New York University

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Cheryl Sterling

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Can You Really See through a Squint? Theoretical Underpinnings in Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy

Cheryl Sterling
New York University, USA

Abstract
Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy is read as an inversion of the colonial travel narrative, addressing the continued asymmetrical power relations between Europe and Africa. The paper posits Sissie, its focal character, as a site of theoretical transformations, engaging with issues of racial subjectivity, sexuality and political positionality in relation to the neo-colonial African state. It further argues that Aidoo situates a performative self in the text through an interrogatory narrative voice that succeeds in both deforming the novelistic pattern and participating in the critique of Western subjectivity and hegemonic feminist positioning, while inserting a resistant feminist ideology into Pan-Africanist discourse to re-envision the role of African women in Africa’s development.

Keywords
Ama Ata Aidoo, Our Sister Killjoy, travel narrative, African feminism, Pan-Africanism, African literature, deterritorialization, reterritorialization, migratory subjectivity

I am a woman and an African, or rather, I am an African and a woman and, I think, that places me on an explosive junction of contemporary political history.

Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* is a novel that uses travel as the conjunctive and contrastive medium to postulate a transformative agenda for African women and the African continent. Travel becomes a metaphor for discussing the effects of the colonial and neo-colonial state on the political, economic and psychological terrain of Africa and Africans. I hesitate to use the term “postcolonialism”, as Aidoo herself, has stated that “‘postcolonial’ is not only a fiction, but a most pernicious fiction, a cover-up of a dangerous period in our people’s lives”. 1 Considering that the colonial legacy still retains its tentacle-like grip over Africa, for Aidoo the term is simply an oxymoron that allows the miasma within the neo-colonial state to flourish. Hence, her quest is to address the collective social crises facing neo-colonial Africa and to theorize alternate strategies for the political and psychological liberation of African peoples. In this quest, she appropriates Pan-Africanist and feminist discourses to invert the colonial travel narrative. 2 Our Sister Killjoy, known as Sissie throughout the text, travels to the colonial heartland and proposes alternate frameworks or forms of consciousness for African agency and identity. I read within this text not only Aidoo’s intent to alter the relations between Africans and Africa, but to generate a theoretical model from which to reconstitute the fabric of everyday life for Africans “at home and abroad”. 3 It is thus important in the analysis to generate an interstice in travel discourse, one that is interpellated by feminine subjectivity, in which to situate *Our Sister Killjoy*.

Formulations of travel, and its theoretical manifestations as journey, migration and dwelling, in its most constructive sense signify movement. Yet, much too often, it also means displacement and exile. Caren Kaplan considers travel as a form of deterritorialization, a “displacement of identities, persons and meanings”. 4 With dispersal and displacement come new forms of settlement, a reterritorialization that allows for a regrouping and alternate constructions of self and society. Correlating the act of journeying to the act of writing, Kaplan considers that women’s writing is a form of reterritorialization, a reformulation of self and agency, figured in “a powerful theory of location based on contingency, history and change”. 5 Within Kaplan’s perspective, the journey generates the modality for all encounters. Rather than generating instability, the flux and reflux of travel become a source of empowerment allowing for theoretical explorations from shifting perspectives. Contrastingly, Edward Said in his concept of “traveling theory” 6 creates a dialogic tension between theories of travel and travelling theories by questioning the ways in which theories change (as they travel) in relation to historical forces, political positionings and subject positionality. Theory is not essentially migratory in its nature, suggests Said, but when subject to migration it
relates to individual subjectivity: the way an individual is affected by migration in her past/present/future positionality in the global arena.

My contention is that Our Sister Killjoy not only deforms the colonial travel narrative, it also reconstitutes a theoretical, scriptural framework in which the identity of the focal character is negotiated. As Sissie travels between the colonial home-world and the neo-colonial state, she is the site of dynamic intercourse and transformation and a site for theoretical propositions to travel. Sissie, in her journey abroad, encounters the different, questions her own identity, questions the constructed identity of peers and strangers and, as a result, develops an “oppositional consciousness” in this negotiated space to frame her return home. Transformed in her journey, she (re)creates her African identity to negotiate the tensions of her migration. In turn, through what Davies refers to as a “migratory subjectivity”, Aidoo develops alternate theoretical constructs to engage and counteract the neo-colonial realities in Africa. A migratory subjectivity denotes the agency made evident in black women’s writing. Traversing outside the dominant discourses of power, in multiple spatial and temporal realms, black women’s writing asserts the coherent, actual, speaking self through the differing journeys of empowerment. Becoming the site of theoretical formations and translocations, Sissie allows (post)colonial theories to travel, to become invigorated and return home to negotiate internal fissures and factions. In the course of the paper, I explore the migratory subjectivity of the focal character as she negotiates the articulatory spaces generated by an interrogatory of race, sexuality and political positionality in relation to the neo-colonial world order.

“The ‘Anti-western neurosis?’”

