2

Imaginary Evidence:
Finding the *Non-Dit* in Fiction

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> 'Sources' are whatever scratches on paper or parchment or stone or earth we find from some past human engagements from some past world. We will listen a long time before they speak—unless they are made to, by the reconstruction of the particular context, by attentiveness to the range of contemporary vernaculars, by our learning to distinguish breaches or absences in the record from willed, resounding silences (Clendinnen 1996).

The social sciences, particularly anthropology, history, philosophy and sociology, are concerned with describing what people do, and analysing the reasons behind behaviour. In the past, these disciplines were almost wholly concerned with the lives and behaviour of men. In the late 19th and early 20th century however, with contributions of anthropologists like Margaret Mead, attention began increasingly to shift to women, and their interaction with men. A distinction between sex (biological role) and gender (social role) was developed as feminism grew during the century, to the extent that gender studies is now a field in its own right.

This development also involved the study of gender and power relations in Africa. While obviously a vast field, women and gender studies in history, sociology, and other disciplines, have resulted in a 'restoration' of women's stories and histories.[1] For example:

> political history has tended to focus on activity in the public sphere and on office holders, both of which highlight male experience. The evidence demonstrates that women also have exercised power… (but) Because women's political participation did not always appear in obvious places or ways, it has been regarded as peripheral or absent, a view that ignores the complex processes through which power is exerted in societies (Berger and White, 1999:xxix).

This bringing of women 'back into the fold' has in some cases been referred to as a 'compensatory scholarship' phase (Visweswaran 2000:1), which places the spotlight firmly on 'how we think, or do not think, or avoid thinking about gender' (Flax 1987:622).

While they are the visible aspects of gender studies in Africa, these 'restorations' do not always recognise (with some notable exceptions), that there is no single, monolithic category of gender, or women, or poor women, or African women. There is no single 'Third World woman' whose life is identical and interchangeable with every other Third World woman. Indeed, there are women who lead basically similar lives in every society, just as there are also those who break out of these conventions. Kumah (2000:5) has pointed out how, 'Third world women are typically considered in terms of how they are affected by certain social institutions and systems, not in terms of their own agency, and certainly not in regards to the specific cultural/historical contexts in which they live'. Similarly, Mohanty has warned against 'othering' Third World women by regarding them as exotic and as Other (quoted in Weedon 1999:191). What is important for gender studies in Africa is to be acutely aware of both *context* and *agency*—to recognise that women's lives differ even under the same or similar conditions, and even within the same societies. Thus, it is not enough to merely 'restore' women to the texts of history, anthropology or sociology, but also to reveal the many differences within the lives of women around the world.

One of the results of this homogenising tendency, I would argue, is that there is still a category of people, especially women, who slip through the cracks, as it were. Their experiences still do not make it into the 'mainstream', 'authoritative' or 'scientific' texts of their society, including the new, 'gender-sensitive' rewritings. These people always remain on the periphery, marginalised and alienated, and unseen by most. Anthropology has a term for them—'marginal ethnographic subjects'—although it seldom studies them. They are, to all intents and purposes, silent subjects. Yet, as noted by Adrienne Rich, the silence of those on the margins should not be 'confuse(d) with any kind of absence'. They are there, but they are excluded:

> Silence can be a plan
> rigorously executed
> the blueprint to a life
> It is a presence
> It has a history of form
> Do not confuse it with any kind of absence (Rich 1980).

The reasons behind this exclusion, which may or may not be deliberate, relate directly to the tendency to homogenise. Sociology and anthropology, and perhaps to a lesser extent history, tend to attempt to describe the dominant patterns in society—the norms and conventions—and the dominant groups

as well. Such disciplines tend to focus on what is visible and quantifiable, such as census results and the public sphere of work, economics and resources. Within every study, too, there is a selection process at work: of what to include and exclude, of what the researcher has been told or not told, and of what is considered important or not. This is closely linked to the question of *authority*, which reveals the underlying power dynamics at work in all research. Those texts which study the dominant groups in a society have the stamp of authority and of acceptance—what they do not say is what need not be said, or even what does not exist. And John Ruggie (1989:32) tells us that 'what we look for obviously has an effect on what we find'. Thus, in 'authoritative' texts, such as surveys, ethnographic research (especially in 'developing' areas such as African countries) or history books, only certain kinds of people and their identities are depicted; these are often classified as 'skilled' or 'unskilled', 'literate' or 'illiterate', 'legal' or 'illegal', not to mention 'male' or 'female'. There is no space in authoritative texts beyond these binary opposites for other identities to emerge, a situation exacerbated by the gender bias characterising much policy and research.

