

Fall 11-13-2017

# Lucie Cousturier: The Female Voice and Travel Narratives in Colonial West Africa

Ashley Gushulak

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Ashley Gushulak

*Candidate*

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Foreign Languages and Literatures

*Department*

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This thesis is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication:

*Approved by the Thesis Committee:*

Stephen Bishop, Chairperson

---

Pamela Cheek

---

Marina Peters-Newell

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**LUCIE COUSTURIER: THE FEMALE VOICE AND TRAVEL  
NARRATIVES IN COLONIAL WEST AFRICA**

**by**

**ASHLEY GUSHULAK**

**BACHELOR OF ARTS  
IN SECONDARY EDUCATION  
WITH A CONCENTRATION IN FRENCH**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts  
French**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**December, 2017**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank my friends, family, and professors whose support allowed me to complete this thesis. I would like to thank my committee chair, Stephen Bishop, for meeting with me and reading over my work, and my other committee members, Pamela Cheek and Marina Peters-Newell, for their feedback. I would also like to thank Walter Putnam who first inspired this project and guided me in its earlier stages. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Scott, and son, Caleb, who gave me love and encouragement.

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by

**Ashley Gushulak**

**B.A., Secondary Education with a concentration in French, 2009**  
**M.A., French, University of New Mexico, 2017**

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I analyze Lucie Cousturier's two major works, *Des Inconnus chez eux* (1920) and *Mes Inconnus chez moi* (1925) in which she navigates the discourses of imperialism, viewed as masculine, and of femininity. Through strategies of intimacy, Cousturier establishes her authority as a female travel writer. In her first work, Cousturier sets up an intimate relationship with the *tirailleurs sénégalais* by teaching them French and becoming a mother-figure to them. At the same time, Cousturier plays a role in France's colonial agenda by teaching the soldiers French. In her second work, she establishes intimacy by adopting the local culture, staying in the *quartier indigène*, adopting non-European clothing and mainly traveling alone. Still, she has a part in France's colonial agenda as she advocates for European ideals in West Africa. Cousturier's works demonstrate how female travel writers dealt with the boundaries set up for women as they entered into the colonial sphere.

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## INTRODUCTION

When thinking about early twentieth century travel narratives in colonial West Africa, several famous literary figures come to mind—André Gide, Michel Leiris, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, to name a few—yet, there is another writer, the relatively unknown Lucie Cousturier, who also wrote about her travels to West Africa at this time. Her writing provides an example of the female experience in a genre that has been historically associated with male writers. As Cheryl McEwan points out:

During the nineteenth century the empire was perceived as a masculine preserve and the literature of empire was male-dominated, heroic literature ... women, (and women travellers, in particular) made notable contributions to imperial discourse ... Their status as writers, rather than their place in 'heroic' histories of geography, lends significance to the works of women travellers. (3-6)

I will consider the significance of her narratives within the history of women's travel writing. At the same time, I will be analyzing Cousturier's major works in order to understand how she negotiated imperialist and feminine discourses and how the two are intertwined.

Lucie Brû was born to an affluent Parisian family in 1876. She took an interest in painting at a young age and eventually worked alongside a group of Post-Impressionist artists, developing a close relationship with artist Paul Signac (Lanfranchi 11-12). In 1900, she married art critic Edmond Cousturier, whose brother Paul Cousturier played an important role in Lucie's interest in and eventual travel to West Africa (91). Cousturier first submitted her paintings to the *Salon des Artistes Indépendants* in 1901, marking her entrance into the

artistic world (21). At the time, there were still relatively few women who participated in the exhibitions. Submitting her work to the *Salon* was an indication of Cousturier's desire to participate in the public sphere despite the barriers that existed for women to do so in France. At the start of World War I, Cousturier turned her attention to writing and regularly contributed to publications including *L'Art Décoratif*, *Cahiers d'Aujourd'hui*, and *Bulletin de la Vie Artistique* focusing on art criticism (185).

The Cousturiers left Paris for a new home in Fréjus, a small town in the south of France. It was at this time that Lucie Cousturier first came in contact with the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, soldiers who were recruited from different parts of West Africa to fight for the French during the First World War. The *tirailleurs* were transported to a training camp located in Fréjus before being sent to the frontlines. Cousturier took it upon herself to give the soldiers French lessons in her home and developed close friendships with many of them. She documents her interactions with the *tirailleurs* in her first work *Des Inconnus chez moi* (1920), published shortly after the end of the war. In the narrative, Cousturier reveals how her own perceptions shifted as she became acquainted with the African soldiers. Like many in French society, Cousturier initially disliked and even feared Africans whom she had not interacted with previously.

In *Des Inconnus chez moi* and *Mes inconnus chez eux* later on, Cousturier adopts an Orientalist stance as she depicts the *tirailleurs* in France and West Africans in France's colonies. According to Edward Said:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) the 'Occident.' Thus a very large mass of

writers ... have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as a starting point for elaborate theories ... concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind,' destiny, and so on ... Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it. (2-3)

Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Said describes the way in which knowledge about other cultures is used to dominate them. Because Cousturier begins her narrative with the assumption that there are differences between the French and West African cultures, she ultimately subscribes to the notions of Orientalism. Moreover, she is in a position of authority and has the power to create knowledge about the Other through her narratives, whereas the *tirailleurs* in France and the West Africans in the colonies have very little control over how they are represented. However, although Said argues that the Other has no influence in shaping its own image, Mary Louise Pratt counters Said's argument with her idea of transculturation. In Pratt's notion of transculturation, there is an exchange between colonizer and colonized and although there is an uneven balance of power, the colonized selects the parts of the Western culture it will accept. Pratt says:

Ethnographers have used this term to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated people cannot readily control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to

varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for. (6)

Transculturation takes place in Cousturier's works when the *tirailleurs* and West Africans learn the language of the colonizer. Although some have argued that using the colonizer's language is an acceptance of the dominant culture as a whole<sup>1</sup>, others have argued against this notion<sup>2</sup>. The *tirailleurs* and West Africans are able to use French to express themselves, and to contribute to their own representation, even though it is disproportionate in terms of what the dominant culture can articulate at the expense of the colonized culture.

Inspired by the friendships she had established with the African soldiers during the war, Cousturier embarked on a long voyage to West Africa, spending October 1921 through May 1922 abroad. Indeed, the end of World War I marked a period of increased travel to Africa for many travelers and a time in which new voices described their experiences there, according to Jean-Michel Belorgey (3). During this time, journalists and writers took on an important role, helping to generate a renewed interest in Africa. As he puts it:

[Afrique] s'ouvre au tourisme et aux grands reportages. Il n'appartient plus aux seuls militaires de faire connaître "notre empire noir"; journalistes, écrivains, hommes politiques venus y chercher l'aventure ou y voir briller la grandeur française contribuent par leurs récits de voyages à développer dans le public la curiosité pour le continent noir. (3)

Not only did travelers have the opportunity to explore West Africa on their own, but they were also able to observe how the French colonial system was operating. Increased travel to

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<sup>1</sup> See Franz Fanon's *Peau Noir Masques Blancs* and N'gũgĩ Wa Thiong'O's *Decolonising the Mind*.

<sup>2</sup> See Adèle Jiandu's article *Language and Politics: On the Cultural Basis of Colonialism*.

France's colonies opened the doors to a greater amount of criticism in regards to the treatment of Africans and the negative consequences of colonization. Writers, including Cousturier, did not describe the same portrayal of colonization that administrators had depicted back home<sup>3</sup>. While there may have been improvements in domains such as education and transportation, which were highly valued by Europeans, these ideals did not necessarily correspond to the African way of life. As a result, many Africans were struggling to adjust to life under new European leadership and values.

Popular works such as Gide's *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and Céline's *Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* (1932) documented their time in West Africa and expressed the writers' thoughts on French colonization. Yet, Cousturier exposes the problems due to French colonization in West Africa before Gide and Céline in *Mes Inconnus chez eux* (1925). Despite the fact that her writing predated other more prominent male writers' work, Cousturier has been studied very little. According to Mills, Cousturier, along with female travel writers more generally, have been left out of the discussion on travel writing and colonialism because their work has been seen as 'bad writing' (3-4). In reality, female travel writers had to travel and write differently, navigating feminine and imperial discourse, because of how their writing would be received by the public and their writing reflects this struggle (3-4).

In *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*, Sara Mills argues that female travel writers had to work within boundaries that did not exist for male writers. According to Mills:

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Jules Ferry made the following statement in the *Chambre des députés* on July 28, 1885: "... est-ce que quelqu'un peut nier qu'il y a plus de justice, plus d'ordre matériel et moral, plus d'équité, plus de vertus sociales, dans l'Afrique du Nord depuis que la France a fait sa conquête ? ... Est-ce qu'il est possible de nier que ce soit une bonne fortune pour ces malheureuses populations de l'Afrique de équatoriale de tomber sous le protectorat de la nation française ... ?" (Giradet 84).

Because of the way that discourses of femininity circulated within the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women travel writers were unable to adopt the imperialist voice with the ease with which male writers did. The writing which they produced tended to be more tentative than male writing, less able to assert the ‘truths’ of ... rule without qualification. Because of their oppressive socialisation and marginal position in relation to imperialism, despite their generally privileged class position, women writers tended to concentrate on descriptions of people as individuals, rather than on statements about the race as a whole. It is in their struggle with the discourses of imperialism and femininity, neither of which they could whole heartedly adopt, and which pulled them in different textual directions, that their writing exposes the unsteady foundations on which it is based. (3)

In *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, while she is in West Africa, Cousturier discovers West African culture and critiques French presence in the colonies. One of the main reasons women’s travel writing differed from men’s travel writing is that women were only beginning to enter into the public sphere. Cousturier exits the private sphere through the act of writing and having her work published, and therefore opens herself up to society at large. Her critiques about colonization also place her in the public sphere because they are essentially criticisms of the French government and its political action. At the same time, Cousturier still presents herself as feminine and tends to focus on topics that were seen as suitable for women, like

education, children, and the domestic space. These areas represent the different textual directions to which Mills refers, and often the tensions lie within the public and private space, which were historically seen as masculine and feminine.