In the first section of the text, “Into a Bad Dream”, Aidoo sets the stage for the interrogation of concepts of displacement and alienation. Inviting Freudian psychoanalysis, concepts of repression and dream formation readily support the journey motif as Sissie passes from a stage of innocence to self-actualization. Throughout the text, there are multiple, polyphonic passages that capture her shifting subjectivity, but they are often rendered through a capricious narrative voice that corresponds with and responds to the dialogue and action of the characters. This interlocutor generates a narrative uncertainty and it becomes a complex task to differentiate between Sissie’s changing subjectivity, the voice of the narrator and Aidoo’s own agenda. With most of the interpolations, we are left to wonder if the voice is an externalization of Sissie’s interiority, a psychic venting of the colour-coded frustration generated in her journey, or a
device Aidoo improvises from the oral tradition, in which the griot gives omniscience to the actions of the characters whose tale he recounts, or even if Aidoo is blatantly embedding her own political position into the text? Vincent Odamttten asserts that Aidoo’s ironical undercuttings serve to avoid the conflation of author and text, but I see it differently, as the text succeeds in becoming a form of performative agency on the part of Aidoo, wherein she generates a typology of resistance through the narrative structure. Inscribing her sense of agency, the text becomes a self-conscious, self-constructed coding of an alternate conceptual paradigm that enacts power relations and debunks their legitimacy. It is a dualistic narrative deformation, of the text and of the world in which it lives, and as the (anti)structure dismantles the hierarchical postures and relationships within the text, it performs a social activist discourse that juxtaposes itself against constructions of subjectivity, primacy and power. Hence, Aidoo enacts a feminist political practice aimed at intervening in hegemonic constructs of African will and agency.

Framed by acerbic observations about the global discord that marks present-day neo-colonial relations, the introduction sets the tone for the (de)constructive scope of the novel. Sissie, a student, wins the opportunity of a lifetime to travel to Europe. Her journey becomes a counter-narrative to those of the intrepid travellers, who paved the way for Africa’s colonization. Classic travel narratives, such as *Heart of Darkness*, favouring the gendered discourse suggested by Janet Wolff, depict the white, Western, male subject journeying to the continent and encountering the savage, dark Other. Scholars such as Anuradha Dingwaney Needham and Bryon Caminero-Santangelo argue that *Our Sister Killjoy* renders an oppositional voyage, as a young, African female journeys to Europe to encounter the savage, white Other. Reading *Our Sister Killjoy* as a response to and a reversal of Conrad’s novella, Hildegard Hoeller argues that there is a narrative transfiguration of Sissie, from a racialized object framed by colonial discourse to a self-actualized individual who transcends her own and society’s racism. While I agree with this interpretation of the novel, what Hoeller fails to recognize is Aidoo’s authorial intent to create alternate strategies for Africa’s empowerment through the stereotypes Sissie simultaneously forms and deforms. Hoeller focuses on the racial lens constructed around her fellow-Germans. From her shock and dismay, it appears that this is the first time that she is facing a construction of herself as the racialized Other and it dominates her sensibility and affects her reading of the text.

If we consider *Our Sister Killjoy* as a palimpsestic rejoinder to *Heart of Darkness*, it fills in the silence of Marlow’s Africans, who never speak. They never give voice to their horror at facing the dementia of colonial power, but our Sister does. However, by just focusing on Conrad, we
limit Aidoo’s dialogical intent to one text, while she is writing against the
canon of representation by Westerners about Africa and African peoples.
Whether an author has been blatantly racist in his/her representation
of African peoples or simply elided them, Aidoo is determined, through
the character of Sissie, to insert the subjectivity of African peoples
into Western discourse and to radicalize that discursive interruption
by giving voice to the most invisible and unimaginable of presences – the African woman. Hoeller, appropriating Achebe’s lens, revisits a
pivotal, but often obscured existential point in Western canonicity: Can
a novel “‘depersonalize a portion of the human race’ and still be a ‘great
work of art’”? 17 The answer is located in the canon. Aidoo’s purposeful
refocalization of the Western lens onto itself reveals its viscosity, its
limited purview, to allow for the realization of the horror it has created.

When “our Sister Killjoy” begins her journey, it is not the voyage of
the conqueror surveying his conquest, but the journey of a subject with a
limited knowledge of the ways the Empire functions. From the start, we
are told that, “Her journey must have had something to do with a people’s
efforts/ ‘to make good again’ […]” (p. 8). Thus our Sister, wittingly or not,
is programmed to countermand the colonizer’s claims against Africa – it
has no history, the people are uncivilized and have no concept of God,
and there are no systems of government – all the opprobrious beliefs that
emboldened the “civilizing” mission. Yet, when we first glimpse Sissie, she
is undeniably naïve and credulous and knows little of the world outside
of her enclosed realm. For her, the Europe she is about to encounter is
the Europe of the imaginary. It is the Europe that she has read about in
textbooks. However, her first encounter does not affirm its beneficence,
but forces a specular reformation, a moment of recognition of the darker
Other within herself. Her subjectivity is redirected and she momentarily
becomes a site of the strange, disconnected, dismembered, epidermalized,
darker self. In the airport, the gateway to the haut monde, a Fanonian
moment is recreated when she hears a woman saying to her child, “Ja,
das Schwartze Mädchen.” (p. 12; emphasis in original).