Yet there is a space, beyond such polarities and preconceptions, in which the *non-dit* operates. The term *non-dit* is used here to refer to what is not said in a society, what is swept under the carpet or excluded. It also refers to that which is difficult to study, because it is occluded, hidden or silent—such as sexuality, or taboos. There are evident difficulties in trying to make the *non-dit* an object of academic research. Where such studies do examine what usually goes unsaid—whether they term it 'outsiders', 'misfits' or the marginalised— the tendency is to look at their marginalisation as a *phenomenon*. They are not studied as individuals or groups of individuals with their own views of society. Such identities may even be effaced in 'authoritative' texts, showing up only as statistics. For example, societal outcasts such as prostitutes may only emerge in newspaper reports when they become 'faceless' victims of crime, or are described in terms of a social problem (to be eradicated, usually). Additionally, although taboos may regularly form the subject of anthropological research, the breaking of taboos is not as easy to discern, or to record as part of an academic study. As well, a group of individuals may be marginalised or punished for not respecting the conventions of fertility (through sterility or miscarriage), marriage (for example, by refusing to enter into a polygamous marriage), and so on, but their behaviour does not form part of the mainstream account of their society.

One of the few anthropological theories challenging this view is the muted group theory of Shirley and Edwin Ardener. Shirley Ardener argues that 'too many anthropologists [have] focused on the dominant male model of how a society worked, and ignored the possibility that other groups in the culture (such as subordinate men, women, religious minorities, ethnic minorities, or

outcasts) might have a different understanding of the ways in which their culture operated' (quoted in Delamont 1995:173). Moreover,

> … because the arena of public discourse tends to be characteristically male-dominated and the appropriate language registers often seem to have been 'encoded' by males, women may be at a disadvantage when wishing to express matters of peculiar concern to them. Unless their views are presented in a form acceptable to men, and to women brought up in the male idiom, they will not be given a proper hearing (Ardener 1975:viii-ix).

Thus, according to this theory, more attention should be paid to discovering how members of muted groups express themselves and construct their identities and philosophy. The assumption, moreover, that 'muted' groups are silent, or silenced, may be incorrect. Edwin Ardener points out the ambiguity of using the term 'muted', as it can mean 'both "dumb" and "of a reduced level of perceptibility". The muted structures are "there" but cannot be "realized" in the language of the dominant structure' (Ardener 1975:22). In this context, it is the mainstream texts that are silent, that, deliberately or unwittingly, do not mention the unmentionable or speak the *non-dit* (unspoken).

Michel Foucault has richly demonstrated how society only allows certain things to be said while classifying others as 'aberrant', or even 'madness'. This enables certain voices in society to gain authority, and others to be completely ignored. The effect is to stifle whatever has no acceptability in the dominant field of the discourse. Shirley Ardener, too, has noted that

> The theory of mutedness, therefore, does not require that the muted be actually *silent*. They may speak a great deal. The important issue is whether they are able to say all that they would wish to say, where and when they wish to say it. Must they, for instance, re-encode their thoughts to make them understood in the public domain? (Ardener 1978:21).

Bell Hooks also wrote about this wilful ignoring of voices that do not match the dominant discourse, specifically in relation to the muted group of black women. 'In black communities (and diverse ethnic communities), women have not been silent. Their voices can be heard. Certainly for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but to change the nature and direction of our speech, to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard' (Quoted in Hitchcott 2000:154).

Yet, there are further complexities to the seeming silence of the marginalised. They may be keeping quiet for reasons of their own. Foucault (1977) describes a tension between discourse (or authoritative speaking or writing) and silence when he describes the workings of power: 'Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. In like manner, silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance'. As Trinh Minh-ha

points out, 'Silence as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored' (Minh-ha 1988).

However muted their voices may be then, these groups—or, more likely, individuals—certainly do exist. But where should one turn to find out about such groups, to discern their models of society, and to trace their attempts at agency? How does one study what is not usually visible—and indeed is often deliberately made invisible? The indicators required to substantiate such academic research would indeed be difficult to establish. However, exploring 'non-scientific' methodologies can fill this lacuna in research.

Speaking the *Non-Dit*: Fiction as Source

If certain people or groups of people (especially women, excluded because of unbalanced gender relations and other factors) are not included in the 'authoritative' descriptive texts of society, how then can their story be told? If disciplines such as history (especially social history), anthropology and sociology do become interested in such excluded groups, where do they turn for sources? We have already noted that other means should be sought: *alternative sources*, that are able to say the unspoken or unspeakable:

> … finding women in the histories of the non-Western, just as in the Western, world requires persistence due to the silence or obliqueness of 'traditional' historical sources such as documents written by historical actors themselves. The roles of women in agriculture, health, crafts, religion, politics, the arts, and other arenas have often been regarded as negligible, exceptional and infrequent, or irretrievable for other than the very recent period. However, far more is available than one may think; much of it lies hidden in non-obvious sources: oral testimony, mythology, life histories, genealogies, religious records, missionary and explorer accounts, archaeological excavations, language, legal codes, land tenure arrangements, *oral and written literature*, or cultural lore and fable (Berger and White, 1999:xxxi; emphasis added).

