

# Zola's Post-Colonial City

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## RÉSUMÉ

*Examiner Zola à la lumière du post-colonialisme permet d'envisager ses romans sous un angle nouveau et de montrer combien ils sont révélateurs du monde contemporain. Par sa façon de peindre les décors urbains de manière exotique, de concevoir la ville en fonction d'une division par caste, et par son utilisation du langage populaire, le romancier naturaliste anticipe plusieurs caractéristiques de la fiction post-coloniale. Chez beaucoup d'auteurs post-coloniaux, on retrouve en effet l'empreinte du naturalisme zolien. En outre, Zola partage avec eux une volonté partisane de montrer et de corriger l'injustice contre les groupes opprimés, ce qui lui donne d'autant plus le droit d'être considéré comme un écrivain post-colonial avant l'heure.*

Viewing Zola through the lens of post-colonial theory can produce surprising results. The very approach, applying late twentieth-century concepts to an author who died in 1902, may seem questionable. But arguments against it must be weighed carefully. Zola's dates do not in themselves disqualify him for such consideration, for post-colonial critics accept the term for all interaction between colonizers and colonized beginning from the first moment of contact, not simply the period after formal independence is granted.<sup>1</sup> Nor is his position as a white male who lived in one of the major colonial powers a serious obstacle: the label post-colonial is accepted for writers of dominant groups who sympathize with and speak for those their own society mistreats;<sup>2</sup> the fiction of white South African writers like Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, and André Brink, or Sartre's essay "Orphée noir" can be cited as examples.<sup>3</sup> A more serious objection can be made, however, on grounds of Zola's nearly exclusive focus on France throughout his career. The subtitle of his *Rougon-Macquart* series, *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire*, can be misleading to students of imperialism: the term Second Empire refers not to overseas colonial possessions but to the system of government within France; during the period in which the novels are set, 1852-1870, the ruler, Napoléon III, called himself emperor rather than king.<sup>4</sup> In fact, throughout the series, Zola seems almost

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<sup>1</sup> In the Preface to *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), the editors acknowledge that scholars differ on the correct meaning of the term but argue that "it is best used to designate the totality of practices, in all their rich diversity, which characterize the societies of the post-colonial world from the moment of colonization to the present day" (xv). In the General Introduction, they state that the term *post-colonial* contains ambiguities but "addresses all aspects of the colonial process from the beginning of colonial contact" (2). They take the same position in the Introduction to *The Empire Writes Back*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Stephen Slemon, "Unsettling the Empire" in Ashcroft et al., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 109.

<sup>3</sup> Slemon notes that "many critics and theorists have argued long and hard for the preservation of white Australian, New Zealander, South African, and Canadian literatures within the field of comparative 'post-colonial' literary studies" (109).

<sup>4</sup> The connection between emperors and a colonial empire was tenuous throughout French history. France's first empire, mostly in the Americas, was built under the Bourbon monarchy, lost in large part before the French

oblivious to both France's slow overseas expansion during the period in which his novels take place and its rapid growth while he was writing them. Even passing references to events outside France are few and far between in the *Rougon-Macquart* series. *L'Assommoir* contains a popular song about an Algerian leader who fought against French colonization and makes brief mention of a minor character's military career in that conflict, while two characters of *La Terre* also served in it; *Germinal* and *Nana* contain passing references to Napoléon III's ill-fated war in Mexico or the Crimean War. But these passages, and a scattering of others, all cite overseas places and events that are briefly mentioned but never seen, and add up to very little in a series of twenty novels that fills more than six thousand pages and takes place entirely within France. The same is true of Zola's other fictional works, both before and after the *Rougon-Macquart* series.<sup>5</sup> All in all, Zola barely seems to notice French attempts to establish a presence outside Europe.