The displacement of identity is a natural outgrowth of deterritorialization,
suggests Kaplan, and alienation occurs as our Sister is forced for
the first time to confront her blackness. Introducing the concept of
deterritorialization in their seminal essay “What is Minor Literature?”,
Deleuze and Guattari use the term to describe the “alienation and exile”
generated through the use of literature and language. All people share
an alienation through language, they state, which nullifies concepts of
origin and the commonality it implies. Likewise, the metaphor of travel
encodes the journey we all share, mediated through linguistic relations,
the distance between the signer and the signified, and the revolutionary
capacity of the literary to dismantle set meanings. Writing, speech, all
forms of articulation are seen as acts of deterritorialization because of their distancing effect – the travelling which generates alienation between interlocutors and within the self. Since Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization is predicated on the navigability of the word or the sign, it leads to the question of power and authorial intent in the exercising of that power.

Sissie’s response to the signifier “Black” that has been thrust on her recodes that dual sense of alienation, through its signified essences and in its relation to her own perceived identity. However, she does not cringe in the face of her perceived inferiority, as Fanon suggests can occur in the colonial encounter, nor is her subjectivity irrevocably transformed into a being of nothingness. Just as she is othered by this encounter, she begins a process of othering the whites in her surroundings. Her gaze fixates on their pigmentation and she views them through a racialized lens, “a black-eyed squint” that ousts them from the mobility of individuated identity to become a mass representation of hypervisible bodies that are “the colour of pickled pig parts” (p. 12). In what Judith Butler refers to as a “racially saturated field of visibility”, constructed by the European imaginary, Blacks have been conceived as not only different, but as different-in-kind. The black body is defined by the white gaze in terms of its exteriority, its epidermis, as Fanon puts it. Blackness is conceived of and circumscribed by its surface; the black body becomes the black being, as individualization, subjectivity and voice are denied and reinscribed as ominous and threatening. Sissie is othered by the natives she encounters and, in turn, like the white, male conqueror in his journey to the “Dark Continent”, she others them. In turn, Sissie racializes whiteness. She decodes the illusory sense of being outside of race and its visible markers; she discounts white individuality and creates a field of “corporeal malediction” informed by the lack of colour:

Trotters, pig-tails, pig-ears.
She looked and looked at so many of such skins together.
And she wanted to vomit.
Then she was ashamed of her reaction.
Something pulled inside of her.
For the rest of her life, she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human colouring. (pp. 12-13)

Her attitudinal shift in this poetic passage indicates that she is not the stereotypical, submissive subject of Empire. Sissie’s response realigns the specular burden, for now Africa looks back and finds that the Western
world too is lacking. The racist predilections in Western societies are thus confronted with an equally racially biased stance, through our Sister’s re-channelling of the gaze. However, her response does not arise out of a naturalized sense of superiority, but in reaction to her racialized subjectivity. Its ignominy is not lost on her, for she is quickly overcome by shame, something that could not be said of the colonizer, and she negotiates her way through the strangeness, the difference, to see the objects of her gaze as just human beings. Sissie’s interiority is the site for this negotiation, as she challenges the racially marked historicity conferred by an identity as Black. “[M]ade to notice differences in human colouring”, her initial reaction is a play on the Manichean allegory and she focuses on the inconceivable alterity she faces. But Sissie is neither the colonizer, nor the subjugated inferior. In the liminal space she occupies, she is forced to look within and her interior vision is forever changed. Subverting the dialectic between self and other, she nullifies these simple binary constructions to (re)construct her subjectivity.

Mirroring Sissie’s psychic dissonance and her actual deterritorialization, Aidoo also subverts the linear, Western form. She doubly interrogates Western norms by inserting poetic interjections that break the novelistic narrative pattern. These textual deformations are politically charged, for as Deleuze and Guattari maintain, such acts of articulation simultaneously dismantle value systems and canons and force other meanings to the forefront. Aidoo further employs these disjunctive techniques to emphasize the neo-colonial disparity between Europe and its former colonial outposts. Sissie’s aimless wandering in the plush and plenty of the airport elicits only her awe and affirms the modality of European superiority. The material excess, indicative of the consumerism of the West, juxtaposed against the lack in her African village-scape, reveal the global dynamics of supply and demand. The omniscient narrator interrogates these machinations and refocuses attention on the underlying query in the novel:

Power, Child, Power.

For this is all anything is about.

Power to decide.

Who is to live, 

Who is to die, [...] (p. 13)

It is here that Aidoo boldly reveals her intent – to question the issue of power and control over Africa in both the representational sphere and its political trajectory. Implicitly, she asks, is Africa’s fate always to be determined from outside its borders? The abundance that Sissie
encounters in the airport is indicative of this imbalance of power, as Africa is forever supplying its wealth to the Others and receiving nothing in return, except an occasional chance to “make good again.”

Madan Sarup describes a migrant as “a person who has crossed a border” and is faced with “hostility and welcome”\(^{23}\) and Sissie’s identity is changed only hours into her journey. The construction of her oppositional consciousness begins immediately, resulting in her ability to negotiate between the centre and the margin and speak to the complexities that lie between these two worlds. She does not, however, accept the known sense of centre and margin, whereby the centre is the European stronghold and the margin its conquered territories. For her the centre is herself, her life and her world-view as a representation of Africa travelling abroad, and as such, her journey becomes one in which she displaces and destabilizes the European world and world-view and makes her Africa paramount.