Today, female travel writers are being studied to a larger extent, but this work tends to be autobiographical in nature (4). There has been very little analysis of Cousturier's work to date. It is my intent in this thesis to give Cousturier's work the critical analysis that it deserves. *Des Inconnus chez moi* provides the reader with the necessary background for understanding Cousturier's relationship with the *tirailleurs* and her desire to travel to West Africa. Moreover, her first work provides a contrast to *Mes Inconnus chez eux* in how she presents herself taking on the masculine role as a traveler.

## CHAPTER 1

As mentioned earlier, *Des Inconnus chez moi* cannot be categorized as travel writing *per se*, although Cousturier is able to begin to learn about African culture and consider French colonization in West Africa through her interactions with the *tirailleurs sénégalais*. Her first book can be described as a memoir, written in the form of a personal journal, and often includes elements of the epistolary novel. Cousturier's first person narrative is a memoir in that she records her experiences, mainly teaching the *tirailleurs* French, over the course of World War I. Cousturier mentions the war only in terms of the consequences it has on specific individuals. For example, when Cousturier learns about the death of an acquaintance, she notes the location and date of the battle in which he was killed. Because it is written in the first person, the perspective is mainly that of Cousturier. In addition, Cousturier's work reads as a personal journal because she exposes intimate thoughts to the

reader. Although Cousturier does not share details about her personal life, she does reveal her thoughts about the soldiers and expresses her sentimental feelings regarding the relationships she has developed with them. She says, for instance, “j’ai mêlé pendant trois années mes rires et mes larmes avec ceux des noirs” (107). Her words illustrate the deeply personal connection she established with the *tirailleurs*. Finally, Cousturier includes several letters written to her from the soldiers who have left Fréjus and are fighting in the war. Through these letters, Cousturier receives information regarding the physical condition of the soldiers and the state of the war. Furthermore, the letters, as well as conversations between Cousturier and the soldiers reproduced in the text, give the reader insight into their perspectives. These exchanges allow for Pratt’s notion of transculturation to take place because Cousturier gives the *tirailleurs* voice within her work. Thus, they have some control over how they represent themselves, although it is limited since it is mediated through Cousturier.

*Des Inconnus chez moi* is essentially a combination of various genres, but they are genres frequently taken up by women writers. Cousturier’s work and women’s writing in general needs to be explored to a greater extent as it has been overlooked. According to Sonya Stephens, “...from the very beginnings of French literature, women played a role in the shaping of society and culture, often in ways which are silenced by history, as promoters of an oral tradition, as readers, and as patrons of the arts and education” (4). The significance of Cousturier’s work is twofold—in her day, she gave readers a firsthand glimpse into her experience with people of an unknown and misinterpreted culture. She also provides a unique perspective as a female writer within France’s colonial history.

## **French Perceptions vis-à-vis Africans**

In the early twentieth century, there were many, primarily negative stereotypes of Africans prevalent in French society. These perceptions had been formed during the course of France's relationship with West Africa, in which France asserted its dominance over the people and land. Yet, very few French citizens had actually traveled to Africa or met an African face-to-face. Instead, organizations with colonial interests<sup>4</sup>, journals and newspapers<sup>5</sup>, and literary works<sup>6</sup> each contributed to the colonial discourse in France and influenced the way in which the French understood Africans. Contrary to the prevalent stereotypes of the day, Cousturier attempts to change the common perceptions of Africans by showing the reader what Africans are actually like. She describes the *tirailleurs sénégalais* as individuals in an attempt to avoid sweeping generalizations about them. Before discussing Cousturier's work in greater detail, we will look at the ideas of savagery and darkness that were associated with Africa and Africans as these were the ideas upon which many of the misconceptions were based. Later, we will see how Cousturier presents herself as a feminine writer by assuming the role of the mother-figure and remaining partially in the private sphere.

### **Savagery and Darkness**

In the nineteenth century, the ideas of European superiority and African savagery were used in French colonial discourse to justify colonialism in Africa and elsewhere. In truth, the word "savage" originated in Europe and had a different significance when it was

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, *le Parti Colonial*, *le Groupe Colonial de la Chambre*, *le Comité de l'Afrique française*, *l'Union Coloniale Française* and *la Ligue coloniale de la jeunesse* (Giradet 110-118).

<sup>5</sup> Some of these publications include *La Quinzaine coloniale*, *Journal des Débats*, and *Revue des Deux Mondes* (117-118).

<sup>6</sup> The adventure novels of Jules Verne, for example (119).

first used (Pieterse 31). In its earliest form, the Old French *sauvage* or *salvage*, meant “wild, savage, untamed” and referred to land rather than to people. The meaning shifted during the Middle Ages, when Europe began cultivating land, and only people who were considered wild continued to live in the forest. This historical background is embedded in the contemporary understanding of the word which is “cruel and vicious; aggressively hostile” and “primitive, uncivilized” according to the Oxford Dictionary. The word “savage” was used in Europe until Christianity spread across the continent, at which point “the notion of savagery was exported, along with its ambiguities, and transferred to non-Europeans” (31). The idea of the African savage was used by both missionaries and explorers to justify their presence in Africa. In their writing, “explorers usually portray[ed] [Africans] as amusing or dangerous obstacles or as objects of curiosity, while missionaries usually portray[ed] Africans as weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need[ed] to be shown the light” (Brantlinger 196-197). Europeans believed they had to civilize Africans and presented themselves as the purveyors of civilization and progress, assuming Africans were unable to achieve and advance on their own.

Also related to the notion of savagery was that of darkness, a description which has been used frequently to depict Africa and which Joseph Conrad utilizes in the title of his famous portrayal of the continent, *Heart of Darkness*. In his novel, Conrad describes Marlow as being beckoned by “the profound darkness of its heart” and journeying “deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness” (97, 99). For Conrad’s character, darkness represents the unknown, the mystery and the exoticism of Africa. The darkness described by Conrad summoned those who wanted to discover, conquer, and civilize Africa. However, the association between Africa and darkness was established long before Conrad’s novel. During

the Middle Ages, it was believed that Ham's children were condemned to live in Africa as punishment for failing to cover Noah's naked body after falling asleep in a drunken slumber. The Curse of Ham explained dark skin, which was seen as a punishment for Ham's descendants. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, missionaries writing about Africa used the oppositions of "light/dark", "good/evil", "believing/unbelieving", and "civilized/uncivilized" to describe Africa and its people to warrant their presence there. The following quote was published in an early nineteenth century edition of the *Edinburgh Review*: "Europe is the light of the world, and the ark of knowledge: upon the welfare of Europe, hangs the destiny of the most remote and savage people" (Pieterse 34). Indeed, the enlightenment of Africa referred to bringing European knowledge to Africans, but also to bringing Christianity and salvation to a people who were thought to be forgotten.

Scientific writing of the nineteenth century took the ideas of savagery and darkness a step further, by asserting that there were fundamental differences between the races. Cousturier was familiar with the work of Arthur de Gobineau, who published a four-volume work titled *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* in France between 1853-1855 (49). Gobineau argued that, "a mixture of races was the cause of decadence, of the decline of civilization, for in every mixture the lower race would predominate" (49). Cousturier discounts the work of Gobineau and others who claimed that Africans were inferior to Europeans. She says, "Ma famille et moi nous savons encore, hélas! en 1917, ce que c'est que les hommes de race noire, car nous avons lu Gobineau et divers livres d'explorateurs et de gouverneurs de l'Ouest africain" (*Des Inconnus chez moi* 32). Cousturier's statement shows that, in fact, Gobineau and others had been mistaken in their descriptions of Africans. However, rather than discrediting Gobineau by making an authoritative statement regarding

the validity of his work, Cousturier uses irony. We see this once again when Cousturier discounts the highest authorities' opinions of Africans saying, "... ces personnes ont déjà consulté au sujet des nègres les plus hautes autorités, dont l'opinion est ainsi résumée dans l'ancien petit dictionnaire Larousse: Race d'hommes à peau noire, inférieure en intelligence à la race blanche dit caucasienne" (97). Once more, Cousturier rejects others' ideas about Africans, whom she objects by using sarcasm. She expresses her disapproval of the highest authorities, likely Gobineau and others with similar ideas, as well as the Larousse dictionary, pointing out the inherent racism in the entry for Africans. Of course, Cousturier herself is only able to expose others' misguided ideas about Africans after she gets to know the *tirailleurs*.

### **Cousturier's Misconceptions of the *tirailleurs sénégalais***

*Des Inconnus chez moi* serves as an important introduction to Cousturier's later work, *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, in which she describes her travels to West Africa. In her first work, Cousturier admits to the reader that she knew very little about Africans before encountering the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in France during World War I. In fact, Cousturier's interest in Africa and desire to travel there is a direct result of the time she spent with the soldiers. I will look at these works in order to come to a better understanding of how Cousturier interacts with and represents the Other and how she presents herself and her experiences to the reader as a female writer. As Said says, "the Orient and Orientals [are considered by Orientalism] as an 'object' of study, stamped with an otherness—as all that is different ... This object of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participating, endowed with a 'historical' subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself" (97). Indeed,

Cousturier begins her work with the idea that there is a difference between Europeans and African which is ultimately based on their differing skin color. In his work *Between Totem and Taboo*, Roger Little explores the history of relationships between white women and black men and notes that “For all white observers, the Black’s color is supremely ‘the visual signifier of his otherness’” (2). Their Otherness, which is based on skin color, is emphasized when Cousturier says in the Préface, “D’après la couleur de leurs corps de forme humaine, j’ai cru devoir chercher sur eux des précisions en regard du mot: nègre” (*Des Inconnus chez moi* 3). In this statement, Cousturier confirms her own ignorance regarding Africans and her need to learn about the *tirailleurs* who appear to be different. Eventually, Cousturier disregards skin color as a marker of inherent difference and instead emphasizes the common humanity of all regardless of race.

