs” ‘readers and graders’ (1).

12. Larba Ouattara planned to write on indigenous pharmacopeia, but ended up writing about foodways after his uncle refused to tell him any secrets (Ouattara 2).

13. Kalifa Keïta describes learning to eavesdrop on conversations without asking questions or even appearing interested, because whenever “an auxiliary of the whites” asks “old people and griots” for information about the historical past they reply, “I don’t know!” (6).

14. Amadou Diallo complains of how difficult it was to do a “demographic study.” Asking families how many children they had generated fears of increased taxes and conscription—but also ran up against the widespread prohibition on counting living children (5).

15. Students who invoke the tension between furnishing and truly forming a child's mind often make reference to Montaigne or Rousseau, the key figures in French pedagogical thought who explored this binary (Diouf N'Dofène 25; Almamy 8).

16. It is important to note that Ndiaye does not entirely reject a racialized frame here so much as dispute its exactitude. And after quarreling with the prompt, Ndiaye goes on to write a fairly conventional study of a Sérère community. In his case at least, dissent was fleeting.

17. We know this because the students themselves complained about it. During a 1937 investigation into the school, eleven Ponty students were interviewed and voiced their grievances about a curriculum that had too many exposés on local questions and not enough readings from "great French authors" and "contemporary writers." (Ly 374; Sabatier 132).

18. Of course, students cultivated their own private reading habits outside the classroom (Sabatier 145). In interviews with Ly, former Pontins recall reading the Senegalese and foreign press and searching for books not in Ponty's library—notably Maran's *Batouala* (403–04).

19. Although the archive is known as the Cahiers Ponty, one finds in it texts that were produced at other schools, particularly the Ecole Normale Rurale Frédéric Assomption de Katibougou.

20. Translation by Richard Wilbur.

21. As this example suggests, certain prompts elicited comparisons on gender across "African societies" from the all-male student body. In notebooks on marriage in particular, the young men reflected on their own masculinities and described the "kind of woman" they hoped to marry. Ponty had a "sister school," the Ecole des Jeunes Filles de Rufisque, that opened in 1938. Rufisque did not have an equivalent to the notebook assignment, but see Barthélemy for an analysis of the curriculum's influence on Mariama Bâ.

22. We also need to remain open to the idea that not everything expressed in the notebooks is merely a performance. As Gregory Mann suggests, the problem with always reading the colonial archive against the grain is that we may dismiss sentiments that are genuine but ideologically compromised (9). Some students could have been quite sincere in their notebooks. Indeed, the intensely sentimental aspects of the assignment likely helped make it into an enduring discipline.

23. Topics included the education of children, beliefs and customs, folklore, markets, local history, foodways, and an "Enquête sur l'Enfant Noir en AOF." (See, respectively, the issues from Jan.–Mar. 1935; Jan.–Mar. 1934; Apr.–June, 1930; Apr.–June 1932; Apr.–Sept. 1935; July–Dec. 1933; July–Dec. 1929.) Respondents included Paul Hazoumé (under a pseudonym), Alioune Diop, Mamby Sidibé, and many others.

24. See Robin 59–60 and Guiffroy 61–63.

25. See, for example, the exam questions from 1930, many of which asked students to recall experiences from their native villages ("Concours et examens en 1930").

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