Shirley Ardener also acknowledges that 'women's ideas or models of the world around them might nevertheless find a way of expression in forms other than direct expository speech, possibly through symbolism in art, myth, ritual, special speech registers and the like' (Ardener 1975:ix). I would add that the symbolic world of fiction is another key source for forms of expression from a muted group, especially the new writing emerging from women in Africa. The *non-dit* can find a voice in the literary genre. Coundouriotis (1999), for instance, has illustrated how historical narration in French and English African novels of the colonial and postcolonial periods 'not only "answers back" to Europe's colonialist legacy, but also serves as a complex form of dissent among Africans themselves. Coundouriotis therefore gives voice to African novelists' defiance of colonialism and nationalist ideology' by exploring the dialogue between literature and history.

There is some debate, of course, as to whether fictional texts can be used as a reliable source for historical or sociological research—it has been dismissed as 'imaginary evidence', as 'subjective' or even as 'inadequate science' (Mitchell 2000; Visweswaran 1988). Since fiction is not based on empirical data or fieldwork, for the most part, and cannot be 'verified', it has not been valued as a source of ethnographic data in anthropology. Additionally, because it is not necessarily based entirely on documented facts, historians tend to dismiss it as a non-historical source. Likewise, literary criticism tends to avoid labelling fiction as 'mimetic' or reflective of social reality. Yet, because not all social reality is recorded or researched, it can be argued that fiction fulfils a valuable function by making visible the patterns, networks of influence and questions of identity that are central to the maintenance of a prevailing society. Fiction reveals subjectivities, in very specific contexts. The paper will show that in certain cases, fictional texts are perhaps the only ones that can be used to highlight particular issues and illuminate the existence, perceptions and experiences of certain kinds of people.

The question of fiction as source is a complex one, raising theoretical questions for both the social sciences and for literary theory. For example, the genre of autobiography, especially autobiographical fiction, raises questions about authority, about authorship, and about the extent to which all written accounts of reality can be said to be constructed (Plummer 1993; Stanley 1992 & 1995; Swindells 1995). The well-known historian AJP Taylor noted that history, 'is not just a catalogue of events put in the right order like a railway timetable. History is a *version* of events' (quoted by Rainbolt 2000; emphasis added). So, too, anthropological texts are versions of the lives of groups of people. They depend on what the author is told, who is interviewed or observed, what is remembered, what is written down, whether the subjects tell the truth, and a variety of other factors, not excluding the gender of the anthropologist. The researcher can also only go so far in using methods like participant observation. In other words, the author *always* has an influence on what is written down, by emphasising certain points, downplaying or excluding others, and thus enabling the reader to trace his or her prejudices, bias and beliefs through the written text.

Despite a growing tendency to read all texts as prejudiced, and all realities as constructed, the reluctance to use fiction as a source remains deep-seated. Redi Mitchell (2000) notes that, irrespective of 'history's origins in storytelling, narrative has not been the dominant mode in the history profession for quite some time'. Yet, observes Visweswaran, '[f]or a movement which claims interest in experimenting with how selves are constituted or represented, experimental ethnography has been strangely reluctant to embrace other forms of writing, like the novel, short story, diary or autobiography. At a time when

literary critics read such texts as expressive culture, why can't anthropologists?' (Visweswaran 1988). The question is a valid one.

> In anthropology, there is a tradition of women ethnographers, not always professionally trained, often writing in a novelistic or fictive voice about culture. Some of these women were the wives of male anthropologists, men who upon completion of their fieldwork continued in the mien of publishing for a professional audience. Kevin Dwyer has noted that the male seemed to adopt the 'objective' explanatory mode, and the female a 'subjective, anecdotal' mode… He suggests contrasting the books of Laura Bohannon, Elizabeth Fernea, Margery Wolf, (and I would add Marion Benedict), to those of their anthropologist husbands to get some idea of this division. I would also consider others consigned to the genre of confessional or popular literature: Jean Briggs, Hortense Powdermaker, and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas. We might ask why it is that this genre consists largely of women, and why it is that women more frequently adopt first person narrative as a means to convey their cross-cultural experiences (Visweswaran 1988).

The question is why are these 'fictionalised' versions of anthropology less valued than the 'authoritative' versions written by their husbands? These texts can be read as much as ethnographic sources as fictionalised, constructed worlds, since they do maintain a keen respect for the social reality on which they are based. Moreover, fictional texts can be used as a means to 'observe' behaviour that is inaccessible to the traditional methodologies of participant observation and collecting empirical data, by making visible experiences which are often hidden. Donna Haraway acknowledges this by raising the question of using fictional texts specifically in the field of anthropology and women's studies. She argues that, 'Fiction may be appropriated in many ways. What will count as fiction is itself a contentious matter, resolved partly by market considerations, linguistic and semiotic practices, writing technologies, and circuits of readers' (Haraway 1988). She goes on to argue in more detail for the usefulness of fiction in accessing women's lives, in particular:

> What may count as 'women's experience' is structured within multiple and often inharmonious agendas. 'Experience', like 'consciousness', is an intentional construction, an artifact of the first importance. Experience may also be *re*-constructed, re-membered, re-articulated. One powerful means to do so is the reading and re-reading of fiction in such a way as to create the effect of having access to another's life and consciousness, whether that other is an individual or a collective person with the lifetime called history (Haraway 1988).