Needham’s analysis of *Our Sister Killjoy* foregrounds the political intent of Aidoo’s agenda, which she states is to “rid Africa of neocolonialism”.\(^{24}\) Yet for Needham, Sissie’s politicization rests on nationalist ideology. Kwaku Korang conversely argues for a Pan-African nationalist vision in the text predicated on the desire it manifests for an ethnocultural knowledge, a will to power and the recovery of an Africanist ethos.\(^{25}\) Sissie is indeed a locus for the actuation of Pan-African ideology, and even more so, a feminist Pan-Africanism that transforms her subjectivity. Visible through her shifting self-referentiality, the welcome and hostility she faces on the journey allow her to expand her concepts of home and self. She is seen first as a schoolgirl, but by the end of the novel Sissie’s growing oppositional consciousness allows her to identify herself as “an African Woman” (p. 117). Leaving the relative enclosure of her world when she steps into Europe, she “feast[es] her village eyes” on the newness she encounters (p. 12). Quickly her recognition as the Other refigures her mindscape and she thinks of herself as the “Black girl” (p. 12). To Marija, a young German “Hausfrau” (p. 23), she identifies herself as a Ghanaian, but here her national identification ends and her Pan-African metamorphosis begins. Faced with Marija’s ignorance of Africa’s geography, she enlarges her consciousness and her world to encompass “West Africa” (p. 24). To the natives she meets in Germany, Sissie is simply the “African Miss”, or the “African girl” (pp. 43, 45). Linked to the larger totality of her continent, her identity expands beyond her corporeality to become a representation of the mass that is Africa. Becoming a site of theoretical transformation, localized figurations of belonging to the village and the nation become subsumed by this totalizing Pan-African identity. Ironically, it is her sojourn in Germany, a colonial bastion, which develops her political positioning of herself as an African over a Ghanaian, or a West African. And, when she returns, she does not see herself
as returning to her village, town, country, nor region, but to Africa “[c]razy old continent”, thus sealing her Pan-African identification (p. 133).

**Riposte in the Rhineland**

Journeying into *otherness* and *othering* in Germany, Sissie is simultaneously deterritorialized and, as she negotiates her identity with the Western Other, reterritorialized. Gender becomes the mediating focus as she develops her friendship with Marija. Marija’s identity and place in the world are immediately scrutinized and undermined: “A daughter of mankind’s / Self-appointed most royal line / The House of Aryan – ” (p. 48). Such assertions simultaneously conjure and nullify any pretension to superiority. Juxtaposed with Sissie’s credulity, they allow for a shift in the balance of power, for now two centres of thought, two equally divergent ideas of the world clash as opposed to one lording it over the other. Exploring travel as a renegotiation of power, James Clifford calls for new interactions in the understanding of travel. He suggests that sites of dwelling in travel are the sites for transformation, where power is reformulated. It is through Sissie’s dwelling in Germany that she sees within the Other a reflection of herself and begins to identify with Marija: “Marija was warm. / Too warm for / Bavaria, Germany” (p. 27). Alone and lonely, both women grapple with the tensions generated by a historical, cultural, racial and linguistic gulf. Deterritorialized through language, they tentatively communicate in English, a language in which neither woman is a native speaker and which, consequently, presages a journey filled with miscommunication, ellipsis and ruptures. Their first disjunctive grappling for commonality reveals Marija’s predilection for the dark Other. Having previously befriended two Indians, Marija views Sissie through their racial lens by asking, “Are you an Indian?” (p. 19). Deliberately emphasizing Marija’s queerness, our narrator points out that:

> IT CANNOT BE NORMAL

For a young

Hausfrau to

Like

Two Indians

Who work in

Supermarkets. (p. 23)

Friendship between the two women develops out of a shared sense of displacement. Marija is often alone because her husband is always working, and Sissie, in Robert A. Heinlen’s words, is a “stranger in a
Marija is a source of solace and companionship, as Sissie negotiates unfamiliar terrain. Her dwelling in travel allows for their perceived commonalities to flourish through moments of genuine discovery and quietude. It is due to their shared reflections that Marija reveals her postnatal joy in her boy-child, suggestively named Adolf. Attesting to the universality of the gynocentric bond, the narrator responds:

Any good woman  
In her senses  
With her choices  
Would say the  
Same  
In Asia  
Europe  
Anywhere [...] (p. 51)

Still, Marija cannot help but view Sissie as the site of the exotic and the different, the African, almost Indian, young woman she can befriend. Becoming a site of conjunction and disjuncture, their responses to their common name, Mary, speak to the distance that neither can fully overcome. Marija, may appear to be another German name in the text; yet, for Sissie it evokes missionary zealotry and the maleficent civilizing mission.