*Des Inconnus chez moi* is written in the form of a personal journal in which Cousturier recounts her interactions with the soldiers during the war. She also comments on the treatment of Africans in France and critiques what she views as others’ misinterpretations of them. In the Préface to *Des Inconnus chez moi* Cousturier says:

Il m’est arrivé, au cours de ces dernières années, une aventure surprenante : dans une contrée des mieux explorées, la région de la France méditerranéenne, je me suis trouvée tout à coup en présence d’êtres inconnus, au sujet desquels ni mon expérience personnelle ni la science en général n’ont pu me fournir de renseignements. (3)

Her statement implies that *Des Inconnus chez moi* was not written intentionally, but that she was inspired to publish her personal journal to correct the misconceptions of Africans that

existed in French society. In addition, Cousturier is aware that her audience is limited. She is preemptive in the following explanation she gives for her small audience. She says, “comme j’ai parlé ici de beaucoup d’hommes inoffensifs, il n’y a que les gens très hardis qui liront ce livre” (117). Indeed, Cousturier’s work focuses on her positive experiences and impressions of the *tirailleurs*, and she does not use negative stereotypes. It would be a disappointing read for anyone looking to have their own prejudices against Africans corroborated by Cousturier’s experience.

While the entirety of the narrative takes place in France, Cousturier encounters the other culture at home as a direct result of France’s colonial relationship with West Africa. According to Mary Louise Pratt, the contact zone is the “space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (6). Between 1914 and 1918, approximately 450,000 African soldiers fought for the French Army (Koller). The soldiers were recruited by the French colonial administration in Africa, and many of them were coerced into joining the army. Without ever leaving home, Cousturier begins to learn about African culture via exchanges with the *tirailleurs*. She even goes as far as to refer to her time with the soldiers as an *aventure surprenante*, likening her experience to the adventures of earlier explorers, but also distinguishing herself from others by noting that adventure found her (*Des Inconnus chez moi* 3). Cousturier’s interactions with the soldiers inspire in her a deep interest in African culture and art as well as a desire to travel to Africa. As she reveals in her second work, “Depuis que j’ai fréquenté en France des tirailleurs toma et kissiens, depuis cinq ans je pense à [la forêt] et à son peuple” (*Mes Inconnus chez moi II* 71). Yet, this shift in attitude occurs only after Cousturier meets the soldiers during the war.

In the beginning of *Des Inconnus chez moi*, Cousturier describes first learning of the African soldiers' arrival in Fréjus. The local farmers were unprepared for the influx of *tirailleurs*, and even the Cousturiers considered leaving the small town. Cousturier says, “je ne trouve que de la haine à vouer aux soldats nègres” (8). Indeed, she initially rejects the African soldiers without providing any justification. In the first few chapters of the text, Cousturier shows the extent to which the soldiers were spurned by the people of Fréjus. This was likely the first time many of them had seen or interacted with an African or person with black skin. These first encounters are significant because people's perceptions about Africans were largely based on what others had written about them. In early writing “explorers usually portray[ed] [Africans] as amusing or dangerous obstacles or as objects of curiosity, while missionaries usually portray[ed] Africans as weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need to be shown the light” (Brantlinger 196-197). Consequently, the people of Fréjus blame the African soldiers for several crimes which they had most likely not committed. Cousturier says, “après la dévastation de la forêt, la laideur des baraquements de leurs camps et de leurs hôpitaux, ce furent l'ivrognerie, le vol, le viol, les épidémies qu'on leur prêta” (*Des Inconnus chez moi* 8). It is not surprising that the African soldiers were blamed for these infractions because many people believed Africans were barbaric and uncivilized, which is the way they had been described in colonial discourse.

It seems even Cousturier's perceptions of Africans had been based on the negative stereotypes that were prevalent at the time. Cousturier describes an early episode in which she feels uneasy because an African soldier is walking behind her. She says:

Je me rappelle mes angoisses les premières fois où, engagé  
dans un sentier forestier, j'entendais derrière moi le pas résolu

d'un tirailleur ... Il me laissait indéfiniment dans ces transes, aggravés du fait que je n'osais me retourner pour voir le visage, peut-être terrible, de mon agresseur présumé, de crainte que ce geste ne précipitât son action. (13-14)

Cousturier's fear originates from portrayals of Africans which described them as savages and unable to control their sexual desires. This tale shows the extent to which Cousturier's views were based built upon old stereotypes. In *White on Black*, Pieterse explains, "From early on uncontrolled sexuality formed part of the profile of savagery ... certain myths were propagated, such as that of the black male as being hypersexed and of the white woman on the pedestal" (173, 175). However, when Cousturier reveals that her fears are unwarranted, she contradicts the notion that African males are overly sexual. Moreover, when Cousturier describes her fear of the soldier, she exhibits behavior that is characteristically feminine. She refuses to look at the soldier's face for fear that this will spur his negative act. A male, on the other hand, would likely confront his perceived attacker.

Cousturier goes on to point out that the people of Fréjus referred to the African soldiers as *des singes* before their arrival. This name quickly changes as the women come face-to-face with the soldiers. According to Cousturier:

[C]'est dans cette acception que les femmes l'appliquaient rageusement aux nègres avant leur arrivée; mais les femmes, même les plus ignorantes du monde, étant plus fines que les sous-officiers de l'armée coloniale, elles renoncèrent, dès le premier bonjour échangé avec les étrangers, à dire: 'ce sont des singes' pour affirmer: 'ce sont des enfants.' (11)

Cousturier makes a clear distinction between men and women and expected masculine and feminine behaviors. Even the most ignorant women opt for *des enfants*, however, both continue to use allusions that are disparaging toward the *tirailleurs*. While both men and women knew that referring to Africans as *des singes* was offensive, women would be abandoning their femininity by using *des singes*. Men, on the other hand, did not alter their usage of the term and in fact, continue to use *des singes* as a way to demonstrate their masculinity. Both *des singes* and *des enfants* were used to preserve the notion that Africans were inferior to Europeans—using *des enfants* was little better than referring to them as *des singes* because at least they were human rather than animal.

### **Feminine Roles: Teacher and Mother Figure**

The most significant way in which Cousturier preserves her own femininity in *Des Inconnus chez moi* is by becoming a mother figure to the soldiers. This theme is repeated throughout Cousturier's *Des Inconnus chez eux*. In addition, she refers to the soldiers as children, although this should not be seen as pejorative considering the earlier remarks made by Cousturier (she explained that the women of Fréjus had replaced *des singes* with *des enfants*, but that it continued to carry the same negative connotation.) For Cousturier, referring to the soldiers as children should be read as a mother-like tendency because this is the role she adopts. In addition to teaching the soldiers how to read and write, Cousturier cares for the soldiers in other ways: by cooking for them, offering small gifts, and tending to their injuries.

After Cousturier's initial fear of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* subsides, she seems to be intrigued by them. Cousturier's first interaction with a soldier occurs when Métey Saar

comes to the family's home to help collect pinecones in the nearby forest. Cousturier admits, "Métey Saar ... est le premier spécimen de race noire installé dans notre maison, donc soumis à notre examen prolongé" (18). It is interesting that Cousturier describes her meeting with Métey in scientific terms. This is most likely a reflection of Cousturier's previous knowledge of Africans which was based on works that described Africans in such terms. After observing Métey and coming to the conclusion that he is harmless despite his skin color, the Cousturiers open their doors to the other African soldiers, who assist with household tasks.

The first soldier with whom Cousturier develops a close friendship is Saër Gueye. One day, Saër asks Cousturier what her and her husband's first names are and she responds Louise and Jean. Later that day as Saër is leaving, he says, "Au revoir, Madame!" and then he runs back and exclaims, "Au revoir, Louise!" (28). Cousturier admits, "Quel vertige de taupe m'a pressée de replonger aux trous de nos conventions sociales lorsqu'une occasion si rare s'offrait à moi de les survoler" (28). Cousturier is somewhat shocked, yet enjoys the fact that Saër innocently uses a familiar form of address by calling her by her first name. When Cousturier mentions the incident in amusement to lieutenant Sandré, he is displeased and responds, "Je suis sûr de la pureté de ses intentions, mais il ne peut ignorer nos usages à ce point" (29). Lieutenant Sandré believes that Saër's behavior was inappropriate, whether or not he meant to be disrespectful. From this point forward, Saër only refers to Cousturier as "Madame" and discontinues his use of the familiar "tu" form with her. Cousturier reveals her disappointment when she says, "Combien n'avais-je pas admiré qu'entre Saër et moi fut supprimé le classeur—"vous"—où l'on range, depuis les siècles, en France, le rang, la classe, le sexe, l'âge ... J'étais contente que, tour à tour, il me criât, comme un fils: 'Viens vite

courir après lapins qui y a sortir” (29). Cousturier thinks that because Saër is from a different culture, he can ignore French conventions. Yet, even though Saër is not French, he is expected to follow French conventions, which is a reflection of French colonial rule.

Furthermore, Cousturier defines the nature of her relationship with Saër as a mother-son relationship when she describes him as being “comme un fils” (29). This is the first time that Cousturier refers to one of the soldiers as a son, and it continues throughout her work. However, this tendency needs to be considered in terms of how the West had started to refer to Africans or blacks and being children or having child-like qualities at the end of the nineteenth century. No longer viewing them as enemies, the West assumed a paternalistic role to justify colonization. Pieterse explains:

A new mythology of Africa took shape which met the needs of established colonialism. Savages had to be turned into political subjects. The paternalistic aura of the White Man’s Burden required subjects who would fill the bill. Gradually the imagery shifted and Africans were characterized no longer as savage or primitive, but as impulsive and childlike...Virtues they did possess, although not of the kind which Europeans cared to claim: kindness, compassion, humour—they were ‘soft’ virtues, not the hard manly ones. (88-89)

Cousturier’s inclination to refer to the *tirailleurs* is based on this new mythology, but it serves a dual purpose. While she reinforces the notion of the African-child described by Pieterse, she also secures her own femininity. In addition, she presents herself in the feminine role of mother to the soldiers, which makes her interactions with them permissible. The

*tirailleurs* that Cousturier presents have soft virtues and she ultimately takes away their masculinity. In other words, she eliminates the possibility of any romantic involvement with them. According to Sara Mills, female writers adopted “narrative roles, such as the nurse/doctor, the invalid, the philanthropist, the angel in the house and the caring mother or wife” (22). Indeed, in *Des Inconnus chez moi*, Cousturier almost exclusively presents herself as “the caring mother” to the soldiers, which is important because she is interacting with the opposite sex. Later on, in *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, her role changes significantly—she no longer presents herself as a mother-figure to the *tirailleurs* and ceases to infantilize them. Furthermore, she addresses the West’s characterization of Africans as children and as part of their agenda to dominate them. Yet, in her first work, Cousturier uses the allusion often.