Similarly, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has argued for the use of 'imaginative literature as a data source for the study of women and society' (1994:43). This is particularly the case when, as many African women authors argue, they specifically write 'in order to comment on society, on the way in which women are treated in society, and on that society's attitude to the rights of the

individual' (Claire Dehon quoted in Hitchcott 2000:33). Such 'committed literature' (*littérature engagée*) may form an especially rich source for details on the lives and identities of the muted group.

This use of literature as an ethnographic or historical source is not only problematic for anthropologists and historians. Literary theorists too regularly debate the question of realism and the mimetic function of texts. Traditional literary theory accepted that a fictional text 'reflected' the world it claimed to represent. Although this simple relationship has been considerably problematised since then, a large number of critics still maintain a mimetic stance:

> The first thing that should be noted about this group of books [i.e. the *Vies africaines* series] is that they appear to be addressed, not to a European or expatriate readership, but to Africans, who will recognize situations that reflect their daily lives… They are important because they depict a society in transition. They constitute a *sociological document* that *reflects* the life and concerns of the people of post-independence Africa (Alain Fresco quoted in Hitchcott 2000:50).

A more nuanced reading of the social function of fiction, and of its role in 'reflecting reality', asks questions regarding the nature of 'reality', rather than the nature of literature. John Lye (1999), writing from a poststructuralist perspective, sums this position up in one question. He asks, 'Most compellingly, is literature a means of representing reality, or it is a means of representing particular imaginative constructions that we take to be reality but which may have ideological, cultural, political meanings which ground and shape the "reality" we think we are looking at?' Perhaps ironically, it is poststructuralism (and postmodernism) that most vehemently rejects the mimetic function of literature, which has provided the theoretical basis for equating all texts as equally constructed, as equally near to and far from 'reality'. Based on the argument that there is no foundational 'truth' or 'reality'—no absolutes, no eternalities, 'no solid ground of truth beneath the shifting sands of history'—these theories read the past as 'textualised remains'. They teach that social reality is structured by discourses, and that, 'A representation does not represent an "original"; rather, it re-presents that which is always already represented'. In emphasising the need for context, it is argued that there are only 'local' and 'contingent' realities, generated by various groups through their cultural systems in response to their needs for power, survival and esteem. Consequently, realities—and thus identities—are cultural constructs, not stable entities. Therefore, any text can only be a representation of reality (which itself is neither singular, nor tangible). Indeed, such a reading is stretched to the extent that the usual sources of sociology, anthropology and history—ethnographic texts, 'mainstream' texts, and so on (often referred to as 'master narratives')—can only be regarded as 'problematically non-fictional' (Lye 2000).

The implications of the poststructuralist emphasis on 'reality' as constructed, and thus as fragmented, diverse, tenuous and culture-specific, are of particular interest here. For a start, poststructuralist theories recognise the need for context, and for greater attention to specific histories, details and local contextualisations of concrete instances. This in turn leads to a greater emphasis on the body, which represents the actual insertion of the 'subject' into time and history, and a greater focus on the specifics of cultures and cultural practices. There is also a specific focus on the role of language and *textuality* in constructions of reality and identity. Textuality is a term referring to the constructed nature of reality. If there is nothing 'outside of the text' (*il n'y pas de hors-texte*), as Jacques Derrida has remarked, then everything we know is constructed through signs and symbols, governed by rules of discourse, and related to other texts through the tropes of filiation, allusion and repetition. John Lye (2000) notes this 'understanding does not mean that all reality is textual, only that what we can know of it, and how we can know, is textual, constructed through discourse, with all its rules; through symbols, linguistic and otherwise; through grammar(s)'.

Due to the political agenda of deconstruction, in particular, this argument can be taken further, to deconstruct the 'master narratives' of history, anthropology and sociology, among others. Being mindful that the term 'history' suggests an objectively existing, cognitively available reality, the term 'historicity' is preferred here, as it implies that what we conceive of as history is tentative, situated, contingent. In arguing that hierarchies, including historical hierarchies, depend on exclusions, deconstruction requires that attention be paid to the marginal. Thus, in deconstructing the so-called 'master narratives', we should look for exclusions, for what has been edited out of 'characterisations of human experiences' and in this way engage in what is referred to as 'affirmative deconstruction', or the construction of alternative, revisionary, and counter-hegemonic histories (Lye 2000; Spivak 1987; Niranjana 2001). As the following statement indicates, this position is slowly being recognised, albeit outside the mainstream of the social sciences:

> As I read the situation, 'we historians' thrive on our own mistaken identity... It is commonly asserted we are historians, not philosophers; *we write history, not fiction.* But these oppositions carry within themselves the seeds of our own deconstruction. If we examine them carefully, it is no longer clear where the boundaries lie between our discipline and others, between us and others. And if this is the nature of the identity crisis which poststructuralism provokes among those who consider its implications for the study of the past, perhaps the task before us is that of reconstructing our disciplinary self, so that 'we' may thrive once again (Hearn 1993:7; emphasis added).