And yet, paradoxically, many aspects of Zola's depiction of life in France anticipate major themes and practices of post-colonialism, making his view of city life strikingly similar to the urban environments of post-colonial fiction. Many parallels can be found: his concentration, at least in his best-known works, on humble characters far from the halls of power; their hard lives that leave them a stark choice between submission and revolt; his exploration of how race, class, and gender intersect; but it is his practice of exoticism, depiction of the city, and use of language that are most similar to many post-colonial – and frequently anti-colonial texts. All three of these subjects play a major role in both post-colonial literature and post-colonial criticism. To begin with the first, many of Zola's descriptive passages can be considered exotic in the sense that they show strange, unfamiliar environments, plunging both characters and reader into an unknown world. The experience is not necessarily pleasant; as Mudimbe-Boyi and Mortimer point out, “[t]here are two possible faces of exoticism: it can focus attention on curious things that arouse wonder, but it can also entail the depiction of horrible and frightening things.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that the places viewed are in a major European city does nothing to change the dynamic of exoticism of their presentation,<sup>7</sup> for they are as mysterious and disquieting to Zola's middle class readership as the sites described by the African explorers of the age. In *Nana*, the theater is first introduced as an object of surprise for a provincial visitor, who is shown around by his more worldly cousin, a journalist who reviews drama. Later, the theater owner guides a small group of nobles, including Nana's future lover Count Muffat, through the backstage area: “Muffat [...] qui n'avait jamais visité les coulisses d'un théâtre, s'étonnait, pris d'un malaise, d'une répugnance vague mêlée de peur.”<sup>8</sup> The dark, mysterious passages leading to actors' changing rooms, the oppressive heat, even the odors he encounters make this environment as foreign for Muffat as the African bush, and faintly disturbing, as a place where his traditional Catholic morality seems not to apply: “Et il ne s'arrêta pas, hâtant sa marche, fuyant presque, en emportant à fleur de peau le frisson de cette trouée ardente sur un monde qu'il ignorait” (150). Muffat later visits the private

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Revolution, then temporarily regained – on paper at least – only to be sold by the first emperor, Napoléon, in the Louisiana Purchase; the later empire in Africa and southeast Asia grew slowly under several regimes but primarily under the Third Republic that ruled France from 1871 to 1940.

<sup>5</sup> *Rome* obviously takes place in that city, but has no relation to France's colonial expansion.

<sup>6</sup> Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi and Mildred Mortimer, “Travel, Representation, and Difference, or How Can One be a Parisian?” *Research in African Literatures* 23.3 (Autumn 1992): 28.

<sup>7</sup> To cite one example, Koffi Anyinefa observes that the Paris metro is shown as exotic by many Francophone African writers (“Le Métro parisien: Figure de l'exotisme postcolonial,” *French Forum* 28.2 [Spring 2003]: 80-89), to whom it is strange and unfamiliar.

<sup>8</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1968) 148. Henceforth, further references to this work will be to this edition and page numbers only will appear in parentheses within the text.

sections of the theater building, including the inner sanctum of the actresses' dressing rooms, which fill him with the fear-tinged excitement of a tropical explorer:

[...] il étouffait. Toutes les odeurs, toutes les flammes, venaient frapper là; [...] Un instant, il se tint à la rampe de fer, qu'il trouva tiède d'une tiédeur vivante, et il ferma les yeux, et il but dans une aspiration tout le sexe de la femme, qu'il ignorait encore et qui lui battait le visage. (165)

The passage contains many of the *topoi* of exoticism: heat, strong odors, half naked bodies, the suggestion of sexual permissiveness, in a way that could be compared to the roughly contemporary works of Loti or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But it uses such tropes to describe not distant tropical places but sites in the imperial capital, in a kind of "reverse exoticism" that Victor Segalen calls "exotisme de renvoi,"<sup>9</sup> in which the former subject of a dominant gaze looks back at the source of dominance. Like post-colonial texts that show Africans discovering the Western metropolis, *Nana* forces the French reader to see places in his own country as strange, confusing, full of secret places that may contain riches or dangers, in an overall vision that mixes excitement and fear in a subversive way. The wild, the savage, the sexually permissive, the reader is told, are not safely removed in a distant land: they are here among you.<sup>10</sup>

It is not just particular interiors but the city as a whole that becomes exotic under Zola's pen. Migration to the big city, with all the bewilderment and hardships it can entail, is a frequent subject of post-colonial literature, and Zola stands as a precursor of this theme. Although the subject can be found in texts from before the colonial era – in the French tradition, Rabelais's *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* already exhibit it in the Renaissance – it becomes a major theme of writing in colonized lands, in many of which large urban conglomerations arose only as the result of colonial occupation.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Zola's approach to the theme, as well as the specific environments he evokes, are remarkably similar to those of numerous post-colonial authors. Many novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* series begin with the provincial protagonist's arrival in Paris, usually emphasizing the uneasiness the city provokes in the newcomers; if *Pot-Bouille*'s main character Octave Mouret settles comfortably into Parisian life, others have greater difficulty: *Le Ventre de Paris* documents the arrival of a former prisoner who fears being recaptured, *Au Bonheur des Dames* shows an orphan who is intimidated by her surroundings, and

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Anyinefa 78. Anyinefa analyzes more broadly the role of exoticism in post-colonial writing in his article; Ashcroft, Griffin, and Tiffin note in *The Empire Writes Back* that a European visitor's guided tour of foreign places is a common feature of the exotic in many post-colonial texts (27), while Mudimbe-Boyi and Mortimer discuss the presentation of Paris as an exotic destination in Bernard Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* (33).