Unpredictably, in the section entitled “The Plums”, the relationship crosses that imperceptible barrier between female bonding and sexual desire. When plums are proffered by Marija to Sissie, our Sister automatically attaches what Chris Dunton calls “symbolic resonances” to the fruit. Cozily sitting in Marija’s garden, “her tongue caressing the plump berries with skin-colour almost like her own”, Sissie experiences an almost masturbatory interlude in which she allows her pleasure to reign (p. 40). Suggesting that the “size, sheen, and succulence” of the plums are metonyms for Sissie, Ranu Samantrai metaphorically underscores the tension between Sissie’s innocence of Marija’s sexual desires and her own auto-eroticism. Eating the plums appears to be an exotic indulgence on the part of Sissie, but underlying the momentary pleasure is a coded reminder of the differences between Europe and Africa. According to Samantrai, food becomes a symbol of wealth and global imbalance, a “metaphor for selfhood and otherness”, even though in this moment of consumption, the binaries between Marija and Sissie collapse.

Marija’s garden, symbolically, appears to be a safe space, where each woman can express herself and negotiate her identity. However, Marija’s lesbianism creates what Carole Boyce Davies terms an “unnatural
space”. Sissie in her unguarded enjoyment unwittingly opens herself to Marija and Marija’s equally unguarded response compromises the space and transforms it into a problematic, unsettling territory: When “Sissie felt Marija’s cold fingers on her breast […] It was the left hand that woke her up to the reality of Marija’s embrace. The warmth of her tears on her neck. The hotness of her lips against hers” (p. 64), she rejects Marija’s advances and almost nullifies their affinity. Aidoo underscores the profundity of the cultural violation felt from Marija’s actions, since the left hand in many African cultures is used for unclean acts. Sissie’s inherently coded rebuff causes each woman to retreat from her moment of vulnerability to again inhabit the identities of the “African Miss” and the young “Hausfrau”.

Little scholarly attention has been given to the issue of homosexuality in Africa and what there is tells us less about behaviour and more about societal perceptions. Chris Dunton’s work on Our Sister Killjoy stands out as among the first to address the issue, confirming that many Africans represent homosexuality as an outsider culture, “a deviation introduced by colonialists or their descendants”. Scholars of indigenous traditions like Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónké Oyewọmí display a similar anathema towards homosexual interpretations in their studies of cross-gender acculturation. More recently, films like Woubi Chéri, depicting a transvestite community in Abidjan, and Dakan, the story of a love affair between two Guinean boys, became objects of controversy and were subject to the dismissal Dunton identifies, again being seen as representing outside practices forced on Africans. Only in Chantal Zabus’ analysis of “doing lesbian” in current works of fiction is homosexuality viewed beyond the topos of abnormality. In this context, Aidoo’s bravura in subverting the discourse of heteronormativity can be seen, when Sissie remembers the homophobic reaction of the British headmistress of her all girls’ school to finding “two girls in bed together” (p. 66). At this point it becomes necessary to distinguish between Sissie’s perspective – and her travelling theory – and Aidoo’s authorial voice. While Aidoo has Sissie reject Marija, she also signals a more transgressive (homo)social bond that enlarges the dynamics of gender relations on the continent. In a significant performative gesture, she opens up the question of homosexual identities, without giving valence to them in the novel.

Marija’s overture is coded and shadowed by precepts of normative Eurocentrism, more than heteronormative behaviour, because Aidoo’s construction of a subject position as African woman depends on a disarticulation of Western paradigms. Hence, Sissie withdraws into an African essentialist self that conceives of Marija’s advances as the unnaturlness of Euro-dominated cultural forms. Self-reflexively, she retreats to her cultural paradigms, wondering how those at home would
even conceive of such a relationship: “do you go back to your village in Africa and say … what do you say even from the beginning of your story that you met a married woman? (p. 65). Although Sissie fantasizes about the glorious affair she and Marija could have, if she were “one of these black boys in one of these involvements with white girls in Europe” (p. 61), she is not prepared to transgress sexual boundaries. In a fleeting moment of empathy, Sissie recognizes the “[l]oneliness” that motivates Marija’s gesture (p. 65); the narrative voice then intervenes to construct a parallel between that loneliness and European imperialism:

And so this was it?
Bullying slavers and slave-traders.
Solitary discoverers.
Swamp-crossers and lion hunters.
Missionaries who risked the cannibal’s pot to bring the world to the heathen hordes. […]
Miserable rascals and wretched whores whose only distinction in life was that at least they were better than the Natives … (pp. 65-6)

Unifying the differentiated narrative voices found in the text, the passage delineates a revelatory moment for our Sister, as she links the psychosis that makes plausible evil practices to its results in global exploitation by asking “why the entire world has had to pay so much and is still paying so much for some folks’ unhappiness?“ (p. 66). Until this moment, Sissie’s subordinated agency has reacted to and been galvanized by the performative agency of the text. Through this rhetorical query, and her questioning of the received knowledge that has thus far marked her journey, a paradigmatic shift takes place and Sissie becomes the invigilator. At this crucial moment in the development of her political consciousness, Sissie rejects Westernization and the idealization of European conquests, which she sees manifested in what Gail Wilentz describes as Marija’s “perversion of womanlove”. The brutal debunking found in the narration thus forces her out of a liminal comfort zone to confront the accommodating postures of her empathetic self, the hypocrisy of her British-based education and her relationship with Marija as a signifier for Europe.

