

## Africa, the French Language and the Francophone World: Francophonía in Black and White.

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### Introduction

The argument of this paper is simple: it not only seeks to show why France has never wished to give up control over the areas of the world (Africa mostly) that it once conquered during colonization, but also why France has always sought to protect her culture from the "corruptions" originating in its former colonies. Among other things, this paper will argue that France's constant invocation, brandishment and reinforcement of the notion of standard French is, in fact, a move whose impulse is geared towards ensuring that the French language, therefore culture, remains pure and uncorrupted. In the end, my paper will show how the resulting French policies have led, not to a Francophonía of equal partnership and interdependence, but rather to a Francophonía in "black and white".

### Roots of the Francophone Problem.

Historically, it has been noticed that, contrary to the British who advocated an indirect-rule policy that helped preserve some of the local civilizations, France had vis-à-vis its colonies in Africa a policy of total assimilation and eradication of local cultures that was symptomatic of a number of things:

- 1) France viewed its own culture as a high and advanced culture that had to prevail over the "primitive civilizations" of the African continent.
- 2) France did not want to suffer any competition from cultures that it considered primitive, chaotic and valueless.
- 3) As a consequence, the French sought to eradicate local African cultures and replace them with France's cultural view of the world, the most important aspect of which was visible in the forced introduction of the French language.

It is not surprising therefore to note that the whole idea of Francopho-

nia was formed, not over the symbolic reunion of interdependent cultures as united through the historical event of colonization, but rather over the intrusive value of the French language and culture as forcefully introduced into the African continent.

That the French language constitutes the central, defining principle of the Francophone structure is a secret to none. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century already, Onésime Reclus, the man who first coined the term, defined Francophonía as the totality of the peoples who speak French, and a Francophone person as someone who speaks French (Deniau 12). Closer to us, it is still noticeable that this view of Francophonía has been kept intact as can be seen in the definitions provided in the 90's by a number of sociolinguists and historians, including Xavier Deniau who in 1992 wrote:

There exists worldwide a certain number of peoples and persons whose native, official, natural or administrative language (...) is French: these peoples and persons constitute Francophonía. Their identity of language forms a geographical entity (18; my translation).

As one can note from this definition, all that France sees in its historical interactions with its former colonies on the African continent or elsewhere, is the relationship of cultural domination through the French language, not the multicultural syncretisms that have arisen from the colonial and post-colonial cross-fertilizations of European and African cultures (Kachru; Zabus). In other words, France seems to have promoted the institution of Francophonía specifically to preserve its status of world power; as a result, the Francophone world was going to help protect French cultural as well as economic interests against the Anglo-Saxon "aggressions" from the United States and the rest of the English-speaking world. To see this, it suffices to read Picoche and Marchello-Nizia's book, *Histoire de la langue Française*, which contains neocolonialist and triumphalist overtones aimed at asserting France's grandeur around the world (61-176).

Based on the preceding, the whole structure of Francophonía must be questioned as it appears to have been designed, not as an organ of egalitarian collaboration and cross-fertilization, but rather as a one-way structure whose *raison d'être* and existential essence is conditioned and determined by France alone. In fact, evidence of the neocolonialist policies of France can be traced back to the 1940's, first with General de Gaulle's ambiguous pre-independence African stances,<sup>1</sup> then with his presidential successors in post-colonial France. It simply shows that, even after the African independences, France has always made sure that its former colonies in Africa would remain under its firm control through a combination

of both economic and political-cultural intricacies. France's recent imposition of Boutros Ghali, former UN Secretary General, as the new Secretary General of Francophonie during the 1997 Francophonie summit held in Hanoi (Vietnam) is symptomatic of France's continuous control over the Francophone structure.