<sup>10</sup> Brian Nelson notes the inherently subversive nature of Muffat's visit: "The long walk through the *coulisses* describes not only the backstage area of the theatre, but also Muffat's excursion into his unconscious, and the downfall of an aristocrat caught in the symbolic labyrinth that is *Nana*. This excursion is also a socially loaded one as it draws him away from his aristocratic sphere toward *Nana*'s working-class one, threatening to destabilize not only the Count's personal boundaries, but also through metaphor those of the Second Empire." See his "*Nana*: Use of the Female Body," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 38.3 (Sept.-Dec. 2001): 420.

<sup>11</sup> There are obviously exceptions: India, for example, boasted large thriving cities long before the British raj, while North Africa had a vibrant urban culture in centers like Marrakesh and Algiers. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, however, and undoubtedly in many regions of Latin America, most large cities were established by colonial powers and owe much of their growth to the administrative and commercial role they played during occupation. Robert J. C. Young names "migrants who have moved from the countryside to the impoverished edges of the city" as one of the groups on which post-colonialism focuses its attention. See *Post-colonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 114.

*L'Œuvre* a confused girl seeking shelter on a rainy night. It is *L'Assommoir*, however, that best captures the sense of worry in the face of an unfamiliar and vaguely threatening environment that many post-colonial writers express. The novel's first chapter is a catalogue of perceived dangers, beginning on a note of intense anxiety as the protagonist Gervaise waits in vain for her partner Lantier to return to their shabby hotel room. The city, hidden behind the customs wall, seems mysterious to her, not alluring as a place of wonders and opportunities, but menacing. Zola's choice of vocabulary emphasizes the sense of danger: "des groupes de bouchers, devant les abattoirs, stationnaient en tabliers sanglants; et le vent frais apportait une puanteur par moments, une odeur fauve de bêtes massacrées,"<sup>12</sup> the crowd of workers heading to their jobs "se noyait" (37) in the city, which swallows them like a hungry beast (38). The immediate neighborhood is squeezed between a slaughterhouse and a hospital: "des vieux abattoirs noirs de leur massacre et de leur puanteur, à l'hôpital neuf, blafard, montrant, par les trous encore béants de ses rangées de fenêtres, des salles nues où la mort devait faucher" (40). Furthermore, Gervaise's descent from her window into the city proves little short of catastrophic: Lantier takes advantage of her absence to leave, absconding with what little money they have obtained from a pawnshop, and Gervaise herself gets into a vicious, brutal fight with another woman at the public laundry house. The chapter's final sentence, recapitulating the view from the hotel window, suggests that all her worries are entirely justified: "et elle enfila d'un regard les boulevards extérieurs, à droite, à gauche, s'arrêtant aux deux bouts, prise d'une épouvante sourde, comme si sa vie, désormais, allait tenir là, entre un abattoir et un hôpital" (61). The trip to the city, dream of so many provincials, quickly leads to poverty and hardship.

Parallels in post-colonial literature are legion. The very title of Mongo Béti's first novel, *Ville cruelle*, suggests how important this theme is in his fiction, and many other post-colonial writers follow his lead. Aké Loba's *Kocoumbo, l'étudiant noir*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *L'Aventure ambiguë*, and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* all show protagonists whose difficulties in Europe stem from, among other causes, the unfamiliarity of urban life, which contrasts in so many ways with their existence at home. Admittedly, they are experiencing a foreign place – Paris or London – after growing up in Africa or the Caribbean; but being a native of the country in question is no guarantee of fitting in or even understanding the city, as Gervaise finds in *L'Assommoir*. The main character of Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*, a South African from the countryside, feels similarly out of place and vulnerable when he arrives in the black shanty towns that surround Johannesburg,<sup>13</sup> where he subsequently discovers a world of squalor and criminality in which survival is a constant struggle. In Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country*, a Zulu clergyman from the hinterland is as bewildered by Johannesburg as Gervaise is by Paris: "He sees great high buildings, there are red and green lights on them, almost as tall as the buildings. They go on and off. [...] Black and white, it says, black and white, though it is red and green. It is too much to understand. He is silent, his head aches, he is afraid."<sup>14</sup> Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not, Child* gives a comparable vision of the city, Nairobi in colonial Kenya this time, when two characters, missing their friends, "peered through the darkness to the city that now held Boro and Kori. Kamau and Njoroge feared that the other two might be lost there."<sup>15</sup> The theme recurs in Native American and African American literature: an urban environment feels equally threatening to

<sup>12</sup> Émile Zola, *L'Assommoir* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion) 36. Henceforth, further references to this work will be to this edition and page numbers only will appear in parentheses within the text.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Abrahams, *Mine Boy* (London: Heinemann, 1989) 1-6, 169.