Marc Michel discusses a phenomenon in which some of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* adopted a new French identity over the course of the war. He notes one *tirailleur* exclaimed in 1916, “Avant j’étais nègre, maintenant je suis français” (85). Michel explains that the renunciation of their African identity happened in the context of *la honte noire* and the *tirailleurs’* desire for equality—to be viewed in the same way as the Frenchmen they fought alongside during the war (86-87). Therefore, some *tirailleurs* made statements such as the one above to confirm their new French identity and allegiance to the *Mère-Patrie*. The *tirailleurs’* relationship to Cousturier and view of her as a mother-figure can also be considered in relation to their acceptance of a new French identity. In essence, Cousturier is a symbolic manifestation of the *Mère-Patrie*, and they embrace their new French mother.

Cousturier shows the reader the mother-son relationship is mutual by including excerpts of letters written to her during the war. In their letters, the soldiers refer to themselves as Cousturier’s sons or to her as their mother. For example, Cousturier notes that

Saër had written many letters from the war and signed them with “Votre fils de toute la vie” (37). Moreover, in the last letter she receives from Saër before his death, he refers to the Cousturiers as “...mon [sic] famille en france [sic]” (38). By referring to the Cousturiers as *famille*, Saër demonstrates the familial relationship that developed between the Cousturiers and him, and Cousturier cherishes the bond as much as he does. After learning of his death on August 15, 1917, Cousturier reveals that her family was comforted their home had been a place of happiness for Saër. She says, “[on] se [raccroche] à un souvenir: notre toit, seule idée douce qu’il trouve dans toute cette France” (38). Saër was not the only soldier who considers Cousturier as a mother—Cousturier points out that in their letters, the soldiers often referred to her as “ma chère mère, ma petite maman” (100). The soldiers welcome the mother-son relationship that develops with Cousturier because they are far away from their mothers and it is uncertain whether or not they will return to Africa. In the same way, Cousturier welcomes the designation from the soldiers, which is demonstrated by the fact that she discusses it with her readers.

In a letter from another soldier, Damba Dia, the mother-son relationship is seen once again. In Damba’s letter, he explains that he has missed class for several days in a row because he has a girlfriend. He says, “puisque vous m’avez fait comme votre fils je ne peux pas vous cacher (cacher) ma vie” (185). Damba admits that he needs to be honest about his relationship with Cousturier because she is like a mother to him. Cousturier responds to Damba, saying, “Tu m’as fait plaisir en me racontant tout ce qui t’arrive comme à une vrai maman” (185). The reader recognizes that both Cousturier and Damba acknowledge the mother-son relationship that exists between them. What is more, Damba feels comfortable disclosing his relationship, an intimate detail about his life, to Cousturier. The fact that

Damba tells Cousturier about his relationship shows their bond is deeper than the surface level of referring to each other as mother and son.

There are two other cases in *Des Inconnus chez moi* in which Cousturier and the soldiers label each other mother and/or son. The first occurs in a letter Cousturier writes to a soldier named Fodé. In the letter, Cousturier urges Fodé to continue attending the lessons she gives in her home in order to help him, “comme François, comme un fils” (130). Fodé is upset because there are too many soldiers attending the lessons and says there is not enough room for them all. Yet, in her response, Cousturier asks Fodé to behave more like a son, in order to encourage a deeper relationship between them. The next instance occurs later in the text before Fodé leaves for the war. Cousturier offers to give him 100 francs as a parting gift to which he says nothing. She attributes his lack of excitement to the fact that, “il me prend pour sa mère” (178). In other words, Fodé does not need to acknowledge Cousturier’s gift because it is her responsibility as his stand-in mother.

The mother-son relationship between Cousturier and the soldiers is tied to the fact that she is also their teacher. Saër wrote his final letter to the Cousturiers himself, even though he had no formal education and little experience writing. Cousturier shows praise for Saër’s effort when she says he wrote the letter, “sans expérience antérieure, sans notions scolaires, avec les seules ressources de sa mémoire et une interprétation graphique des sons” (38). Cousturier’s praise makes a larger statement; it is an attestation to the intellectual abilities of Africans, contrary to what others had alleged in regards to Africans’ intelligence and capacity to learn. Cousturier first offers to teach a soldier named Baïdi how to read and write after she sees Saër’s desire to communicate. Baïdi accepts Cousturier’s offer and she admits, “Je n’avais encore donné de leçons d’écriture qu’à mon fils et, incidemment, à

quelque jeunes cousins ou amis” (45). Cousturier makes a connection between her son and the soldier when she describes only having taught him and a few other children previously. On the one hand, Cousturier’s intentions are selfless in that she is acting in response to the soldiers’ desire to communicate. On the other hand, by teaching the soldiers French, she is taking on a role in France’s colonial endeavors. Cousturier would certainly not have considered herself or teaching the soldiers French in this way—yet adopting the colonizer’s language, in this case French, has long been considered an adoption of the colonizer’s culture as a whole.

### **The Question of the Colonial Language**

As I have already pointed out, Cousturier offers to give French lessons to the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in order to help them. She senses the soldiers’ desire to express themselves, and takes it upon herself to teach them how to read and write. In addition to helping the soldiers communicate in personal relationships, Cousturier also sees improving their French as a way to better their situation in French society. Cousturier describes her students’ desire to learn French, saying, “Les derniers venus veulent exprimer des pensées, des sentiments complexes. Ils viennent me demander un remède à l’impuissance qu’ils ont éprouvée jusqu’ici à se faire bien comprendre en France” (80). Once again, Cousturier’s statement demonstrates the fact that Africans were not only capable of learning a new language, but that they had complex thoughts and emotions in contradiction to what others had previously declared vis-à-vis the intelligence of Africans. In other words, the soldiers were more than capable of just simple thoughts and only required the written language skills to articulate them. Yet, the soldiers were limited to a pidgin, referred to derogatorily as *petit*

*nègre*, a rudimentary version of French which they had been taught before leaving their homes in Africa. Cousturier explains how this version of the language was used to isolate the soldiers within French society. She says, “Leurs instructeurs ont su généraliser un espéranto, ou ‘petit nègre’, propre à la fabrication et à la livraison de soldats par les plus brèves voies possibles. A cela se bornait leur rôle; ils n’avaient point à prévoir que ces soldats voulussent parler le français en France” (82). The implications of this statement are twofold; first, it shows the extent to which it was believed Africans were unable to learn formal French, and thus only taught a very basic version of it. Second, the recruiters did not believe the Africans warranted learning formal French because they would most likely not live past the end of the war. Cousturier points out that the title of the book used to teach the African soldiers was “Le français tel que le parlent nos tirailleurs sénégalais” (82). The title of the book emphasizes what has already been shown—that the soldiers did not have the capacity for learning proper French, which was not the case as Cousturier shows.

In France, the soldiers were ridiculed because of the pidgin that they spoke. According to Cousturier, “Les noirs ont appris, par les rires, que leur langage les ridiculise: ‘c’est français seulement pour tirailleurs,’ reconnaissent-ils tristement. Un de mes élèves, plus malveillant, assure que ‘c’est des mots trouvés par les européens pour se foutre des Sénégalais’” (83-84). Cousturier shows that the soldiers are aware the pidgin they speak is used to demean them. The fact that a large number of the *tirailleurs* attended Cousturier’s lessons is proof the soldiers wanted to learn and knew they were capable of learning.

Some scholars, including Frantz Fanon, have argued that learning the colonizer’s language is ultimately accepting their culture. Fanon says:

Tout peuple colonisé ... se situe vis-à-vis du langage de la nation civilisatrice, c'est-à-dire de la culture métropolitaine. Le colonisé se sera d'autant plus échappé de sa brousse qu'il aura fait siennes les valeurs culturelles de la métropole. Il sera d'autant plus blanc qu'il aura rejeté sa noirceur, sa brousse.

(14)

For Fanon, language is at the center of culture and that the colonized turns away from his own culture when he accepts the colonizer's language. Writer N'gũgĩ Wa Thiong'O reiterates Fanon's claim, saying:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world ... Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world

(293).

Accordingly, Thiong'O has since made a conscious effort to write his novels in his native language of Gĩkũyũ.

Adèle Jinadu argues that in the colonial setting, the colonizer's language can be useful to the colonized subject in a variety of ways. In her article *Language and Politics: On the Cultural Basis of Colonialism*, Jinadu responds to scholars like Fanon and Thiong'O. She says:

It is not necessarily true, even within a colonial context, that to speak the colonizer's language is to assume his culture or embrace his civilization. The colonizer's language has many uses in the colonial situation. It may have been introduced for reasons of communications and efficiency ... Another use of the colonizer's language was that of upward mobility. The educated colonial subject might have learned how to speak English or French not with a view to becoming 'white' or 'whiter', or to assuming the colonizer's culture. He might have learnt it primarily for the opportunity it presented for personal advancement in the rigidly stratified colonial situation. (608-609)

Indeed, the soldiers' reasons for wanting to learn the language do not imply that they are accepting the French culture in its entirety.

Taken as a whole, besides learning French in order to satisfy a desire to communicate and express themselves, the soldiers also seem to enjoy learning as a form of leisure and as a way to divert their attention from the harsh realities of the war. Lastly, the soldiers ability to write is a form of consolation—they find solace in knowing that the Cousturiers care about their well-being as when Saër writes, “Ma chère ami, cé saër Gueye tou seul qui écrire la lettre pour te faire savoir qué même que je suis sové” (38).