However, one of the most striking elements conveying the imbalance of power within Francophonie has been France's desire to preserve the purity of its language and ensure that it was not soiled by cultural influences from its colonial satellites. The weight given to the notion of standard French, with reference to the Parisian/metropolitan variety, has made it impossible for schools around the world to depart from the teaching of this sole expression of the French language. Yet, sociolinguistic evidence from around the world has shown that there have emerged all around the Francophone area regional varieties of French that have grown to be native varieties for those regions (Manessy and Wald; Dumont, *L'Afrique noire*, and *Le Français langue africaine*; Mengara, "On the Nature", and "French"). Thus, it has been suggested that we could now talk of a native African French,<sup>2</sup> just as we could talk of European,<sup>3</sup> Arab-Maghrebian,<sup>4</sup> American,<sup>5</sup> Caribbean,<sup>6</sup> and Oceanian<sup>7</sup> Frenches that are native and specific to those regions (Mengara, "On the Nature", and "French"). Yet, France has not really sought to officially recognize these sociolinguistic and cultural idiosyncrasies as genuine manifestations of an enriched French language. Rather, they have been viewed as impoverishments of the metropolitan mother tongue, forgetting that the emergence of such multifaceted varieties was expressive of the fact that France could no longer be considered the sole repository of the French language. In fact, this language has, over the years, undergone metamorphoses that now make of it the language of Francophonie as a whole.

But this Francophonie has to be redefined. It has to be viewed from a perspective different from the one through which France views it. This redefinition has to pass through a reconsideration of a number of notions which have adversely affected the sociolinguistic and sociohistorical fields for years now, and which have had the consequence of perpetuating the imbalances within the Francophone world, turning the institution of Francophonie into a Francophonie of contradictions, paradoxes, and subjugations, that is, a Francophonie in "black and white".

### Actual Francophones and Potential Francophones

The first notion to be re-explored is that of the word "Francophone". In other words, who is to be considered a Francophone?

1) Here, we must signal that most French people, be they intellectuals or not, do not usually consider themselves to be Francophones (Bourhis). For them, a Francophone individual is necessarily a non-French person born in a former colony of France and who speaks French as a second or foreign language.<sup>8</sup> This view has had noticeable effects even on the way the French-speaking world is viewed around the world: there is always a French culture, a French Studies Department, but almost never a Francophone Culture or Francophone Studies Department. Matters pertaining to Francophonie, that is, in exclusion of France and the other Western countries of the French-Speaking world, are always awkwardly placed in annexes in most books and programs, just as we saw at the MIFLC conference that gave birth to this article.<sup>9</sup> Here for example, our section was categorized as a "Francophone Literature" section, with the special mention of a "Special Session".<sup>10</sup> Thus, we were confined into a special "Francophone Literature" session which seemed to have been reduced to its simplest African expression: where was Canada? Where was France? Where were all the others?

2) Traditionally in the sociolinguistic field as expounded by French scholars, the notion of "Francophone" has been used to represent two categories: actual Francophones and potential Francophones (Chaudenson and De Robillard; Chaudenson). Not so surprisingly, actual Francophones, when it comes to the non-Western countries or regions of Francophonie, are currently sociolinguistically defined as nationals from former French colonies who have had a formal degree of school instruction amounting to the last years of high school.<sup>11</sup> Thus, everyone below that school level is considered a potential Francophone, that is, not yet acceptable to France as someone who can claim he or she speaks French naturally and correctly. So here again as we can see, anyone from a Francophone country who does not speak French as a result of school education, and who does not naturally speak it with a degree of mastery that is academic and that best represents the ideal French of the French people is excluded from the actual Francophone category. Yet, sociolinguistic research and theory shows that the French language that, for instance, Africans use is now an appropriated native variety that is used by Africans as a native African language to fulfill their own sociolinguistic and sociocultural communication needs (Manessy and Wald; Dumont, *Le Français langue africaine*; Mengara, "On the Nature", and "French"; Woods). Thus, as Fig. 1 below shows, this specific French has its own grammar, its own sociocultural rules, and forms an independent continuum with its own basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal categories of users<sup>12</sup> (Manessy; Manessy and Wald). In sociolinguistic theory, basilectal users of a given mother tongue are those who speak this tongue naturally, but did not necessarily go to school to learn