<sup>14</sup> Alan Paton, *Cry, The Beloved Country* (New York: MacMillan, 1987) 17.

<sup>15</sup> Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, *Weep Not, Child* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1987) 42.

the reservation Indians who visit Seattle in Sherman Alexie's *Reservation Blues*: "the sheer number of people frightened them. Especially the number of white people."<sup>16</sup> That evening, they "slept fitfully in the blue van. The city frightened them" (142); later in the novel, they find New York just as intimidating (230). More than merely unfamiliar, the city is presented as an insidious danger from which they need to escape: other Indians in Seattle are "a long way from home, trapped by this city and its freeway entrances and exits" (150). Bigger Thomas faces a similarly threatening environment in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, where deserted buildings with broken windows that "gaped blackly," and look like "eye-sockets of empty skulls"<sup>17</sup> – just as Gervaise in *L'Assommoir* finds in her despair that the porch of her own building "semblait une gueule ouverte" (426). Brought to the megalopolis or the industrial center by the growth of modern industry, these newcomers risk ending up as its victims.

Moreover, Zola's urban space is not only dangerous to life and limb but also a cause of moral decay. Despite his occasional celebration of modern environments like the expanding department store in *Au Bonheur des Dames* or the railway stations in *La Bête humaine*, Zola often strikes a nostalgic, even bucolic note of longing for nature that led one critic to call him one of Rousseau's last disciples.<sup>18</sup> Working-class Paris cripples Gervaise's husband and leads him into alcoholism and death, a fate that the female protagonist herself ultimately shares; her daughter Nana is corrupted by this milieu and becomes a prostitute. Similarly, the miners of *Germinal*, although in a rural area, live in a sort of micro-urban environment, their company housing project, in which they suffer from all the overcrowding and filth of city dwellers. The moral results are predictable: as one of the miners recognizes, "Ça finit toujours par des hommes saouls et par des filles pleines."<sup>19</sup> This emphasis on the city as a place of corruption is found in many post-colonial works. The protagonist of *Cry, The Beloved Country* likewise has a child led astray by the city – "the disastrous effect of a great and wicked city on the character of a simple tribal boy" (199), as the judge puts it during his trial for murder – and another relative who sinks into prostitution; the narrator of Daniel Bियाoula's *Agonies* claims that urban life brings out the worst in each person, "exalte tout ce qu'il y a de monstrueux en lui."<sup>20</sup> Bigger Thomas's lawyer in *Native Son* elaborates at great length on the morbid influence of the Chicago slums, which he shows as if not justifying, at least explaining Bigger's violent crimes. Even Zola's concern about alcoholism, a central theme of *L'Assommoir*, finds its parallel in other texts: Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* illustrates vividly the dangers of alcohol in South African townships, while Claude Brown's autobiography *Manchild in the Promised Land* shows a different drug, heroin, playing the same role of undermining social structures and destroying lives of urban youth in 1950's Harlem.<sup>21</sup> For these writers as for Zola, the city is a place that lures naive outsiders into a trap, destroying their work ethic and even their self-respect, making them active agents in their own destruction.

<sup>16</sup> Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1995) 133.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted without page number in Robert Butler, "Native Son Is Set in a Gothic Ghetto," *Readings on Native Son*, Hayley R. Mitchell, ed. (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2000) 121-22. Butler points out that "Bigger perceives the city as a process of fragmentation and dislocation, a stranger nether world that threatens to destroy him" (120).

<sup>18</sup> Pierre-Henri Simon, "Un des derniers disciples de Rousseau," *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* 38 (1969): 105-14.

<sup>19</sup> Émile Zola, *Germinal* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1968) 178.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Bियाoula, *Agonies* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1998) 60. Henceforth, further references to this work will be to this edition and page numbers only will appear in parentheses within the text.