## Cousturier's Children

In addition to referring to the *tirailleurs sénégalais* as her sons, Cousturier often describes the soldiers as being childlike. In essence, she describes them as having the soft virtues Pieterse refers to, including “kindness, compassion, [and] humour” (89) and separates them from the category of “real” men. However, she also reaffirms her femininity, by emphasizing her maternal role and her view as the *tirailleurs* as children. The tendency to describe the *tirailleurs* as having childlike qualities occurs more frequently toward the end of her work, which indicates a shift in the nature of her relationship with the soldiers. She uses expressions such as *gamin*, *gosse*, and *bébé* to describe the soldiers’ actions or reactions to certain situations. By reiterating the fact that Cousturier is like a mother to the soldiers and that she considers them children, rather than the men, she spares herself from being accused of improprieties with them. Yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, the view of the African as child/childlike was becoming more prevalent in European society. This representation was tied to that of the African savage and continued to reinforce the notion that Africans were inferior to Europeans. As Pieterse notes, “Colonial paternalism engendered as its counterpart the infantilism of the colonized ... ‘Once he [the Negro] comes in touch with the white man, he loses his barbarian character and only retains the childlike qualities of the inhabitants of the forest’” (89). As I pointed out earlier, Cousturier was aware of the fact that the women of Fréjus had begun to use *des enfants* in place of *des singes* to refer to the soldiers, but that the nuance was the same. This implies that Cousturier does not describe the *tirailleurs* as children because she believes they are of an inferior race. Rather, it is out of Cousturier’s need to safeguard her own character as woman and is careful in the how she presents herself to the reader.

Cousturier describes the excitement of one of her students, Ghibi Tangara as follows: “Son excitation, quand il nous parle, est celle des gamins qui ont trouvé un nid” (147). This portrayal is part of a longer description of Ghibi in which Cousturier reflects on his lively personality. Shortly following this description Cousturier notes that, “Ghibi rit comme un bébé qui fait une malice” (152). She uses similes to describe Ghibi, rather than metaphors so as to avoid implying that he is a child. Cousturier’s description also illustrates that she does not feel threatened by Ghibi because he is innocent and playful like a child. There are other instances in which Cousturier labels the soldiers’ behavior as childlike. For example, she says, “Bélia s’amusera comme un gosse” (170). There are two other possible explanations as to why Cousturier comes to describe the soldiers as children/childlike. The first is that Cousturier’s own son, François, is only a few years younger than many of the soldiers she is teaching. As such, she likely draws similarities between them and their behaviors. The second reason is that Cousturier is their teacher and therefore, the soldiers, her students, are like children.

At the end of the war, the Cousturiers return to Paris to resume their lives in the city. One of Cousturier’s former students, Ahmed Mamadou, visits Paris and together they visit some friends. Cousturier’s friend asks Ahmed to sit next to her and she is quite amused by her guest. Cousturier describes the scene: “À chaque mouvement de son exotique visiteur, elle se récrie, en souriant: ‘Qu’il est gentil! ... Mais qu’une dame blanche le regarde sans cesse, avec attendrissement, et le soigne comme elle ferait son petit bébé, c’est ce qu’il n’a pas encore vu” (222). Although Cousturier identifies the woman’s behavior as compassionate, she is curious about Ahmed whom she views as different and exotic, the

Other. Cousturier does not describe the soldier as being childlike directly; instead, her friend treats the soldier like a child, exhibiting the West's paternalistic attitude toward Africans.

Cousturier's tendency to refer to the soldiers as her children ceases almost completely in Cousturier's second work, *Mes Inconnus chez eux*. While Cousturier is in West Africa, one of the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, Mamady Koné, who is traveling with Cousturier as her guide, is to be married. Cousturier explains how Mamady is like a son to her and how she plays an important role in his marriage. She says, "Puisque j'ai déclaré maintes fois que Mamady est comme mon fils, c'est à moi qu'il amène sa sœur en me disant: 'C'est à vous que je la donne pour que vous l'adoptiez comme votre fille en la donnant à Mamady si elle vous plaît, ou pour me la rendre, si vous la jugez indigne de vous et de lui'" (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* 118). It is obvious that Mamady considers Cousturier to be family because she is given the important responsibility of deciding whether or not the woman he is to marry is acceptable. Besides presenting herself as a mother figure to the soldiers, Cousturier discusses the soldiers in terms of their individuality, and avoids making sweeping statements or generalizations about them. Sara Mills argues that this is a common characteristic in feminine discourse, tied to the intimate relationships women established with others.

### **A Focus on Individuals**

Throughout *Des Inconnus chez moi*, Cousturier describes each of the *tirailleurs* individually and in detail. In fact, each chapter of her narrative focuses on one of the soldiers, and Cousturier describes that person's traits with attention given to his personality, appearance, background, and interests. In effect, she humanizes them by emphasizing their distinct individuality. According to Sara Mills, many women "concentrated on descriptions

of relationships with members of the other nation, foregrounding their individuality rather than membership in another nation” (99). Women writers focused on their intimate relationships with others because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women’s roles continued to remain within the private sphere in which family and close relations were the focus. Consequently, this experience emerges in the feminine discourse of the time (94). This section will look specifically at the two primary ways in which Cousturier highlights the soldiers’ individuality—by dedicating chapters to the individual soldiers and by providing the reader with detailed descriptions of them.

Not only does Cousturier intend to show the reader how her perception of Africans changes as a result of her relationships with the *tirailleurs sénégalais*, but her work is also a tribute to the soldiers, many of whom lost their lives during the war. Thus, depicting the soldiers as individuals is an important feature of Cousturier’s work in two ways. By getting to know the soldiers personally, she is able to see past the negative stereotypes that are associated with them. Moreover, because her work is meant to acknowledge the soldiers, importance is placed on their individual lives. First, Cousturier acknowledges the soldiers by making individuals the focus of each chapter. She titles her chapters after the soldier who is the focus, for example, *La Colombe Noire*. She uses the metaphor *Colombe Noire* to refer to Saër Gueye because of his peaceful nature and dark skin color. Cousturier also uses the idea of light/dark and good/evil, associations that were common in colonial discourse and referred to Europeans and Africans respectively. Cousturier disrupts this association by emphasizing Saër’s goodness, like the dove, regardless of the color of his skin color. Cousturier goes on to describe Saër in this chapter, providing the reader with information about his appearance and background. The reader learns, for example, that Saër was Wolof and that had never worked

before as he was to become a marabou, an Islamic holy man (*Des Inconnus chez moi* 27). Cousturier provides information regarding Saër's ethnicity, and she is specific in what she includes in the description. This information is also important because although the African soldiers that fought in France during World War I were commonly referred to as *tirailleurs sénégalais*, they came from different areas in West Africa and belonged to diverse ethnic groups (Koller). Cousturier emphasizes the soldiers' individuality by pinpointing their ethnicity and/or birthplace. Moreover, by discussing the soldiers' past lives, Cousturier recognizes that these men were much more than soldiers—they had past histories from the time before they came to France.

Similarly, Cousturier's chapter *La Statue Égyptienne*, focuses on another soldier, Baïdi Dialo. She uses this metaphor because of Baïdi's stately appearance, like an Egyptian Statue. She says, "long de visage et de buste, ample de poitrine, Baïdi Dialo me parut aussi solide et définitif qu'un bronze" (40-41). Rather than writing one description and applying it generally to all of the soldiers, she gives a unique description each time she introduces a new soldier. In a similar fashion to the description of Saër, Cousturier gives a bit of information about Baïdi's past life. She says, "J'apprends que Baïdi est passionné pour la pêche et que, depuis l'âge de dix ans, il sait employer le filet indigène et l'hameçon européen. J'apprends qu'il est fils d'un chef de village toucouleur des environs de Podor, Sénégal" (42). This description of Baïdi may seem to include trivial pieces of information, but these are details that set him apart from the other soldiers. In addition, Cousturier indicates Baïdi's ethnicity, Tukolor, and birthplace, near Podor. These pieces of information show that he has a history and that he is not just from the obscure Dark Continent.

Cousturier's focus on the soldiers as individuals continues throughout her first work. Of course, Cousturier also describes the soldiers in terms of their strengths and weakness as students. Like any classroom of students, they have an array of abilities and their comprehension of the French language varies. It is also through her interactions with the *tirailleurs* that Cousturier begins to see that white women and black men share a similar marginalization within French society.

### **Early Feminism**

In *Des Inconnus chez moi*, Cousturier deals with two conflicting discourses, colonial discourse, deemed masculine, and feminine discourse. Although Cousturier's main focus is presenting the *tirailleurs sénégalais* with the intent of changing the way in which Africans are viewed in French society, her work takes on an issue of equal political significance. She begins to address issues that exist in French society, including racism and sexism. Cousturier can therefore be considered an early feminist, who embraced the New Woman ideals that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The New Woman of the fin de siècle had also been referred to as "Novissima, the Odd Woman, the Wild Woman and the Superfluous Woman" (Ardis 1). However, the term New Woman was popularized by writer and feminist Sarah Grand in an article titled "The New Aspects of the Woman Question" published in 1894 (10). In the article, Grand denounces traditional gender roles and women's oppression in Victorian society. She says, "[the New Woman] has been sitting apart in silent contemplation all of these years, thinking and thinking, until at last she solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with Home-is-the-Woman's-Sphere, and prescribed the remedy" (271). Not only does Grand point out that women are well aware of their perceived status in

society, but she also argues that women will no longer stand for being treated as inferior beings. Furthermore, she declares that women will no longer be confined to the private sphere. In addition, besides working to expand women's rights, the New Woman fought for issues regarding race and class.

While Cousturier certainly embraced some roles that were traditionally viewed as feminine, most notably as a wife and mother, she also immersed herself in occupations that were seen as masculine. As a female writer, for instance, she engaged in work that had primarily been taken up by men heretofore. Before turning to writing, Cousturier had focused on painting and was one of the few women who exhibited her work. Furthermore, she believed women were equal to men and that they were capable of doing the same things, which is best illustrated by her personal pursuits. She had her artwork displayed, her writings published, and she traveled to West Africa on her own. Her espousal of the New Woman ideals is also demonstrated in a conversation she has with one of the soldiers, Damba Dia. In their conversation, the two discuss the similarities between the marginalization of women and Africans in French society. Cousturier says:

‘Tu dis que les Européens ne regardent pas les Sénégalais comme les autres hommes? Oui, ils disent que la tête des hommes noirs n’est pas faite de la même manière que la leur.’

‘Peut-être que c’est vrai,’ dit Damba Dia avec mélancolie.

‘Mais peut-être que ce n’est pas vrai, car ils disent aussi que les femmes sont moins intelligentes que les hommes...’