it. Thus, because basilects have little, or no school instruction at all, and generally belong to the lowest socio-economic classes, they will speak a seemingly non-normative, popular variety<sup>13</sup> of their own language (the basilectal variety), not the standard one. In the African context as in most postcolonial societies using European languages, basilectal French, which is almost exclusively **acquired** through sociolinguistic interaction by people already speaking other mother tongues, is enormously influenced by the substratum African languages that these people speak (Mengara, "French"). Mesolectal users are those who, as a result of more advanced years of school education (last years of primary school to middle of secondary school), use a language much closer to the standard norm, but still marked by structural limitations when compared with the standard variety. In Francophone Africa, the French used by this category is still marked by the substratum African languages, but much less than the basilectal variety. Acrolectal users are those who use the standard variety and who are therefore assumed to have had as much school education as possible (last years of high school or higher). Although persistent signs such as the accent can still be observed, acrolects of French in the African context are almost free of the grammatical interferences from the substratum African languages.<sup>14</sup>

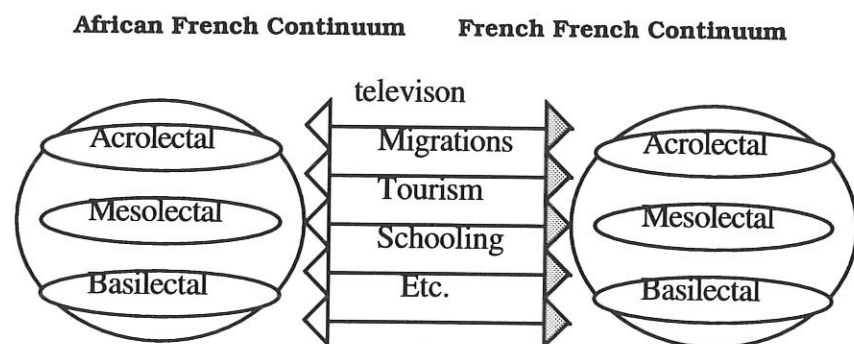


Fig.1: Interaction between the African continuum and the French continuum<sup>15</sup>

Because in any linguistic continuum the lower levels (basilects and mesolects) are said to aim at the acrolectal, standard variety of their own language as their acquisitional norm of reference, it is generally expected that it is this standard norm that they will all generally seek to emulate. However, the acquisitional aim of Africans when they acquire their French in their own milieu is not the acrolectal French of France, but the acrolectal French of Africa within the African context.

rican languages. Also, because acrolectal African French is part of the local French continuum, it has to be considered mainly in the context of its interactions with the lower categories of this African continuum. Thus, when talking about French in Africa, one cannot take into account only Africa's acrolectal levels, which by nature are school or academic varieties necessarily deemed closer to the French of France, and used by a minority of educated speakers. Because it is mostly in the context of the lower categories that one can truly ascertain the particular grammatical and structural patterns of local French, their exclusion from sociolinguistic analysis can only constitute a paradoxical refusal to accept the lower levels that are thus considered faulty, that is, a menace to the purity and correctness of the French language. Yet, as scholars such as Kachru, Zabus and Ashcroft, *et al.* have shown, most postcolonial societies have been able to appropriate and indigenize the European languages that they once inherited from their colonial masters. These languages can therefore now be seen as evolving—culturally and structurally—independently from the metropole.<sup>16</sup>

3) The preceding argument has tremendous consequences on the very way the number of Francophones in the world is determined.

### How Many Francophones in the world?

As of 1992, it was determined by the French government itself<sup>17</sup> and some of the most influential French sociolinguists—Chaudenson, Manessy, Dumont, Valdman, Deniau, etc.—that, of the 330 million people that populated the Francophone zone (here we are including France), only 120/122 million of them could be considered actual Francophones.