<sup>21</sup> See Bloke Modisane, *Blame on History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990); and Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

Furthermore, when Zola shows the actual spaces in which his working class characters live, his descriptions are eerily similar to those of more than one post-colonial writer. Note, for example, Zola's description of a Parisian apartment building in *L'Assommoir*:

[L]a maison avait cinq étages, alignant chacun à la file quinze fenêtres, dont les persiennes noires, aux lames cassées, donnaient un air de ruine à cet immense pan de muraille. [...] La maison paraissait [...] colossale [...] carrée, pareille à un bloc de mortier gâché grossièrement, se pourrissant et s'émiettant sous la pluie, elle profilait sur le ciel clair, au-dessus des toits voisins, son énorme cube brut, ses flancs non crépis, couleur de boue. (72)

And compare this passage to Daniel Biyaoula's account of modern French slum housing in *Agonies*: "Les immeubles étaient immenses en hauteur, en largeur, mais surtout en longueur" (14); and the continuation as follows: "Ses murs à l'immeuble, ils étaient bien gris, lézardés, décapés. Les fenêtres, pour la plupart branlantes, semblaient près de tomber. Certaines, à volet cassé ou en partie absent, étaient recouvertes d'un morceau de carton ou de plastique" (181). Ayi Kwei Armah gives a similar portrait of a huge, decaying building in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*:

The building never ceased to amaze with its squat massiveness. [...] For years and years the building had been plastered at irregular intervals with paint and distemper, mostly of an official murk-yellow color. In the intervals, between successive layers of distemper, the walls were caressed and thoroughly smothered by brown dust blowing off the roadside together with swirling grit from the coal and gravel of the railroad yard within and behind.<sup>22</sup>

In all three cases, the dehumanizing immensity, combined with filth and decay, intimidates visitors. Other details are also amazingly similar, even down to the masses of dirty laundry hanging from the windows. In Zola's *L'Assommoir*:

[S]ur des cordes tendues, des linges séchaient, toute la lessive d'un ménage, les chemises de l'homme, les camisoles de la femme, les culottes des gamins; il y en avait une, au troisième, où s'étalait une couche d'enfant, emplâtrée d'ordure. Du haut en bas, les logements trop petits crevaient au-dehors, lâchaient des bouts de leur misère par toutes les fentes. (73)

And in Biyaoula's *Agonies*: "des cages minuscules où les gens étaient encaqués, au balcon desquelles étaient entassés des objets de toute sorte, des bouts de décharge, pendus, habits, chiffons et hardes qu'on faisait sécher" (14). The psychological effect of such grinding poverty on those who live in it are clear; one of Biyaoula's characters reflects: "Et, vrai, aux guenilles qui pendouillaient aux balcons des immeubles de Parquerville qu'elle avait l'impression qu'elle ressemblait" (215). The characters of all these works live lives of struggle against the oppressive effects of urbanism, an endeavor in which they, like Gervaise, will ultimately fail.

Inside these buildings violence constantly threatens: visiting the tenement for the first time, Gervaise overhears a domestic fight, "un piétinement dont le plancher tremblait, des

<sup>22</sup> Ayi Kwei Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Florence: Heinemann, 1988) 10-11.

meubles culbutés, un effroyable tapage de jurons et de coups” (80), evidently so commonplace an event that the neighbors pay no attention, not even closing their door to muffle the sound. Similarly, *Native Son* opens with the killing of a rat, an episode whose symbolic value becomes clear as the novel progresses through acts of violence and Bigger himself is hunted mercilessly; *Manchild in the Promised Land* shows a hallway splattered with blood.<sup>23</sup> But the strongest impression created is of filth and squalor, continuing the abject poverty seen from outside. The apartment building in *L'Assommoir* is very much like those in Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, and J.R. Essomba's *Le Paradis du nord*.<sup>24</sup> The parallels between the cheap hotel where Gervaise is staying in the first chapter of *L'Assommoir* and the apartment described in Biyaoula's *Agonies* are striking: Zola's "petite table *graisseuse*" in *L'Assommoir* (35), "la pièce *noire*" with its "*papier décollé par l'humidité, ses trois chaises et sa commode éclopées où la crasse s'entêtait*" (42), are echoed by Biyaoula's room that is "*humide*" and its "*papiers [...] décollés [...] crasseux,*" "un coin-cuisine *graisseux,*" and "une table branlante, toute *noire*" (113; emphasis added). In another passage of Zola's novel, even the dirty dishes are repeated in Biyaoula's.

In *L'Assommoir*, there is "une violente *odeur de cuisine [...] une humidité fétide, dont la puanteur se mêlait à l'âcreté de l'oignon cuit, [...] des casseroles qu'on grattait*" (80); while in *Agonies*, the reader notes a countertop "jonché de *casseroles et d'assiettes d'où se dégageait une odeur de fermenté à peine supportable*" (113). More important than the specific details, however, is the overall atmosphere the authors create in all these texts: a place of suffering, of despair, with the latent threat of violence always present, in which the characters are trapped.