‘Comment?’ sursaute Damba, ‘les femmes elles ne sont pas regardées aussi bien que les hommes, ici? Moi, j’ai toujours vu

les femmes, en France, faire tous les services même chose que les hommes, puisque j'ai dit: En France, c'est pas comme au Sénégal, les femmes elles sont dans toutes les places.' (*Des Inconnus chez moi* 184)

By including this conversation with Damba, Cousturier allows him to have a voice and to speak about his culture. Their discussion provides an example of Pratt's notion of transculturation, because there is an exchange in which the colonized describes his society. Cousturier still has ultimate control over the representation, for it was she that decided to include the conversation, however, Damba has now also taken a part in shaping how Senegalese women are perceived by the West.

Moreover, their conversation sheds light on Cousturier's belief that women and Africans are equal to men. Rather than making a declarative statement regarding the equality of Europeans and Africans, Cousturier takes a different approach in order to substantiate her claim. The reader must assume that Cousturier believes women are as intelligent as men in order to understand how she determines that Africans are as intelligent as Europeans as well. It is unclear as to why Cousturier does not use a more authoritative voice while discussing the issue, but it may perhaps be due to the limits she is bound to in the discourse of femininity. While a male writer may have easily been able to make a more authoritative statement on the issue, Cousturier is unable to do so while at the same time maintaining her feminine voice.

Furthermore, the reader also sees, at least from the view point of an outsider, that women are perceived as being equal to men in France. Damba is surprised to learn that French women are not always viewed as equal to men, based on the fact that they are more

visible in the public sphere than are Senegalese women. Cousturier does not make any other comments regarding the status of women in France, yet was surely aware that there was still work to be done in terms of women's rights. In fact, while traveling in West Africa, Cousturier comments on expanding women's rights there, which she envisions as one of the only positive possible outcomes of French colonization.

## CHAPTER 2

In the nineteenth century, female writers turned to several genres in particular to express themselves including journalism and travel writing (Lloyd 123). Women traveled in a variety of ways and wrote about their experiences, as Lloyd explains:

Whether they accompanied husbands or traveled alone, visited other European countries or explored further afield, whether they perceived the foreigners whose lands they visited as barbarians or realized that to the foreigners they themselves were, in Flora Tristan's expression, the pariahs, they seem to have responded to a growing hunger for the exotic and for adventure among their own compatriots of either sex. While such writing has until very recently been rejected as popular and non-literary, its discovery by scholars exploring the interrelationship of gender and colonialism suggests that in many cases it offers more than such a derogatory classification might suggest. (123)

Indeed, Cousturier follows in the footsteps of her predecessors by devoting her later years to travel writing. Cousturier's travel writing not only gives the reader perspective into the gendered experience of a female traveler abroad, but also addresses issues regarding the negative aspects of French colonization in West Africa. While there were a growing number of female travel writers at the time, the work of relatively few has remained in the public eye. However, the work of Mary Kingsley, a travel writer who wrote two decades before Cousturier, has gained interest regarding its relation to gender and colonialism.

The travels and writings of Kingsley and Cousturier have much in common. Kingsley traveled to parts of West Africa at the end of the nineteenth century and documented her journeys in *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and *West African Studies* (1899). Alison Blunt describes Kingsley as:

[P]lay[ing] many roles throughout her brief life—dutiful daughter, loyal sister, fearless traveler, well-known author and public speaker, political lobbyist, and wartime nurse. These roles were spatially distinct, with Kingsley moving from the domestic, familial sphere of home to gain individual independence while traveling ... her life vividly illustrates attempts to balance a sense of duty with the desire for independence. (46)

Blunt's description of Kingsley highlights the female desire to have a presence in the public sphere while at the same time observing traditionally feminine roles. Both of Kingsley's parents passed away within a relatively short amount of time and she was unmarried and without children. Relieved from familial responsibilities, Kingsley acted on her desire to

travel as she had the freedom to do so. Her first trip to West Africa was from August 1893 through January 1894 and her second trip, shortly after, was from December 1894 through November 1895. The majority of her travel took place in Gabon, which had been under French power since 1890. Kingsley traveled modestly, mainly alone, and traded to finance her travel. During her second trip, she gave herself a purpose for travel by collecting fish specimens for the British Museum (48-51). In 1899, Kingsley describes the reason for her own travel as being tied to her father's earlier work in anthropology. She says, "it was the study of early religion and law, and for it, I had to go to West Africa, and I went there, proceeding on the even tenour of my way, doing odd jobs, and trying to understand things, pursuing knowledge under difficulties with unbroken devotion" (64). Yet, Blunt points out that Kingsley's explanation reflects the dual desire to satisfy familial duty while at the same time pursuing scientific knowledge (64). Like Cousturier later on, Kingsley criticizes colonization in West Africa in her works. Although her critiques are not as scathing as Cousturier's, she concludes that:

[T]he Crown Colony system is unsuited for governing Western Africa, and [I] have attributed its malign influence to its being a system which primarily expresses the opinions of well-intentioned but ill-informed officials at home, instead of being, according to the usual English type of institution, representative of the interests of the people who are governed.

(110)

Kingsley recognizes that Britain is not working on behalf of African people in West Africa, despite only attributing this to the fact that those in power are ill-informed and not to a sense of imperialist racism.

The fact that Kingsley and Cousturier, for the most part, traveled alone in West Africa shows the extent to which women desired the same freedom men had to explore and travel on their own. That these women were able to do so also shows that women were able to depart from the private sphere if they had other aspirations. It also demonstrates how colonization had resulted in conditions in which women were able to travel safely on their own. Mills explains:

[I]t is interesting that many of the texts present the female narrator travelling without protection and without coming to harm; this seems to signal to the reader that the colonised country is so much under...control that *even* women can be represented travelling through it without the 'natives' daring to approach her. (22)

Mills suggests that the native people in France's colonies had learned that white European women were off-limits to them. That white women were forbidden is also reflected in Cousturier's work as she does not once mention feeling threatened during her journey. Rather, she is treated with respect and notes the way in which her presence is celebrated by the native people.

Although Cousturier and Kingsley had different motivations for traveling to West Africa, they both had the financial means and personal connections which made their trips possible. Cousturier was on an official mission to research and report on family life in West

Africa. Official documents describe the mission as an “‘Étude du milieu indigène familial et plus spécialement du rôle de la femme indigène au point de vue de l’influence qu’elle exerce sur la formation morale des enfants’” (Lanfranchi 104). At the end of *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, the report Cousturier submitted to the Minister of Colonies is included. The fact that Cousturier is traveling to West Africa to study the native people demonstrates Said’s notion of Orientalism in which the West views the Other as an “object” of study (97). As Said points out, “such texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe” (94).

Yet, Cousturier’s travels are also very personal. Cousturier’s brother-in-law, Paul Cousturier, who served as governor of Guinea from 1891 until 1904, likely played a role in Cousturier being selected for the mission (91). Moreover, her experience with the *tirailleurs sénégalais* during the war also made her an ideal candidate for the mission (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* vii). Cousturier is also driven to make the trip to visit some of the *tirailleurs*, or their family members. During the first part of her journey, she is accompanied by Mamady Koné, one of her former students (9). He serves both as a guide and as an interpreter for Cousturier and her acquaintances. However, the two part ways when Mamady leaves to celebrate his marriage and Cousturier continues on alone for a short period of time. Then, another one of her former students, Ghibi Tangara, serves as Cousturier’s guide until Mamady’s return (*Mes Inconnus chez eux II* 27).

Cousturier’s work is divided into sections that are based on her travels, rather than individuals like her first work. There are, for instance, major sections, or chapters titled after large cities, and within those sections are subsections headed by the name of a smaller city, village, or date. This organization was common in travel writing as it authenticated the

writers' travels in addition to giving them credibility as they wrote about other people and places. Gide, for example, uses an almost identical format in his *Voyage au Congo* (1927). Furthermore, a map showing Cousturier's route is included at the beginning of her work. The map serves as evidence which authenticates her journey by showing the reader her itinerary, similar to the use of dates and place names. Generally speaking, the author of a travel narrative is expected to have taken the journey they describe in their work. Peter Hulme insists this is the defining characteristic of the travel narrative, arguing, "their authors must have traveled to the place they are describing" (in Youngs 4).

One of the greatest similarities between Cousturier's works is their similar titles: *Des Inconnus chez moi* and *Mes Inconnus chez eux: I Mon Ami Fatou, Citadine* and *Mes Inconnus chez eux: II Mon Ami Soumaré, Laptot*. By using parallel structure in the titles, Cousturier establishes a link between them, as if they are meant to be read together. Cousturier's intention is to show her own discovery of another people and their culture via her encounters with them in France and West Africa. The fact that she feels a new sense of closeness to the West African people is demonstrated by a variation in the title to her second work—she changes the nonspecific determiner *Des* to the possessive *Mes*. By using *mes* in the title of her second work, she establishes intimacy between herself and the individuals she is writing about. She also includes the names of two of her acquaintances in the title, Fatou and Soumaré. By naming Fatou and Soumaré specifically in the titles, she acknowledges their individuality and importance. As I showed earlier, Cousturier's focus on individuality is a distinct characteristic of her work as well as a reflection of the relationships she shared with others, an important aspect of feminine discourse.

*Mes Inconnus chez eux* is filled with pictorial descriptions of the landscape, detailed accounts of cultural events, several self-revelations, and of course, critiques of French colonization. Cousturier frequently describes herself as different from other Europeans—in where she decides to stay, in the manner she dresses, and in the way she interacts with the native people—as a way to set herself apart from both tourists and other travel writers alike. Tim Youngs notes in his *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* that this distinction—between the traveler and tourist—was a common one, and travel writers undoubtedly viewed themselves as different from the ordinary tourist. James Buzard explains that while “tourist” had the same meaning as “traveler” at the end of the eighteenth century, the word tourist developed a derogatory connotation by the mid-nineteenth century. Buzard says:

‘Travel’s educative, acculturating function took on a newly competitive aspect, as travellers sought to distinguish themselves from the ‘mere tourists’ they saw or imagined around them. Correspondingly, the authentic ‘culture’ of *places*—the *genius loci*—was represented as lurking in secret precincts ‘off the beaten track’ where it could be discovered only by the sensitive ‘traveller’, not the vulgar tourist’. (in Youngs 59)

In fact, almost immediately Cousturier aims to distinguish herself from the others, the ‘mere tourists’ that made the journey at the same time as her. We first see her distinguish herself from others when she describes spending one more night on the ocean liner as to avoid the ‘tourists’. She frequently emphasizes the fact that chooses to stay in the *quartier indigène*—away from the other travelers—to set herself apart. There are several other examples that we

will soon see in which Cousturier emphasizes that she is different, including the way she dresses and her attitude toward the native people.