Total Population in Francophonía in 1992	330 million
Number of Actual Francophones (36%)	120 million

Table 1: Traditional Number of Actual Francophones (as of 1992)

It is easy to note, as Table 1 shows, that of these 120 million (36% of the populations living in the Francophone zone), France and other French-speaking Western regions, including Canada, constitute the main group. In fact, France comes out as the most Francophone nation with 100% of actual Francophones because, surprisingly, every single French person, whether he or she attended school or not (note the bias here), is considered an actual Francophone (Chaudenson). Thus, of these 120 million,

France with its 55 million was, as of 1992, ensured to come out as possessing almost half of all actual Francophones in the world, that is, 46% (see Table 2 below).

Total Number of Actual Francophones	120 million
France's Share (46%)	55 million
Rest of Francophonía (54%)	65 million

Table 2: Traditional View: France's Share (as of 1992)

However, if we change the definition of actual Francophones and argue that because actual Francophone-ness in what is still considered **non-native** Francophone contexts (including Africa) cannot be defined solely on the basis of the number of years spent at school, the configuration of actual Francophones would change dramatically. In fact, I argue that actual Francophones should be viewed as representing those who, within the context of historically Francophone countries (this includes former colonies), and whether at school or in society, have attained a more or less advanced command of local French and can use it at one or more levels of the local linguistic continuum, in situations ranging from the simple basilectal survival mode to more complex acrolectal communication settings. These settings would thus include all the possible contexts within a global spectrum of receptive as well as productive skills. It is clear that such a re-definition would change the linguistic balance in favor of the non-Western world, most notably in favor of Francophone Africa. This would establish a new configuration where France's population would weigh only about 16% (see Tables 4 and 5 below), with Africa growing to be the main Francophone region of the world, both currently and in the future due to its current and projected population growth, and a younger general population. At the same time, a recalculation of the actual Francophone population based on both our redefinition and regional literacy rates would yield results that show that at least 60% of the current population in the Francophone regions of the world could be considered actual Francophones. The overall potential Francophone category would thus be reduced to about 40% at most (see Table 3 below).

Regions	General Literacy %	Literacy Rate in French %	Contaminated %	Actual Francophones %	Potential Francophones %
Black Africa	41	41	14	55	45
Northern Francophonía <sup>18</sup>	98.5	55.5	18.5	74	26
Territories <sup>19</sup>	78.5	47	15	62	38
Maghreb <sup>20</sup>	54.67	35	12	47	53
Total Average	68	45	15	60	40

Table 3: Literacy Rates, Rates of Contaminated, Actual and Potential Francophones (Based on our re-interpretation).

Within this new configuration, we posit a contamination principle which establishes the following law: if (to take the instance of Black Africa) 41% of the population is literate<sup>21</sup> in French, then it is predictable that these 41% will represent the sociolinguistic force that will linguistically contaminate a portion of those who did not go to school. This contamination will generally occur during various sociolinguistic interactions in contexts—administration, internal trade, inter-ethnic communication, etc.—that make it necessary for various groups or individuals to use the French language. As a result, it is predictable that these 41% users of French will, through sociolinguistic interaction, contaminate at least one third (1/3) of their own volume, that is, about 14% here. These contaminated 14% are then added to the initial 41% literates to get an overall actual Francophone population of 55% in Africa. In Francophone black Africa, French usually serves as the most efficient and admissible lingua franca due to the so many languages that cohabit and/or conflict within the same artificial national borders; as a result, a large number of people is more likely to use local French in a good number of daily activities, above all in the multilingual towns and cities of Africa where, due to a strong rural exodus, more and more people are migrating (Woods). The 55% actual Francophones posited above for black Africa are therefore not an exaggeration, at least not if we include all the possible levels of linguistic production as

well as reception (basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal) which are part of the African French continuum.

