RESISTING HYBRIDITY
Colonial and Postcolonial Youth in
Ambiguous Adventure by Cheikh Hamidou Kane
and L'Appel des arènes by Aminata Sow Fall

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY AND CULTURE in nations that have experienced the colonial encounter has been examined by theoreticians such as Frantz Fanon, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Jean Pierre Makouta Mboukou and Homi K. Bhabha who have variously addressed the cultural problematic. Writers of fiction have also addressed the issue; Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Aminata Sow Fall, for example, construct young subjects facing the demands of milieux undergoing changes ensuing from the contact with the new and different realities with which they need to come to terms. The protagonists' situations reflect issues that have long concerned people hailing from the former colonized world. Both novels contextualize the debate over culture, identity and hybridity through their protagonists' predicament. Homi Bhabha's hybridity formula, proffered as a solution for subjects exposed to more than one culture, hardly befits them. They resist hybridity. Consequently, before discussing the novels, it may be illuminating to explore the notion of hybridity that can be traced back to Senghor and Fanon.

Fanon's work on cultural issues in colonial Africa is relevant to this study, all the more so since Bhabha uses it to fashion his own notion of hybridity. Looking at the cultural reaction of colonized subjects, Fanon identified, among others, a re-immersion phase in which “the native is disturbed, and decides to remember what he

Moving his frame of analysis to the context of the Algerian revolution, Fanon posits that revolution causes cultural instability and fosters translation and negotiation. Bhabha builds on this idea and asserts that “for Fanon, the liberatory people who initiate the productive instability of revolutionary cultural change are themselves the bearers of a hybrid identity. They are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation.” The two last terms are fundamental to Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity. Of equal significance is his concept of “Third Space of enunciation,” still inspired by Fanon.

The Third Space situated between the I and the You is conceived of as a fluctuating, unstable and even ambivalent locus in that it excludes certainty and anchorage of meaning. This space also claims a dialectical and challenging status, which Bhabha explains thus:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable, even before we resort to empirical historical instances that demonstrate their hybridity. (37)

This view of culture as a process devoid of unity and fixity questions the conventional notion of culture and identity by inscribing postmodern relativity. To achieve a metaphor for his own construction, Bhabha turns to advantage Wilson Harris’s concept of the “assimilation of contraries,” which denotes willingness to descend into and participate in an alien territory. He then posits that the following:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into an alien territory [. . .] may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. (38)

This willingness is interrogated in the two novels under consideration. The main protagonists are reluctant to undertake such a descent that recalls Léopold Sédar Senghor’s métissage culturel, which can be translated as cultural hybridity. The term appeared in his work in the early 1960s and thus predates Bhabha’s formulation. Harris’s assimilation of contraries is rather close to Senghor’s view as well.

2 Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994). 38. Further page references are in the main text.