The theoretical implications of this moment posit an implicit choice between white, Western feminism and Pan-Africanism. Although Aidoo is not advocating racial affiliation over gender affiliation, here she rejects an alliance with white feminism at the expense of nullifying relationships between black men and women. For Aidoo, “feminism requires attending
to and offering a very clear perception of gender, class, and power relations”. She inscribes a fundamental paradigmatic shift away from a hegemonic feminism tied to Western hierarchies, which continues to overwrite the discourse about the African subject in female form, to one with a liberatory ideology located in a history of resistance to such domination. In Sissie, she offers her strategies for remapping that locus of resistance. Sissie thus embodies all the contradictions of the individuated subject negotiating through racial, cultural and gender barriers. In the airport, she has become aware of her racial subjectivity and she subsumes that awareness to her longing for a common humanity. Now, with Marija, they both overcome racial, cultural and linguistic barriers to find each other’s humanity, but for Sissie that bond could not entail voluntarily subordinating herself to the Other’s cultural paradigm. The food that she so longingly consumes, becomes “strange” and “cold”, just like her relationship to Marija, as she is perceiving the world around her through Africa’s eyes, the “black-eyed squint” (p. 68). No longer is she the naïve Miss, but an agent suffused with her own potential power. Her rejection of Marija presages the development of a polemical self that engages with Europe’s concepts of normalcy and alterity, rejects her placement within it and the positioning of Africa and Africans in its hierarchization.

Sissie’s dynamic transformation resonates most profoundly in the moment of her leave-taking from Marija, when she has to choose how she will reconstitute and reconceptualize herself as a site of resistance. An explicit contrast is made between male and female subjectivity, when she positions herself within the male psyche. Maleness is reproduced as mercilessness, as Sissie realizes that “there is pleasure in hurting. A strong three-dimensional pleasure, an exclusive masculine delight that is exhilarating beyond all measure” (p. 76), in obvious enjoyment of Marija’s distress and suffering. Markedly, rather than critiquing Aidoo’s uni-dimensional fabrication of male behaviour, Chris Dunton unwittingly affirms its rationale by suggesting that Sissie “achieves closure by projecting herself as a male”. Aidoo also gestures to the dominant typology of resistance as found in the dialectics of white/black relations. Othering Marija and racially demarcating her, Sissie notes that her “skin kept switching on and switching off like a two-colour neon sign” as her level of distress fluctuates. Marija’s racial difference, her visible otherness, becomes an object of derision as Sissie considers that “it must be a pretty dangerous matter being white”, because it is “[l]ike being born without your skin” (p. 76). Sissie quickly realizes, however, that while these simplistic reversals may allow for a momentary sense of transcendence of racial victimization, they are ultimately ineffective forms of resistance, because one is forever encoded and subjugated by the binary significations. Curbing these racist fantasies, Sissie will not
allow herself to follow the trajectory of the colonizers and view Europe and Europeans only through a negative, denunciatory lens. By allowing her empathy for Marija to return, she makes manifest the desired relations between the two entities, since an enduring identification with the racial Other requires a revamping of power relations. In these new modalities, Africa is no longer the follower of the European or Western agenda; it maintains its norms and behaviours and negotiates from an equally acknowledged centre of power. Thus, ends Sissie’s sojourn in the Rhineland.

The Subjective Sissie

Sissie as a site of subjective transformation is also a site of theoretical transformation: in rejecting the trope of the exotic Other, she reconstitutes her identity and ideological centre, to reposition herself in the global order. In the racially contested terrain of her journey, she asserts a selfhood shaped by that journey, but her point of origination aids her in this construction. If we re-envision her journey as the mobility of identity for the enactment of social activism, then, it is that sense of origination that allows her to reintegrate her psychic, emotional, political and corporeal selves. As she reshapes her identity from that of a villager to an African, she follows the route of countless Pan-African thinkers before her, who in their journeying outside of Africa and the myriad locales in the African Diaspora, learn the extent to which they share a common history of oppression and racial negation with other black peoples. While Marija leaves her with the injunction that she must see Munich, because it is so beautiful, to Sissie:

Munich is just a place –
Another junction to meet a
Brother and compare notes [...] (p. 80)

Sissie now apprehends that her journeying can also allow for encounters with fellow-Blacks and her recognition of their common African identity refigures her own sense of self. Munich is therefore just another access point, because her enlarged locational positioning encompasses Africans, Caribbeans and Latin Americans met en route. Demarcated as the unimaginable presences in the European landscape, she and her fellow-Blacks form affiliations as displaced bodies, doubly deterritorialized in the midst of foreign locations. The cities of Europe therefore become sites for engagement, questioning and dialogue, and for some like our Sister, such contact generates the modalities for (re-)envisioning one’s subject position and building coalitions from possibilities. Hence,
Can You Really See through a Squint?

reterritorialization also begins out of these crossings that enlarge and transform political consciousness due to these dialogic encounters. Sissie, as a metonymic reminder of the manner in which to appropriate socially activist discourse, must travel to England, the former colonial metropole, to fully integrate her subjectivity and newly-minted oppositional consciousness in this project of articulation and actuation of a theoretical construct for Africa’s empowerment.