Another interesting fact to note here is the weight of Africa's Francophone population as a whole (Black Africa and Maghreb). Table 4 shows that Francophone black Africa alone represents 52% of Francophonía's overall population, whereas Maghreb accounts for 15% of that same population. Africa thus comes out as the main Francophone region of the world, with 236 million people (67%), as opposed to only 101 million people (29%) for Northern Francophonía.

Northern Francophonía	101 million	29%
XXXXXX	XXXXXX	XXXXXX
Black Africa (including Madagascar)	184 million	52%
Maghreb	52 million	15%
Total Africa (Maghreb and Black Africa (out of 350 million))	236 million	67%

Table 4: Francophone Africa's population weight within Francophonía.

The figures from Table 5 below have profound implications on the measurement of the *actual Francophone population* as a whole. They confirm that, when given due justice, French-speaking Africa does represent the main Francophone region of the world, with an *actual Francophone* population amounting to 101 million people (Black Africa and Maghreb = 36%), as opposed to only 75 million (21.5%) for Northern Francophonía. With its younger population and its overall birth rate, Africa certainly is doomed to assert itself as the continent that will ensure the survival of the French language in the future. But this can be viewed as a survival only if France ceases to see the transformations through which French is going in Africa as impoverishments of the French language. French as we know it today may just, by default, end up being French as the Africans will speak it in the future.

	Francoph. Black Africa, inc. Madagascar	Maghreb	Northern Francophonía
Overall Pop. per Region	184 million	52 million	101 million
% of Actual Francoph. per region	55 %	47%	74%
# of Actual Francophones Regional %	101 million (55%)	24.5 million (47%)	75 million (74%)
Total % Actual Francophones/350	29% (101 million)	7% (24.5 million)	21.5% (75 million)

Table 5: Number of Actual Francophones per region (only the main Francophone regions are taken into account here: Black Africa, Maghreb and Northern Francophonía).

### Conclusion

These are just a few of the issues that can be raised as to the current understanding of Francophonía, an understanding based on a French perspective that remains exclusive and thus conditions the way Francophonía as a whole is perceived around the world: Francophonía and Francophones, clearly, are still currently confined south of the Northern Hemisphere, that is, mainly in Africa and other "lesser" regions. The French used there is not considered French until it sounds Parisian both in terms of accent and structural patterns. Because of this exclusiveness, the term "Francophone" has inherited a pejorative connotation that will be hard to remove. As a consequence, every single nation from around the world that seeks to offer French instruction in its schools turns to the metropolitan and Parisian variety, as if use of the French language was limited to France alone and all learners were going to have interactions with French people only. Little effort, with France's silent approval, is thus given to the integration of "Frenches" that are not Parisian into French curricula worldwide. Also, academic departments that should have been labeled as departments of Francophone studies desperately remain departments of French studies, thus drowning the whole of Francophonía into a sea of Frenchness<sup>22</sup> from which it is becoming harder and harder for other Fran-

cophones to extirpate themselves, thus perpetuating what I call a "Francophonism in Black and White".

The future of Francophonism is still a mystery. However, that future already announces the struggles to come. Such struggles will be political at first, and will increasingly become economic as well as cultural. Such a future represents France's worst nightmare as it will embody and bring to front the very fear of devoration by the "black masses" from Africa that France has managed to keep secret over the centuries.<sup>23</sup> The figures which this paper has brought forward clearly show that the linguistic balance of power will increasingly weigh in favor of Francophone Africa. Thus, when Africa becomes politically and economically more assertive, its cultural influence will follow, thus justifying France's fears. However, is there any other choice?

Only the future will tell whether the current "whiteness-versus-blackness" dichotomies will, in the eyes of France and others, intermix and eventually become grayish, to symbolize, at last, the syncretisms that have appeared and consolidated themselves in the Francophone world since the time when the first French colonialists set foot on the African soil centuries ago.