Zola's strategies find parallels in post-colonial literature regarding the depiction of cities divided into utterly separate realms – geographic, social, and psychological – as distinct from each other as the white and native quarters of a colonial town. Throughout *L'Assommoir* the protagonists are trapped in the poor areas of the city,<sup>25</sup> and, while they fight to improve their lives within this environment, leaving for a more agreeable place is so far beyond the realm of possibility that they scarcely even dream of it. Gervaise adapts to life in her neighborhood of Paris, but other, more bourgeois areas of the city remain completely foreign to her, rarely seen and never understood. Fanon's description of the colonized city as a "monde compartimenté, manichéiste, immobile,"<sup>26</sup> in which one section appears blessed and the other cursed, applies equally well to Zola's Paris, and many post-colonial writers show a comparable divide in other urban areas. The narrator of Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* observes that his city is split according to race and class, "divided up in little worlds, and you stay in the world you belong to and you don't know anything about what happening in the other ones except what you read in the papers,"<sup>27</sup> just as the Abidjan of Ahmadou Kourouma's *Les Soleils des indépendances* is hierarchically divided.<sup>28</sup> As Brown notes in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, white areas are forbidden to blacks, *de facto* if not *de jure*, and the separation will be enforced with violence if necessary: "I knew that if I went out to the Flatbush section of Brooklyn or Brighton Beach, where all these [white] cats lived, they'd probably lynch the landlord if he rented me an

<sup>23</sup> See Brown 12, 52.

<sup>24</sup> See Zola, *L'Assommoir* 80-81; Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998) 3-19, 16, 105, 248; J.R. Essomba, *Le Paradis du nord* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1996) 73, 74.

<sup>25</sup> See Colette Wilson, "City Space and the Politics of Carnival in Zola's *L'Assommoir*," *French Studies* 58.3 (2004): 344.

<sup>26</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Editions du Seuil, 1952) 82.

<sup>27</sup> Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (New York: Longman, 1985) 74.

<sup>28</sup> Ahmadou Kourouma, *Les Soleils des indépendances* (Paris: Seuil, 1970) 20, 45-46, 64.

apartment.”<sup>29</sup> More than the simple fact of physical separation is at stake, for on the rare occasions when such characters make forays outside their neighborhoods, they look and feel uncomfortably out of place, alienated from their surroundings and unable to comprehend what they see. One famous passage of *L'Assommoir* shows a working class wedding party visiting Parisian monuments, a visit which they only make because a planned expedition outside the city has been rained out. Yet despite the physical proximity of the city's center, reached on foot after a leisurely walk, only their semi-bourgeois leader has ever been to these places before, and their entire excursion through the Louvre and the Vendôme Column is almost comical by the strange figure they cut in such unfamiliar surroundings. Paintings of nudes in the museum make them giggle like schoolchildren seeing anatomically correct African statues; the world of art and culture is as foreign to them as a distant country. Similarly, the main character of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* visits areas of Manhattan outside his familiar Harlem, but like Gervaise and her companions, he sees them as fundamentally foreign, made for another group that he will never be able to join: “This world was not for him”;<sup>30</sup> “John knew that these buildings were not for him – not today – *no, nor tomorrow, either!*” (200; emphasis added). In a close parallel to Zola's *L'Assommoir*, a black man and woman in Baldwin's novel visit museums, but feel as out of place as Gervaise's group: “The first time he suggested this, she demanded, in panic, if they would be allowed to enter”; he tells her, “Sure, they let niggers in,” but are the only black people there, in a place she imagines as “cold as tombstones” (166). The deep sense of discomfort, of being where they do not belong, lost in a place that is fundamental other, runs through all these texts.

Finally, Zola also prefigures post-colonial literature by his use of language. In a radical departure from accepted French literary practice of his time, Zola wrote much of *L'Assommoir* in colloquial language. Ungrammatical, often crude, and full of slang, the text reflects the actual speech of inner city Parisians; the very title, which literally means “the bludgeon,” is a popular term for a tavern. Characters speak in the vernacular of low income neighborhoods; for example, Coupeau's sympathy for Gervaise immediately after childbirth is expressed in colloquial language: “Cette pauvre poule! elle a eu bien du bobo! Ces crapoussins-là, quand ça vient au monde, ça ne se doute guère du mal que ça fait [...] Vrai, ça doit être comme si on vous ouvrait les reins [...] Où est-il le bobo, que je l'embrasse?” (128). But such language overflows the novel's dialogue to appear in narration as well. The opening paragraph of Chapter III is a perfect example of how Zola incorporates the language of the street into his narration, in a way that suggests but never directly states that he is quoting his working class characters. Coupeau disagrees with his bride's idea of getting married without any celebration:

[O]n ne pouvait pas se marier comme ça, sans manger un morceau ensemble. Lui, se battait joliment du quartier! Oh! quelque chose de tout simple, un petit tour de balade l'après-midi, en attendant d'aller tordre le cou à un lapin, au premier gargot venu [...] Histoire de trinquer seulement, avant de revenir faire dodo chacun chez soi. (90)

Other passages use popular language in narration without even suggesting it is reported speech. A description of Coupeau's repeated hangovers is virtually a catalog of popular expressions and slang: “Les lendemains de culotte, le zingueur avait mal aux cheveux, un mal aux cheveux

<sup>29</sup> See Brown 288.