In the imperial “home”, Sissie is especially perplexed and dismayed at the condition of the black population. The degraded condition of these economic exiles, reflected in their mismatched garb, sets them apart as “scavengers” (p. 85). Economic exiles, according to Madan Sarup, are escaping the poverty caused by global imbalances. Living in fictional meccas of prosperity, these exiles, attests our Sister, have become third-class citizens who have lost their ability to conceptualize themselves as agents of their own destiny; and, therefore, lost the ability to re-envision their positionality in the pogroms of global inequity:

Our poor sister. So fresh. So touchingly naïve then. She was to come to understand that such migrations are part of the general illusion of how well an unfree population think they can do for themselves. Running very fast just to remain where they are. (p. 89)

Becoming mere shadows that enable European agency, the exiles dream of inclusion through participation. This vision is powerfully accessed through the communal exultation over the first successful heart transplant surgery. Aidoo’s sense of irony reframes the magnitude of this accomplishment, as it is related that the heart came from a young Kaffir and was transplanted to an old Boer. The ridiculousness is lost, however, on the Anglicized characters who only view the event as an apex of black achievement, “the surest way to usher in the Kaffirmillenium”. Here, too, the narrative voice is used to debunk these illusionary precepts, as the poetic interjections underscore their folly and “[d]isgraceful imbecility” (p. 101). Sissie’s naïveté quickly shifts to disillusionment, as she discovers that “for the slave, there is nothing at the centre but worse slavery” (p. 88). Yet, Aidoo problematizes the issues raised by the nugatory presence of these economic exiles. In a series of letters composed as prose-poems, it is made obvious that our cast of been-to’s have many dependants at home who would not survive without their aid (pp. 104-7).

In an interview, Aidoo states that

we are caught in a kind of almost no-win situation […] . Although I don’t believe in no-win situations […] . The contemporary situation in Africa is terrifyingly dangerous because we can’t see our way through either the issue of living in economic exile, even political exile, and the compromises
those who live at home have to make in order to survive, in order not
to be considered a threat by those who operate the power machines.44

The been-to’s offer a deliberate, if albeit, poorly nuanced contrast to
Sissie’s enlarged consciousness. What appears to be a perplexing situation,
the voluntary subordination of will and agency to the quest for inclusion,
becomes symptomatic of global power relations, and even more specifically,
the asymmetrical power relations within the neo-colonial state. Our Sister as
the site of resolution must reject such affiliations and their implicit shared
codes of denial: if she does not, her journey is a transformative failure,
because her success can only be measured within the dimensionality of her
mapping herself onto an already hierarchically organized space.

Shifting to the epistolary form in the final sequences of the text, Aidoo
generates a sense of intimacy that allows any distanciation and disjuncture
in the narrative to collapse due to the at-one-ment between Sissie, the
narrator, and herself as activist-writer. Giving voice to her transformation
and sense of agency, Sissie writes to her lover, “My Darling, we are not
responsible for anybody else but ourselves. We did not create other races.
So we should not let others make us suffer because we are stronger than
them or have better skins” (p. 114). This stream of consciousness narration
makes it clear that this is not the same Sister that began the journey, but
one fortified with a political impulse to debunk the chimerical desire for
materialist inclusion in another’s world. However, it is within this self-
reflexive ending, as it almost devolves into a wail against been-to lies,
rather than its racial ambivalences, that we see the shortcomings of the
story. Before it becomes solely a fulmination on the effects of the grand
schemes of colonization on the African body, psyche and soul, Aidoo
advocates a very simple treatise to countermand the cultural evisceration
caused by imbibing Western ideals – return. Sissie’s posture of return
thus dually encodes the performative agency of the text to mimetically
reposition her voice and Aidoo’s intent as one.

Significantly, through this passionate emphasis on her return, Aidoo’s
Pan-Africanist political self melds with her feminism to present an agenda
for Africa’s empowerment. If, as argued by diverse scholars like Kofi
Owusu,45 Kwaku Korang46 and Sally McWilliams,47 Aidoo also seeks to
insert the female voice into a male-dominated canon of African literature,
the agentative Sissie, as the actual speaking subject, reshapes the gendered
demographic thrust of liberatory ideologies found in these narratives to
express a vision for continental change that centres on women. Aidoo has
said, “I feel the revolutionizing of our continent hinges on the woman
question. It might be the catalyst for development”.48 As indicated in the
epigraph to this paper, Aidoo’s concept of femaleness is irrevocably tied
to her concept of Africanness. For her, women are the sites for achieving
the reformation of the continent, as expressed in Sissie’s insistence that her voice as an African woman must be heard. She categorically distances herself from Western conceptions of womanhood as weak and soft: “at home”, she points out, “the woman knew her position and all that. […] But wasn’t her position among our people a little more complicated than that of the dolls the colonisers brought along with them […]?” (p. 117). Sissie laments women’s lost autonomy figured through the lens of their collective, pre-colonial past by speculating that she could have been an initiate to a “famous priestess” and her lover “apprenticed to one of our goldsmiths” (p. 115). The common use of English as their medium of communication most clearly represents this sense of loss. For, as she states, “I have only been able to use a language that enslaved me, and therefore, the messengers of my mind always come shackled?” (p. 112). The question-mark at the end of such a categorical statement gestures to a subtly embedded, What if?