#### • NOTES

1. In the 1950's, General de Gaulle desired to maintain a "Communauté Française" structure in which the various Francophone states would have some degree of autonomy under France's supervision; however, intense pressures from African territories, but also from the French parliament itself led de Gaulle to the abandonment of the idea. Later, de Gaulle strangely became the champion of the decolonization movement in Africa.

2. Covers the "Frenches" used in the 18 Francophone countries of continental Black Africa (that is, Mauritania, Senegal, Djibouti, Mali, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger, Togo, Benin, Chad, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi) and Madagascar.

3. Used in the Francophone countries of Europe (France, Belgium, Switzerland, etc.) and characterized by a strong degree of nativeness conferred by history.

4. Used in the region occupied by the Francophone (Arab) countries of Northern Africa (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria). For specific historical and colonial reasons as related to the now popular notion of an "Arab world," Lebanon, and to a lesser extent, Egypt and Syria are sometimes included in this group.

5. This variety includes not only the Francophone regions of Canada, but also Francophone states and regions within the United States—Louisiana and New

England mainly. Note however that because of the particular way in which assimilation occurred in these U.S. areas, very few people can be shown to be left with French as their primary language. However, the point here is not so much to show whether populations in these U.S. regions use French as their primary language or not; rather, it has to do with how their Francophone-ness is defined. As can be seen in Charpentier's article, a form of creolized French subsists in Louisiana, and a good portion of Louisianans like to set themselves apart as Francophones due to their historical links with France. Their desire, however idealized, to maintain this cultural link and to be part of the Francophone world is demonstrated by the fact that Louisianan scholars produce a journal called *La Revue francophone de Louisiane*, and the state regularly takes part in the Francophone summits. This cultural link is so important that no expert of Francophonism can mention its constituent regions without including Louisiana and New England.

6. Used in Haiti, but also in the French territories of the Atlantic Ocean (Martinique, Guadeloupe, etc.), including French Guyana.

7. Used in the Francophone countries and territories of the Indian and Pacific oceans, including the Oceanian region (Reunion, New Caledonia, etc.).

8. In "French, An African Language: Finally!", Mengara argues that French can no longer be viewed as a second or foreign language in the African context. Because it no longer owes allegiance to the French of France for its existence, African French should now be viewed as a native African language alongside other African languages.

9. 47th Mountain Interstate Foreign Language Conference, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, October 1997.

10. See program for details.

11. Some French specialists and scholars may defend themselves and argue that this is not exactly what they mean. However, the evidence is obvious: they usually classify any French person as an actual Francophone, even if this person never attended school.

12. Sociolinguistic theory generally posits a three-level continuum according to which individuals can be classified based on their degree of linguistic competence—that is, basilectal, mesolectal and acrolectal.

13. This variety is usually considered faulty when compared with the standard one.

14. Note, however, that due to multilingualism, the substratum African languages exert such an influence on all levels of local French that even the acrolectal level ends up heavily marked by them, thus revealing a process of cross-coloration not always visible in the linguistic continuums generated by monolingual societies. More precisely, although the grammar used by acrolects is structurally faultless and very similar to the French of France, acrolectal French in the African context nevertheless uses local lexical and phonological patterns that make it necessarily different. Because the African acrolect and the French acrolect speak a French

based on different, albeit resembling continuums, this difference would necessitate specific linguistic adjustments and accommodations on the part of the African acrolect if s/he is to communicate with a French person (For more detail on these issues, see Mengara, "On the Nature" and "French"; Kapanga, "Discourse Strategies" and "Pidginization").

15. This figure represents the idea that various forms of interaction occur between the various Frenches used around the world. Such interactions occur through elements such as television, migrations, tourism, school education (books, etc.), written media, etc. However, the influence of France over its former colonies is still tremendous; as a consequence, France gives enormous, but receives very little sociolinguistic and sociocultural influence from its territories or former territories; this almost unilateral cultural fertilization is symbolized by the plain arrows (France's influence) versus the dotted arrows (Africa's limited influence). Note that all tables and figures in this paper are original. The figures used are borrowed from a variety of sources, including the *CIA World Factbook* online.