<sup>30</sup> James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Delta, 1981) 31. Henceforth, further references to this work will be to this edition and page numbers only will appear in parentheses within the text.



terrible qui le tenait tout le jour les crins défrisés, le bec empesté, la margoulette enflée de travers. Il se levait tard, secouait ses puces sur les huit heures seulement” (171). This use of spoken French gives Zola’s novel an air of authenticity that engulfs the reader in the strange world whose speech it reproduces; both characters and reader are surrounded by an environment that offers no exit, no formal narration to distance its oppressive force and make it less threatening.<sup>31</sup> It is thus not simply a choice of form but an integral part of that environment.

But along with this negative role, the use of popular language also has a more positive function: it confers a kind of *droit de cité* on the non-standard speech of the underclass, suggesting that just as they are suitable subjects for literature, their language deserves to be taken seriously and studied, not scorned as incorrect. As many critics have noted, the issue is crucial to post-colonial peoples, who typically speak a variant of the dominant language that marks them as – supposedly – inferior; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin comment:

The imperial education system installs a “standard” version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all “variants” as impurities [...] Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated [...] Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice.<sup>32</sup>

*L’Assommoir* created a furor when it appeared, and Zola himself later claimed that what had so outraged many critics was not his bleak portrayal of urban life but the intrusion of street language into the hallowed realms of literature. By this virtually revolutionary act, he gave both the language and the people who spoke it a respectability they had been denied.<sup>33</sup> Many post-colonial writers have done the same thing with the language of subject groups, whether local varieties of French or English or indigenous non-European languages. Some use it only in dialogue; for example, Azouz Begag’s *Le Gone du chaâba* – a title in dialect that means “The Kid from the Slum” – reproduces the language of the children of North African immigrants in the suburbs of Lyon and the heavily accented French of their parents in their speech, with expressions like “Allez, digage dlà.”<sup>34</sup> Many – in fact, most – post-colonial writers show the dialect used in their specific settings, whether the West Africa of Ousmane Sembène’s *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*, the South African townships of Bloke Modisane’s *Blame Me on History*, or the segregated Chicago of Wright’s *Native Son*, to name only a few.<sup>35</sup> Some authors employ local spoken dialects throughout the text through a first-person narrator: Uzodinma Iweala’s *Beasts of No Nation*, told in the voice of an African child soldier, begins, as follows: “It is starting like this. I am feeling itch like insect is crawling on my skin [...]”<sup>36</sup> Other writers, like Zola, go further, incorporating popular speech into omniscient narration. Paton’s *Cry, The Beloved*

<sup>31</sup> David Baguley notes that “the proletarian characters of *L’Assommoir* remain trapped in their cultural and verbal environment” in his chapter “*Germinal*: the gathering storm,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Zola*, Brian Nelson, ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 148.

<sup>32</sup> *The Empire Writes Back* 7; in another passage they state: “The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the center and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place” (37). See their full discussion of language in post-colonial literature (36-76).

<sup>33</sup> Victor Hugo claims in his poem “Réponse à un acte d’accusation,” written nearly fifty years before *L’Assommoir*, to have been condemned for the same alleged crime when he used common words, including *patois*, in his works. But the Romantics never went as far as Zola in using the language of the street in all its ungrammatical, often indelicate slang forms.

<sup>34</sup> Azouz Begag, *Le Gone du chaâba* (Paris: Seuil, 1986) 173.

<sup>35</sup> See Ousmane Sembène, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* (Paris: Pocket, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Uzodinma Iweala, *Beasts of No Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 1.