### **A Different Type of Traveler**

An important consideration to any traveler's journey is deciding where to stay. This is especially true for female travelers, whose travels were ultimately linked to their desire for freedom. Finally liberated from the constraints of their own societies, they chose to stay in places away from colonial settlements, often in remote areas. According to Dea Birkett:

Women travellers found in the Dark Continent, the Orient, the Savage Lands, the stage upon which their new experiences as travellers could be realized and a heady sense of freedom ...

Although they had painted, fictionalized, imagined and dreamt of the scenes they saw, these had been but two dimensional pictures on a dabbed canvas or scribbled page. Now they looked out on a tangible world into which they could journey.

(47)

Birkett explains the way in which physical space was tied to women travelers' freedom. These women pushed the limits by journeying further inland, to remote places where they could truly experience independence. This is the case for Cousturier, who begins her trip in Dakar and continues to travel on toward the interior of the continent going as far as the forest of Upper Niger.

Early on in *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, Cousturier emphasizes her preference to lodge in the *quartier indigène* rather than in the same hotels where the other Europeans are staying,

demonstrating her desire to become acquainted with the native people. More generally, living amongst the native people was considered an obligation for the participant-observer in the field of ethnography, who would have better access to the culture given their close proximity to it. Cousturier is reluctant to be associated with other European travelers, especially since she does not want to be regarded as a colonizer. When she arrives in Dakar, Cousturier explains:

Je sais que les hôtels sont pleins. Ce matin déjà, sur le paquebot, des passagers renseignés sur l'encombrement de la ville s'épouvantaient à l'avance de leur sort. Sans doute seraient-ils obligés de coucher à l'hôpital. Des officiers coloniaux galants, généreux, offraient à des dames, à des mères encombrées des enfants, leur chambre en ville. Eux-mêmes iraient coucher au camp. Mes risques doivent être les mêmes que ceux de tous ces débarquants. Cependant, j'ai peine à le croire. Pourquoi mon destin s'identifierait-il à celui de personnes qui durant toute la traversée me furent si étrangères? J'ai la conviction que ce serait injuste. (*Mes Inconnus chez eux* I 9-10)

After the long journey, Cousturier decides to spend an additional night on the ocean liner because she wants her travel experience to be unique. She emphasizes her own individuality when she describes the other passengers as *étrangères*. Moreover, she uses sarcasm to critique the colonial officers when she refers to them as *galants*, *généreux* for offering their homes to the women and children.

Cousturier is immediately drawn to the *quartier indigène* the morning after her arrival in the city. She says, “Tout le quartier indigène qui m’attire résonne encore de prières musulmanes murmurées, psalmodiées, chantées, glapies” (11). While she is in Dakar, she stays with the cousin of one of her former students in the *quartier des artisans* (11). There, she makes the acquaintance of his wife, Fatou, whom Cousturier spends a great deal of time with over the next two weeks.

When Cousturier later arrives in Conakry, she describes how she has given Mamady the task of finding her a place to stay in the *quartier indigène*. She says, “Je l’ai chargé hier, en quittant le paquebot, de me trouver une chambre dans le quartier noir ou je remplirai mieux ma mission officielle d’étude de la vie locale” (34). Indeed, Cousturier is aware that staying in the *quartier indigène* will allow her to better complete her mission. This is due to the ethnographic nature of the mission, to study specific aspects of West African culture. However, she spends her first night in Conakry at the *Grand Hôtel*, which she describes as an overly luxurious establishment that verifies the privilege of her race. She says:

C’est en vain qu’à Paris ou à Nice, par exemple, les hôtels sont plus luxueux; je n’y ai jamais éprouvé comme ici le sentiment de la puissance ... Ma puissance jusqu’à présent n’avait été que très relative et voilà qu’à Conakry, très brusquement, elle se faisait absolue ... Conakry porte tous les Blancs au-dessus de sa population noire ainsi qu’un lac porte les cygnes ... mon privilège m’était confirmé...puisque Dieu lui-même avait pris le soin de la certifier au pinceau sur ma face. (31-32)

While staying at the Grand Hôtel in Conakry, Cousturier recognizes the fact that her race gives her a sense of power which is undeserved. She also recognizes that whereas power is tied to one's class in France, it is overwhelmingly tied to race in Conakry. By means of a stark metaphorical description, Cousturier illustrates the way in which Europeans are viewed as superior to Africans in Conakry. Although Cousturier considers her wish to stay in the *quartier indigène* as harmless, she faces apprehension in response to her unconventional ways.

Cousturier's guide, Mamady, points out that her conduct as a European and as a female is abnormal, drawing criticism from Africans and Europeans alike. He tells Cousturier:

Oh! Ce n'est pas la peine de chercher partout qui m'a fatigué,  
c'est la peine de penser toujours à toutes les vilaines choses  
que les Noirs et les Blancs ont dites après de vous, contre une  
Française qui fait demander sa place dans la ville par un simple  
indigène, au lieu de la faire demander par le Gouverneur, par le  
médecin, par le maire. (22)

Mamady's confession demonstrates the extent to which Cousturier's behavior is uncharacteristic of the typical European traveler. His comments also show that both Africans and Europeans have certain expectations of her, as *une Française*, which are based on her race and gender. After this admission, Cousturier describes feeling upset and crying, perhaps realizing that even abroad there are social boundaries that exist.

In addition to her unique lodging choices, Cousturier distinguishes herself by traveling mainly alone unaccompanied by a large group to attend to her. As noted earlier, the

fact that women travel writers journeyed alone at this time was an indication of the safety colonization had brought to the colonies for whites. However, being alone was also related to women travelers' desire for self-discovery. Birkett argues:

For many women travellers the important element of their journey was the discovery not of a foreign land but of themselves, the exploration not of an unmapped river but of the avenues to forging new horizons for their own personal experience and self-fulfillment. Essential to this experience was the aloneness, meaning separation from European companions, which they celebrated. (133-134)

Cousturier rejoices when she is finally alone after the long journey from France to Dakar, exclaiming “C’est la première fois depuis quinze jours que je suis seule et j’en profite” (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* 10). Later, when Cousturier and her guide Mamady part ways and Cousturier travels alone toward Bamako, she says, “J’occuperai seule avec les quatre laptots et leur patron noir le chaland bâché à l’usage des fonctionnaires en déplacement,” (*Mes Inconnus chez eux II* 5) adding, “L’appréhension que j’avais eue le matin en m’embarquant seule, sans connaître la langue indigène . . . s’est depuis longtemps dissipée” (7). While Cousturier does confess her apprehension about being alone, she gives the reason that it is due to not knowing the native language. She is not afraid to travel with five Laptots who are of the opposite sex. Moreover, she notes that whatever apprehension she did have disappears.

As Cousturier continues on, she decides to travel to Beyla, a trek that will take an additional ten days to accomplish. She boasts of her own bravery when she describes the

shock of one of her European acquaintances at traveling alone with a group of Africans. She says:

Je pense à mon ami, Mme H., à Bougouni, qui s'étonnait que j'aie le courage de partir seule dans un groupe de noirs et de vivre parmi eux plusieurs jours sans voir un Européen. Ce courage, en cours de route, a doublé, puisque je souffre à présent de ne pouvoir, sans passer par Kankan atteindre Beyla avec l'escorte actuelle. (50)

When she informs the men carrying her of her decision to continue on to Beyla she declares, "l'in vraisemblable, c'est déjà moi-même, cette femme qui, sans son mari, court le monde" (51). Cousturier flaunts the fact that she is traveling alone and embraces the experience. She also indicates the freedom that she has she describes traveling the world without her husband. When she tells the postmaster of her intention, he tries to dissuade her when he says, "Vous voulez passez par Kérouané? Seule? Ne faites pas ça! C'est un trajet épouvantable! Et pas de médecin avant Macenta! J'ai pris une fois cet itinéraire en cette saison-ci justement; j'ai failli mourir ... Vous demandez ce que j'ai rencontré de si terrible! Tout! La route, l'eau, la nourriture, la chaleur, la lumière, les moustiques!" (54).

Dea Birkett explains that many female travelers used dress to emphasize their European origins and bolster their authority while traveling alone, yet Cousturier chose to do the opposite. Birkett says:

As women travellers journeyed alone through lands which had been or were under threat of colonization and subjection, it was the colour of their skin, their dress, their identity as Europeans

which held importance ... they exploited and exaggerated these same trappings to their own advantage ... They used them to stress their difference, based on race, from the local populations. (116)

In addition to staying in the *quartier indigène* amongst the native people, Cousturier “goes native” by adopting traditional dress as she travels. Sara Mills describes “going native” as “the way in which certain European travellers and residents abroad adopted the dress and customs of the people of the colonised country, and potentially aligned themselves with that culture.” She also notes that, going native by women travelers, “constitutes both a challenge to male Orientalism and a different form of knowledge about other countries” (98-99). By adopting the local culture, women may gain a better sense of the culture, as opposed to describing it as a non-participatory observer.

Cousturier’s first experience wearing non-European dress occurs while she is in Dakar. Her host’s wife, Fatou, dresses her in traditional West African clothing and Cousturier describes the event in detail. She says:

Pour me vêtir comme elle d’un pagne et d’un boubou, Fatou m’a d’abord engainée, des chevilles aux hanches, dans une pièce d’étoffe bleu clair rayée transversalement de bandes sombres ... Le sommet de ma tête et mon front sont couronnés par mon amie d’un mouchoir orangé ... C’est à l’aise dans ce costume que je le décris. (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* 18)

This experience shows Cousturier's willingness to embrace the culture. Moreover, Cousturier reveals that she remains in the outfit Fatou has dressed her in and feels comfortable wearing it.