Aidoo’s call for return is not a singular act in as much as she envisions it as a collective form of agency. The brain drain’s having left the continent bereft of its doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers, lawyers and all manner of professionals suggests our Sister is a crucial point of articulation. Return is implicitly recoded as redevelopment. The earliest Pan-Africanists saw within the dream of repatriation to Africa a modality for its future development because the returnees would have the skills and cultural knowledge to rebuild its past glory. Hence the unceasing excuses of the exiles met on the journey become trite and wearisome to our Sister, as they seem so meaningless in the context of the loss and turmoil facing the entire continent. Internal colonization, as suggested by Fanon, involves total identification with the colonizer to the extent that one voluntarily isolates oneself from one’s own people. The cast of professionals and their litany of self-negation only serve to legitimate and perpetuate the hierarchies of power.

Yet it does create an aperture to ask those looming What if questions: What if the been-to’s return en masse to the continent? Will they actually aid in its transformation or will they, like many neo-colonial elites, just aggrandize their own pockets? Can an African identity be constituted given the fulsomeness of colonization from its manifestation in language to the desire for materialist belonging in the West? What localized strategies will be effective against the organic factionalization and proliferation of difference found everywhere on the continent? And, will a Pan-Africanist vision extend beyond the heteronormative codes of African societies? Aidoo’s romanticizing of this act of return elides these questions. This is not to consider the novel and its cause a failure, because Aidoo signals towards an alternate, transgressive ideation to counteract the neo-colonial reality and it is for real world protagonists to enact.
The intent in *Our Sister Killjoy* is to disrupt, question and transform consciousness. The question of an African identity has a decidedly masculine thrust and the contours of the continent a feminine one. As Aidoo inserts female subjectivity and agency into the masculinist discourse of Pan-Africanism, she completes an aesthetic, ideological quest because now the African woman asserts her intent, her desire for wholeness and her projected role in the struggles the continent faces. Aidoo’s feminist Pan-African framework calls for the inclusion of women in the canon and iconography of African resistance and the quest for identity. In some ways this may be read as Aidoo replacing one totalizing framework with another. However, she is writing against hegemonic positions that deny the subjectivity and agency of African women. Her vision implicitly acknowledges those women from Algeria to South Africa, who participated in the armed struggle against colonial regimes. It acknowledges more ancient paradigms that found nothing unusual in the matrifocality of African cultures. It opens the question of alternate (homo)social bonds; and, it further decentres the blanket patriarchy and sexist paradigms of Africa, conceived of in the West and perpetuated by some African men and women to lessen the challenges to authority. Moreover, it demands of women and men an equal participatory role in the remaking of the continent. Sissie’s writing a letter to her lover becomes an even more sardonic gesture, since her true love is Africa. Sissie is intertwined in its history and its destiny. With it and in it, she is whole and Africa too becomes whole with the inclusion of the self-conscious, politically agentative, female voice it breeds.

NOTES


3 I borrow this terminology from the famous aphorism of Marcus Garvey, “Africa for Africans at home and abroad”. 
Can You Really See through a Squint?

5 *ibid.*., 197.
11 *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo*, p. 11.
16 Hildegard Hoeller, “Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Heart of Darkness*”, *Research in African Literatures* 35, 1 (2004), 130–47. Hoeller uses Achebe’s analysis of *Heart of Darkness* as the point from which to build her argument.
17 *ibid.*, p. 131.
19 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 1967. See the chapter titled “The Fact of Blackness”, wherein Fanon chronicles the journey into a racialized subjectivity and the attendant self-negation of the black subject to address the psycho-social imbalances of the colonial encounter (pp. 109–40).
22 “What is a Minor Literature?”, p. 17.
Using the Master’s Tools, p. 82.
“Ama Ata Aidoo’s Voyage Out”, 52.
ibid., 155.
Black Women, Writing and Identity, p. 66.
The left hand is also used for spiritual acts.
“‘Wheyting be Dat?’”, 422.
Dakan, dir. Mohamed Camara, DVD, California Newsreel, 1997.
“An Interview”, p. 133.
“‘Wheyting be Dat?’”, 433.
James Clifford, “Notes on Travel and Theory”, Inscriptions 5 (1989), 176–88. Clifford, like Said, considers how theories travel and are influenced by distinctive histories, migrations and dwellings. However, it is the emphasis he gives to their points of origination that influence this layer of analysis.
“Home and Identity”, pp. 93–104.
“An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo”, p. 128.
“Caught at the Confluence of History”, 147.
Much theorizing has been done about the issue of language in Africa, ranging in complexity from advocating the use of one language for the continent, to using European languages. Linking language to development, Aidoo enters the theoretical debate, seemingly on the side of writers such as Armah, Soyinka and Ngugi, for the use of one common African language, “our secret language”, to avert and rebuke the European gaze (Our Sister Killjoy, p. 116).