*Country* imitates in English the structure and pattern of Zulu throughout the text, while Selwyn's *The Lonely Londoners*, written in the English of West Indian immigrants in Britain, begins thus:

One grim winter evening, when it had a kind of unrealness about London, with a fog sleeping restlessly over the city and the lights showing in the blur as if it is not London at all but some strange place on another planet, Moses Aloetta hop on a number 46 bus at the corner of Chepstow Road and Westbourne Grove to go to Waterloo to meet a fellow who was coming from Trinidad on the boat-train. (23)<sup>37</sup>

In all these cases, the intention is identical to Zola's: to depict the setting with accuracy, to recreate the entire environment in which the characters live, and to declare that such people and places have innate value that makes them worthy of inclusion in literature. The language traps the characters, but suggests that their plight deserves attention and sympathy.

In summary, several aspects of Zola's writing show remarkable similarities to numerous post-colonial texts. The question inevitably arises whether post-colonial authors simply adapted aspects of naturalism in their writing, or more broadly, whether Zola himself should be considered post-colonial – or, to coin an oxymoronic term, “pre-post-colonial”? There is a crucial difference between these two claims, for the first reduces the similarities to a matter of literary style and technique, while the second suggests a set of socio-political attitudes and beliefs on Zola's part. But they are not mutually exclusive, and both may be true at the same time. Support for the first can be found in the similarities between Zola's text and the works of post-colonial authors noted above: the parallels with Biyaoula's *Agonies* are so close that one may wonder whether this African writer, schooled in French literature during his education in the Congo, is following, consciously or unconsciously, the example of a French author he undoubtedly had read. In the same way, Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* has often been compared to *Germinal*:<sup>38</sup> both tell the story of a strike that seeks to shake up the oppressive power structure. Just as the resemblances between Dadié's *Un Nègre à Paris* and Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* have often been noted,<sup>39</sup> Biyaoula and Sembène may have modeled their writing to some extent on the French canon, and concluded that the best way to tell their own stories was through the kind of precise naturalism championed by Zola. Other post-colonial writers who were not familiar with Zola – Anglophone authors, for example – seem to have followed the trend to use a kind of naturalism in their works; as the champion of that kind of literature, Zola is in some sense one of their ultimate sources.

But the comparison with Ousmane Sembène also supports the contention that Zola himself deserves to be considered post-colonial. By showing an uprising against the dominant socio-economic system, *Germinal* calls that system's underlying assumptions into question, just as *L'Assommoir* raises questions about the plight of the urban poor; more broadly, most of Zola's works, like those of virtually all post-colonial literature, are inherently subversive. Despite his

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<sup>37</sup> Chantal Zabus in *The Post-Colonial Reader* uses Loreto Todd's term “relexification,” for the use of “one's mother tongue, using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythm” (314) to describe this process and analyzes the many strategies employed by African authors writing in European languages.

<sup>38</sup> For a comparison between Ousmane Sembène's novel, see for example Gilbert Darbouze's article, *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* d'Ousmane Sembène: L'esthétique naturaliste d'Émile Zola dans un roman sénégalais, *Excavatio* 11 (1998): 182-87.

<sup>39</sup> See Jean Derive, “*Un Nègre à Paris*: Contexte littéraire et idéologique” in *Bernard Dadié: Hommages et études*, Unionmwan Edebiri, ed. (Cotonou, Bénin: Éditions du Flamboyant, 1992); see also Mudimbe-Boyi and Mortimer.

claim of objectivity in *Le Roman expérimental*,<sup>40</sup> he was unmistakably an *écrivain engagé* who wanted not just to depict society in works of art but to right its wrongs. *L'Assommoir* was intended to show the evils of alcoholism among the urban poor and promote new policies; *Germinal* sought to change the conditions of manual labors and, more broadly, the conceptual framework of nineteenth-century capitalism. Shortly after the publication of the novel, Zola told an interviewer that his attitude toward the miners was “pas plus en leur faveur que contre eux”; but later admitted in a public letter: “Je n’ai eu qu’un désir: [...]: les montrer tels que notre société les fait, et soulever une telle pitié, un tel cri de justice que la France cesse enfin de se laisser dévorer [...].”<sup>41</sup> It is true that throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* Zola’s narratorial voice carefully avoids the kind of open judgments that mark the *Trois Villes* and *Quatre Évangiles*. But such apparent objectivity only serves to give greater strength to what is clearly a partisan text – which is precisely what most post-colonial writers do. It is this *parti pris* on major social questions of his day, and their centrality to his writing, that make Zola most similar to post-colonial literature and most deserving of the epithet himself. It seems, then, that both claims are true: many post-colonial writers follow Zola’s path, and Zola himself can legitimately be called a direct precursor of post-colonial literature. Perhaps this concern for social and political issues that are current in the twenty-first century helps explain his continuing appeal throughout the world today.

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<sup>40</sup> See Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971) 79.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Préface by Henri Guillemin, in Émile Zola, *Germinal* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1968) 13.