Poststructuralism tends to focus on fragmentary, experimental texts. It has hardly been applied to the realist genre or those texts which most clearly

attempt to make a link between the created reality in the text and reality as it exists 'out there'. Postcolonialism, too, has tended to argue that non-realist texts offer the best opportunities for resistance and struggle, a key part of the reason for writing postcolonial texts (where 'post' often means 'in opposition to'). Yet, realism, and the tracing of links between realities, has its own value. Moss argues that perhaps,

> one reason that realism not only persists but thrives, at least in many postcolonial contexts, is that contemporary postcolonial realist novels are capable of resistance…. Theoretical responses to realism produced in postcolonial locations have ranged from viewing it as a form that interpellates the ideology of imperialism, to characterizing it as naïve or simplistic, to configuring it as an attempt at the representation of a single authenticated experience (Moss 2000:1).

In using literature as an ethnographic source—in other words, in seeking a version of reality within a fictional text—then, are we assuming that texts are a direct reference to a 'real' world outside the text? Or are we instead assuming that all texts are equally constructed, whether literary or otherwise?

One of the objections to fiction as a source is that it is not 'authentic'. However, the 'reality' constructed by a writer of fiction—rather than an anthropologist, who is usually an outsider—can claim a certain 'authority' or 'authenticity' of its own. Minh-ha argues that, '[a]n insider can speak with authority about her own culture, and she's referred to as the source of authority in this matter' (Minh-ha 1988). It should be noted, however, that the authors considered in this paper are not necessarily insiders or outsiders. Many are privileged, living abroad and having benefited from a good education, but still choose to focus on outsiders in their writing, while others work daily with the development of their countries and communities, and have made a conscious decision to stay in Africa. These pressures in turn create a tension within the works of such authors. As Minh-ha goes on to say, 'The moment the insider steps out from the inside she's no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside' (Minh-ha 1988). Similarly, the insider becomes an outsider when she leaves her country. For example, Calixthe Beyala lives and works in France and thus risks losing 'authority' and even 'authenticity' as an insider and writer.

This question of the writer as outsider is an interesting one, as Rangira Béatrice Gallimore notes:

> When a woman writes, she forces her way into a space that was previously closed to her. She pulls herself up to a higher rank and places herself outside the social structure reserved for her. With this subversive movement she breaks the rules preestablished by tradition and custom, and cannot escape her own marginalization. For an African woman, to write is to place yourself voluntarily on the *margins* of society (Quoted in Hitchcott 2000:5).

Tanella Boni, an Ivorian writer, spells out her experience of being an outsider in this way:

> [I write] when, in a way, I have broken with the world that surrounds me. When I have dared to speak: me, a woman ordinarily doomed to other kinds of work… No. I do not write because I am part of the world. When all is said and done, I write because I am at odds. With the world. With others. With myself (Quoted in Hitchcott 2000:26).

There is thus tension between authenticity and being an outsider in fiction writing. Perhaps this tension also exists in the writing of other kinds of texts, but has not been thoroughly explored as yet. It is certainly a fruitful basis for illuminating areas of social life that usually remain hidden or unspoken.

It must be noted, however, that not every fictional text can be used in the search for the *non-dit*, since not all raise the same issues. It has often been said that African male writers depict few women characters in their works while those that do, present them as mere cardboard cutouts (and perhaps vice versa). Kumah, for instance, notes that due to 'the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive— perpetuating popular myths of female subordination. Female characters in male-authored works are rarely granted primary status—their roles often trivialized to varying degrees—and they are depicted as silent and submissive in nature; remaining absent from the public sphere' (Kumah 2000:7). D'Almeida suggests that the work of many African authors 'is far removed from the reality of women's daily existence' (quoted in Kumah 2000:9). This is not only the case for male writers; well-known woman writers such as Aminata Sow Fall do not deal with women in much detail, either. For these reasons, then, one must look carefully for texts that do elicit the *non-dit* if one is seeking to raise awareness of those who do slip through the cracks. This is the case for fiction as for any other kind of text.