16. This evolution has even led to the development of pidginized or creolized varieties of European languages. In the Anglophone part of Africa, Nigerian pidgin—a mixture of English and African languages—can be cited here as a good example which shows the direction that Africanized European languages will be taking in the future.

17. See for instance *Etat de la Francophonie dans le monde*, the annual volume published by the French government, more specifically by the Conseil de la Francophonie agency. The 1991 volume has some interesting data pertaining to this paper.

18. Northern Francophonia represents the four major Francophone countries of the Northern Hemisphere (limited here to France, Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland)

19. "Territories" here represents a non-exhaustive list of some of the main former Islands-Colonies of France: Reunion, New Caledonia, Haiti, Martinique, Guadeloupe; French Guyana is included in this group.

20. Here Maghreb is limited to Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria.

21. Literacy rates usually take into account persons aged 15 or older. Thus, a 41% literacy rate assumes that 41% aged 15 or more can read and write.

22. As can be seen in Monique Yaari's article entitled "Cultural Studies: A French Perspective." The author talks about Francophonia as a "discrete subfield" within French Studies, instead of French Studies as a discrete subfield within Francophonia (34). Thus, when she says: "But in 'language' departments we also have the mission to teach a wealth of subjects spanning ten centuries." (32), her ten centuries do not seem to incorporate the whole history of French colonization.

23. For a good analysis of this fear of devolution as it relates to the master-slave relationships in the colonies at the time of Enlightenment, see Sala-Molins's *Les Misères des lumières*.

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## Aux soeurs de Messaouda: une lecture d'Assia Djébar

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Comment se fait-il que la littérature maghrébine d'expression française se trouve au carrefour de la crise contemporaine en sciences humaines? Crise d'Histoire, grâce au renouvellement de la thèse sur la fin de l'Histoire (Fukuyama, Kojève, Hegel); crise d'études françaises, voire remise en question du rôle de la littérature au sein de l'Université; incertitudes interdisciplinaires. Entre Assia Djébar. Nouveau sphinx, nouvelle criminelle à la mode? L'oeuvre hybride d'Assia Djébar nous gêne. Toujours intempestive selon certains, elle ne cesse de remettre en question le rôle de l'Histoire, celui de la femme sinon celui de la civilisation humaine au sein même des sciences humaines, les sciences dites de l'Homme. Au lieu de considérer le Sphinx comme question et l'Homme comme réponse, il y va de tout autre chose chez Djébar. Tout au long de son oeuvre il nous faut repenser la possibilité inouïe d'un tel chavirement épistémologique: pourrait-on évoquer un instant la réponse "Homme" comme question et le Sphinx comme instantiation d'une réponse éthique [i.e. la responsabilité de toute réponse] et comme question la plus profonde? La question la plus profonde, selon Maurice Blanchot dans *L'Entretien infini*, ce serait (mais Blanchot lui-même ne fait que cerner de loin les alentours d'un tel questionnement) s'affronter de nouveau devant pour ainsi dire nous-mêmes. "Tout le travail de la question," écrit Blanchot, "est de conduire l'homme à la reconnaissance que, devant le Sphinx, le non-homme, il est déjà devant lui-même." Et Blanchot conclut ainsi,

La question, ainsi posée, avec son caractère de jeu et d'énigme, compensé par son caractère menaçant, question sans sérieux appuyée par le sérieux de l'enjeu, est-ce la question la plus profonde? La question profonde, c'est l'homme comme Sphinx, la part dangereuse, inhumaine et sacrée, qui arrête et tient arrêté devant elle, dans le face à face d'un instant, l'homme qui avec simplicité et avec suffisance se dit simplement homme. La réponse d'Oedipe n'est pas seulement une réponse. C'est la question même, mais qui a changé de sens. Quand le Sphinx parle, dans