Interestingly, however, it would seem that the majority of 'authoritative' texts that exclude the *non-dit*, are written by men, while themes of marginalisation and exclusion come up in a large variety of women's writings. While women writers, in Africa and elsewhere, are not exclusively concerned with the *non-dit*, a large proportion focus on the forgotten, the marginalised, and the silenced. This raises the question of whether it is only through the sympathetic words of other women that marginalised women can be heard. In this way, they do what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called 'speaking for the subaltern'. They provide a space for the stories of such women to be heard, through their focus and indeed insistence on the primacy of women's experience. Although this act may not be without problems, it is one way of creating awareness of women's diverse identities, and the ways in which they may be struggling against more accepted identities. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to be aware of both *context* and *agency* when looking at the lives of women in Africa.

Revealing and Reflecting: What Remains Unspoken?

The fact that the *non-dit* is located outside of conventional society and does not easily show up in the written word does not mean that muted groups lack their own models of society or even attempt to access conventional society. People may be marginalised or silenced for various, often overlapping factors, including religion, race, class, and gender. Issues which have specific relevance here, as they do not lend themselves to traditional forms of academic study—such as sexuality—also have particular relevance for the workings of power in a gendered society. Thus, we focus specifically on sexuality and gender, understood not only as a social and political construction but also as *irreducible*, not to be subsumed under class, race, ethnicity, cultural or national identity.

Experimental ethnography, with its focus on the relations of power, knowledge and fieldwork, has opened up some interesting possibilities for the study of gender. Arguing from the Foucauldian basis that 'power originates in power over the body' (quoted in Synnott 1993:232), gender is revealed as a symbolic system not separable from domains like the family, the economy, and politics, but embedded in discourses and images marking social boundaries and self-reflective identities. The actual power of women in society is linked to kinship and residence patterns, to the social structure and modes of production, and to ideological representations of women in art, ritual or belief systems. Consequently, the body becomes a focal point for understanding gender performativity and agency, because people, or 'subjects', are material beings, embodied and present in the physical world, and entrenched in the material practices and structures of their society (Niranjana 2001).

This emphasis on the body and sexuality with regard to the gendered place of women in society is not coincidental: 'Throughout history, societies have generated ideological systems that link female identity to female sexuality, and female sexuality to women's role in procreation' (Berger and White 1999:xxxvii). However, as Foucault points out, merely speaking out about sexuality can be seen as a subversive act in itself:

> Repression is a sentence to disappear, an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such subjects. Repression has been seen as the fundamental link between power, knowledge, and sexuality since the classical age and nothing less than a transgression of laws, a lifting of prohibitions, *an irruption of speech*, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, a whole new economy in the mechanisms of power will be required to free ourselves from it. If sex is repressed, then *the mere fact that one is speaking about it* has the appearance of a deliberate transgression (Foucault 1978).

However, Foucault goes on to note that modern power can perhaps be characterised as productive, rather than repressive. This means that, in sexual as in other discourses, new techniques and regulations are being generated for

controlling social activity and perceptions. These in turn induce other schemes of power relations like techniques of self-management by people subjected to control (Foucault 1978). The fluid and multiple nature of power relations become part of the everyday life of young women in developing societies. The tension between tradition and modernisation in many postcolonial African countries, for instance, has been accompanied by an inflationary increase in the social meanings of gender and sexuality: these are negotiated and contested in relation to other discourses about social difference and domination in African society.

But where does one find evidence of these new meanings of gender and sexuality? Again, let us look to fiction as a source. In fictional texts, especially those written by African women, the identities of the female characters are often over-determined by their sexuality. They often fall into the extremes of the range of sexuality, as prostitutes (i.e. always sexually available, and defined in terms of their sexuality), or virgins and old maids (i.e. taking the ideal of sexual purity far beyond the social norms, and rejecting marriage and motherhood into the bargain). This means that they fall outside the conventional range of roles available to young women in these societies, and thus become part of the muted group. When they take their unconventional behaviour still further, by attempting to do violence against men, or to revolt against the enforced ideals of heterosexuality and the nuclear family, they become outcasts—a far more muted part of the muted group, or the *non-dit*.

Such women do not adhere to society's directives for conformity and acceptance. They are not dutiful daughters, wives or mothers. Their bodies do not adhere to socially accepted norms (such as those who have escaped clitoridectomy or who use their bodies as an economic commodity). Above all, they resist the constraints of roles imposed by a male-dominated, conservative society. They are aberrations: prostitutes, spinsters, politicians, madwomen! Examples could be provided from a whole range of novels by African writers. For example, Ken Bugul focuses on the effects of polygamy and religious power relations on the lives of women in certain parts of Senegal and in exile in Paris. She describes both women forced into polygamous marriages and those who embrace such a situation. Her novels also reveal how autobiography and fiction can intertwine. Her first work, *Le baobab fou*, based on her own life experiences, examines many forms of exclusion: prostitution, madness, drug-taking; abortion and homosexual episodes (many of which are taboo in African societies). Similarly, examples from Tanella Boni reveal the lives of an urban underclass in the Côte d'Ivoire. She describes how women can be treated as commodities while investigating a quasi-incestuous Oedipal triangle in *Une vie de crabe*. Her use of a child as protagonist in this novel also reveals the world-view of a different kind of muted group: children, and those classified under the law as minors (such as wives have

been at various places and at various times). Sembene Ousmane exemplifies a male writer who has depicted marginalised groups such as beggars in his books and films, for example, *Xala*. However, although he maintains his 'commitment to speak[ing] for those in society whose voices are seldom heard' (Ousmane 2001:40), his depiction of women is at times problematic, as will be shown later.

In this paper, I will focus briefly on the fictional works of Calixthe Beyala, the most prolific and well-known woman writer in francophone Africa. In Beyala's novels, the women characters, especially the protagonists, are good examples of a muted group that does not show up clearly in 'authoritative' or 'mainstream' texts except as passive constructions, even stereotypes. Beyala overtly focuses on the experiences of 'forgotten' women, especially in Cameroon and immigrant communities in Paris, and on drawing attention to the constraints and problems of their lives. This makes Beyala's novels seem particularly shocking, while encouraging a sense of alienation from what we as readers think we 'know' about Beyala's society. Madeleine Borgomano comments on the subversive nature of Beyala's fictional voices when she writes that, 'she does not respect the law of silence: she also writes that which must not be spoken' (quoted in Hitchcott 2000).

One interesting 'muted group' which Beyala and many other authors write about is prostitutes. This is an interesting and complex example, because prostitutes are not entirely invisible. However, much of the received wisdom about them as a group is from diverse perspectives other than their own— from the point of view of crime, disease, social morals, a social service, and so on. Moreover, while prostitutes are overwhelmingly female, this wisdom tends to be overwhelmingly a male viewpoint. In other words, prostitution is, perhaps paradoxically and certainly hypocritically, both over-determined and erased where possible. Shirley Ardener has proposed a reason for this paradoxical situation:

> The inconsistency of requiring women to be chaste while chased, and at the same time requiring men to prove themselves by defeating the women's success, is obvious. One way of resolving this dilemma is to have a category of females who are kept outside the recognised universe—perhaps prostitutes, 'women of the streets' who belong nowhere, or strangers from other universes, who are not fully women—for men to use to complete their 'manness' (Ardener 1978:36).

Prostitutes thus clearly form a muted group. While they are relatively visible in society, they remain unheard, and not to be spoken about—*non-dit*. Dr Melissa Farley, an activist and one of the few researchers working on prostitution from the point of view of women involved in prostitution, argues that prostitution is 'socially invisible'. Prostitutes, she wrote, are 'the most silenced group of women, the most raped group of women, in the world, and their voices are not heard' (Farley 1998 & 2000). She goes on to make a point

about how current research looks at the prostitute from the point of view of the client and its social effects rather than on the muted women themselves. She writes, 'if you look through the professional medical journals and literature on prostitution, you know what you see? HIV and HIV risk factors. That's about 90% of what's written about prostitution to "educate" professionals. You know how I interpret that? It's the perspective of the john who is interested in 'clean meat' (Farley 1998).

These studies fail to address the sexual violence and psychological harm that both precede and are intrinsic to prostitution. Rather, they focus on the medical and soial effects of prostitution on others besides the prostitutes themselves. (Farley 2000). Prostitutes also feature regularly in fiction, unfortunately often in male-perpetuated stereotypes as foils for the male protagonists. There is the prostitute with the heart of gold, the happy prostitute, the selfish, gold-digging prostitute. One example is Sembene Ousmane's depiction of Penda (in *God's Bits of Wood*), a prostitute who is despised and looked down upon until she renounces her 'calling' and becomes politicised, leading a women's march in support of the men's strike. In contrast to this approach, there is a western feminist view of prostitution as a form of sexual and economic liberation of women.

In Beyala's novels, prostitution is pervasive. Nevertheless, she questions whether 'sex work' is a path freely chosen by women, as either the stereotype of the 'happy prostitute' or the feminist view of emancipated sex workers would have it. She shows how her female characters have been forced into situations beyond their control largely because they are women, and because power relations in society are predicated on their sexuality. In her early novel *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, about the construction of the identity of Tanga, a child prostitute forced into this profession by her mother, Beyala asks probing questions. Tanga vehemently rejects this label and the work it entails, declaring 'je ne suis pas une pute!' and 'je refuse l'habit qu'il veut me faire endosser' ('I am not a whore!' and 'I reject the clothes [i.e. the identity] they want to put on me', p 25). Tanga in fact ends up in jail because she runs away from her fate, in a vain attempt to earn her own money, and is caught with a gang of thieves. In *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*, the protagonist, Amina, is not a prostitute, but her best friend is, and she dies after an abortion. Amina then kills a man when she, in turn, is forced to turn to prostitution—thus violently rejecting the role enforced on her.

In Beyala's depiction of Cameroon, women are commodities, and prostitution is an overt means of exploitation, whereby men's domination of the powerless is most clear and complete. At the same time, however, she does not judge those women who are prostitutes. She treats them not as the outcasts they clearly are in society, but as people with their own aspirations and notions of their own identities. Ironically, Tanga's aspirations lie in the

socially sanctioned dream of marriage, motherhood and happiness—a fairytale which is sold to women from a young age, and forms a key part of their identity construction as they grow up. Shirley Ardener notes in this regard that 'counterpart models (whether generated by women or by ethnically or otherwise defined groups) are not generated independently of those of the dominant structure, but are to some extent shaped by them' (Ardener 1975:xiii). Yet, because Tanga's position in the social structure does not allow her to access its privileges and stability, this dream remains unattainable, and indeed, she is punished for questioning her own position. Her lack of 'fit' with the dominant model leads her to believe that she is going mad, and the system, too, identifies her with the mad and isolated. This is part of Beyala's point: that women in Tanga's position cannot escape society's constrictions, because they are outside of 'acceptable' society, and thus have no power whatsoever.

In addition, while the dream of motherhood and marriage may appear unachievable, a number of Beyala's characters actually reject the role of motherhood, an act which further dooms them to the status of outcasts, in a society which bases much of women's value on their ability to reproduce. In other writings, Beyala has noted that, as an African woman, she wanted to 'extend the dream of a free woman to [her] continent where the value of women is decided in terms of their physiological capacity for reproduction. As for sterile women, *they don't even exist*, effaced by a society which makes it a point of honour to procreate' (Beyala 1995; emphasis added). Tanga's 'mothering' of a crippled young beggar, and rejection of the opportunity to become a 'real' mother, reflects this, as does Saïda's desperate hold on her virginity certificate and her later thwarted attempts at adopting a child in *Les Honneurs Perdus*. Both Tanga and Saïda become obsessed with virginity, in a total repudiation of the role of motherhood—Tanga even goes so far as to plug her vagina with mud. This is a deliberate strategy, aimed at liberating women from the constraints of this role. Failing to live up to the expectations of motherhood results in pain, madness, and even death for Beyala's protagonists.

In addition to the protagonists not becoming mothers themselves, they also experience a distinct alienation from their own mothers, unlike in many other African novels, especially by women. Such novels depict the family as the primary unit holding the social fabric together. In contrast Beyala shows families falling apart. She explains Tanga's alienation from her mother, for instance, as a direct result of her clitoridectomy, a process by which 'elle est devenue femme' ('she becomes a woman', p. 24). This is one of the ways in which she is forced to 'become' a woman, and it has a lasting effect: 'One of the first images of adulthood engraved in her mind, and even more so on her body, is the excision performed on her by 'l'arracheuse de clitoris'. ...Tanga's body can be used, abused and even commodified as a source of revenue to

her mother and family' (D'Almeida 1994:75). This is an interesting irony, because while the function of female circumcision is to integrate a woman into her society, it can have the opposite effect, alienating families and contributing to the breakdown of relationships. Beyala has noted that she believes the commercialisation of the mother-child relationship is responsible for a general breakdown in family ties in Cameroon, saying 'the child has a market value in our society, and if she contributes nothing, she cannot enter into the family circle' (Bah-Diallo 1988:85).

Thus, Beyala uses the stereotypes and dominant models of women as either mothers or prostitutes, not unthinkingly or in perpetuation of these stereotypes, but firstly to reveal the plight of women who do not 'fit' into their societies, and secondly to question the kind of society which creates (only) such roles for women. This is achieved through the construction of protagonists and characters who find it almost impossible to live within the constraints of such limited roles and subject positions available to them. Indeed, such figurative constraints become a physical prison in *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, that repository, like the mental institution, of all that is not socially acceptable, and a metaphor which describes the way in which female characters operate within the(ir) world, as opposed to the ideal and oft-repeated image of a bird flying free. Beyala's novels can thus be seen as part of her greater activism for women in Africa.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I asked the questions, 'how does one study what is not always visible, what happens in the margins of society, what is *non-dit*? How does one go about theorising what one cannot see clearly, but which is, certainly, present?' My answer is that alternative forms of sources need to be mined for what they reveal of muted groups, the excluded, the marginalised and the deliberately omitted. In particular, I propose that we use fictional texts as sources where little or nothing else can be found.

As shown in the above readings, fictional texts reveal certain patterns of how power operates in society, and in particular allow for the excluded—the *non-dit*—to move out of its hidden, occluded subject position and become visible. This enables the construction of an alternative discourse in the narratives of anthropology, history, and sociology, and a fuller understanding of human experiences and human behaviour.

Notes

1. The hard sciences too are concerned about the place of women in disciplines that were/are popularly regarded as male domains: Physics, mathematics, nuclear sciences, and so on.

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