Cousturier is aware that her European clothing carries with it the implication that she is playing a role in colonialization. Thus, she chooses to forgo European clothing, opting for an understated dress and cap instead. However, when Cousturier must go to the *magasins français* for French goods, she must change back into her European clothing, which she describes as colonial. She says:

Ce matin, pour y aller, il va falloir que je m'habille moi-même en blanc, en coloniale. Depuis huit jours, j'en ai perdu l'habitude. Je me vêts ordinairement d'une robe-sac en batik bleu et bistre et d'un casque gris. J'ai fait du mimétisme, instinctivement. En changeant de robe aujourd'hui, je crains un peu de paraître déguisée. (48)

Cousturier changes into her European clothing because when she asked Mamady to go to the same stores earlier, he was turned away. In order to ensure a smooth transaction, she decides to wear clothing that will confirm her European identity. When she explains having worn non-European clothing for the past eight days, she suggests the change of habit occurred naturally, instinctively. Cousturier even admits to feeling disguised as she steps out in European clothing since she associates it with the colonizers whom she does not personally identify with.

## Ethnography à la féminine

Once again in an effort to distinguish herself from others, Cousturier separates herself from the field of ethnography amidst a discussion on the West African tradition of circumcision, stating:

Si j'étais un ethnographe j'aurais été ravie de ces rencontres ...

Mais je n'aime pas l'ethnographie. Je l'aimerais si elle n'était qu'une science, même inexacte, comme les autres. Mais elle est un art de trahir les peuples pour les diviser, pire que l'histoire.

Donner la vie de quelques individus pour la vie de tous, c'est la tromperie de l'histoire. Donner les formes collectives de la vie

d'un peuple, pour ce peuple lui-même c'est la trahison bien plus grave de l'ethnographie ... Les coloniaux ethnographes

nous montrent les rites de la circoncision, tous les rites des sociétés nègres en nous disant: voici des nègres, voyez et

touchez et reconnaissez que ce ne sont pas là des hommes!

*(Mes Inconnus chez eux II 62-63)*

Although she does not want to consider herself an ethnographer, her official mission is based on an ethnographic study of the West African family milieu. When she denounces the work of other ethnographers, Cousturier ultimately presents her representation of West African culture as more authentic than theirs. Cousturier does not mention any names in her reproach of ethnography, but she accuses other ethnographers of *tromperie* and *trahison*, purposely misrepresenting cultures to create hierarchies. She may be referring to Arthur de Gobineau, whom she mentions elsewhere in *Des Inconnus chez moi*, a writer who purportedly used

science to substantiate racist claims. In her statement, Cousturier describes how ethnographers specifically use the traditions of other cultures, such as circumcision in West Africa, to judge them. In her own description of circumcision, which is a rite of passage for boys and girls in many of the West African villages she visits, Cousturier avoids critiquing the ritual and focuses on the details of the celebration instead. Cousturier's warning to readers regarding ethnography is justified because of the way in which it was used historically to distort European perceptions of Africans and other non-European peoples. At the same time, the field of ethnography and the methods that were being used to conduct ethnographic studies were changing significantly at the time Cousturier was writing.

At the turn of the century, ethnography was undergoing a transformation in terms of how the ethnographer interacted with the culture being studied and the methods of collecting and presenting information. According to James Clifford, the idea of participant-observation was the new approach ethnographers used to conduct fieldwork (*Writing Culture* 13). As the term suggests, participation-observation requires the ethnographer to engage with the people and culture as much as he/she observes them. Clifford explains how the new participant-observer sought to balance subjectivity and objectivity, but also describes how the two were and will always remain intertwined. He says, "The ethnographer's personal experiences, especially those of participation and empathy, are recognized as central to the research process, but they are firmly restrained by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective' distance" (*The Predicament of Culture* 13). The changes that were occurring in the field of ethnography were taking place in an effort to make the field appear more scientific, and move away from seemingly arbitrary interpretations of other cultures. Clifford goes on to say, in ethnographic writing, "Participant observation obliges its practitioners to

experience ... It requires arduous language learning, some degree of direct involvement and conversation, and often a derangement of personal and cultural expectations” (24). Indeed, the ethnographer must establish an intimate relationship with the culture he/she is studying in order to show the reader his/her work has truth value. We have seen many of the ways Cousturier embodies the new participant-observer such as by staying in the *quartier indigène*, adopting the local dress, and espousing an attitude that set her apart from other Europeans.

However, despite the best efforts of any ethnographer, cultural representations remain problematic because they are creations, based on certain historical and linguistic movements. Clifford explains that, “the historical predicament of ethnography [is] the fact that it is always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures” (*Writing Culture* 2). Clifford goes on to say, “ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders” (2). In other words, it is impossible to give an accurate representation of another culture, in particular, when the accounts are written by someone of another culture. In the end, ethnographic accounts will always reflect the author’s opinions to a certain extent regardless of their intention to remain non-judgmental.

Cousturier anticipates Clifford’s argument regarding the nature of ethnographic work. She recognizes the difficulty of maintaining objectivity in ethnographic work, an objectivity which she refers to as ‘un œil et un microscope innocents’. She says, “À propos d’espèces et de races, (Fabre) assure qu’il n’est profitable de se documenter chez les bons auteurs qu’après avoir regardé soi-même ses modèles avec un œil et un microscope innocents. Et cette innocence est très difficile de sauvegarder” (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* 53). The scientist she

refers to, Jean-Henri Fabre, was a French entomologist known for the distinctive approach he used in his study of insects. His methodology, based on extensive observation, was rooted in his desire for “scientific truth.” Cousturier’s reference to Fabre gives the reader an understanding of Cousturier’s approach in the study she is conducting. She also challenges others’ ethnographic work and describes the need to make one’s own observations rather than relying blindly on other author’s assertions. It is clear that Cousturier wants to remain objective, to preserve her ‘œil innocent’, yet she is unable to do so wholeheartedly, an effort that is ultimately unachievable. Her comments regarding education and the status of women within West African society demonstrate her personal values as a European and as a woman, and do not reflect the traditions or values of the culture she is studying. In addition, she is aware of instances when she willingly accepts the privileges of her race, adopting the role of colonizer and the sense of superiority that goes along with it.

Cousturier betrays her own agenda to resist Eurocentric statements, and unintentionally affirms the superiority of her culture over other non-European cultures. Cousturier’s ideals, including women’s rights and education, are illustrated in *Des Inconnus chez moi* as I presented earlier in this work. The value she places on these matters is echoed once again in *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, when Cousturier explains to the women of Labé the Colonial Administration’s intention to educate girls in the future. Cousturier says:

[J]'explique avec l'assistance de l'interprète que le ministre des Colonies, content de tirailleurs venus en France, m'a envoyée pour saluer leurs mères ... Le ministre des Colonies espère bien qu'un peu plus tard toutes les petites filles de la belle ville de Labé iront à l'école comme les garçons. Elles n'hésitent pas à

me répondre que ... toutes les femmes foula seront enchantées  
de lui obéir. (82)

In addition to confirming that she is there on behalf of the Colonial Administration, Cousturier affirms her own role as an advocate of these concerns. When she discusses the Colonial Administration's desire to teach girls, she is passing on a message in which European values are privileged over those of the native people. Cousturier does not consider that the European conception of education for girls is not part of West African tradition, believing that it is an institution that should be universally embraced. She also fails to recognize that schools set up by the Colonial Administration may force young Africans to accept European values and strengthen France's control over its West African colonies. Moreover, Cousturier states that the women of Labé are delighted to obey the desires of the Colonial Administration, which reflects the patronizing relationship between the administrators and the native people. In fact, when Cousturier returns to France, she conveys the need for the expansion of education for girls in France's colonies in her official report.

In that report, Cousturier describes the plight of women in West Africa to the Minister of Colonies. She equates the status of women in West Africa to their lack of formal education and believes attending school would elevate their status and solve other problems in the colonies. She says, "Si la masse indigène s'enrichissait, les filles ne seraient plus vendues en bas âge et elles fréquenteraient l'école, les gros commerçants noirs, instruisant leurs fils, tacheraient à en faire des spécialistes, à certaines industries, sciences ou arts" (*Mes Inconnus chez eux II* 170). Although Cousturier appreciates West African culture, the system she describes, built upon access to economic opportunities and education, replicates the organization of European civilization. In other words, Cousturier still believes France can

help its colonies even though she has seen firsthand the devastation of the culture the administration has caused.

**“Je ne suis pas conquérante...”**

Although Cousturier unintentionally exposes her Eurocentric views, she maintains that she is not a conqueror, explorer, or colonizer. Her disassociation from these three roles is significant for several reasons. First, by denying that she is a conqueror, explorer, or colonizer, she is rejecting roles that are perceived as masculine. In addition, she shows she is unaffected by her position of superiority. She refuses to present herself as being in West Africa for the same reasons as colonizers; she does not want to dominate anyone or anything. Cousturier says, “Il y a des personnes en France qui me prennent pour une vaillante exploratrice. Ils s’abusent. Je ne conquiers rien, je suis plus ou moins conquise” (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* 51). Cousturier’s statement demonstrates her awareness of the ideas associated with the male explorer. Yet, as a woman, she does not want to be associated with the masculine character who is ultimately in search of something to conquer. She flatly denies embodying the traits of the male explorer and instead presents herself as vulnerable when she turns the accusation around and refers to herself as being conquered. This sentiment is echoed once again when she says, “C’est en vain que je compare mon inadaptation physique à l’aventure, inverse, d’un poisson retiré de l’eau” (33). Unlike the bold and adventuring male explorer, Cousturier describes being unable to adventure. However, she is inconsistent in her self-descriptions for reasons of ideology. While at times she describes herself as being capable of adventure (staying in the *quartier indigène*,

traveling alone) she also contradicts herself by saying she is unable to adventure at other points in time.

Cousturier presents herself and the way she acts in the villages in direct contrast to that of the bold masculine explorer and conqueror. Her actions are also connected to her role as a participant-observer, who does not want to significantly alter the way of life in the villages. She illustrates her intention to remain obscure when she describes her arrival in Kindia. Rather than officially announcing her arrival, which other European travelers have the tendency of doing, Cousturier prefers to be inconspicuous. The native people learn that there is a European in their village gradually later that day. She says, “Peu à peu, au cours de la journée, le quartier a pris conscience d’une présence imprévue en son sein. J’y suis tombée comme un aérolithe tandis que les Blancs, d’ordinaire, se font annoncer. Mon étrange attitude aimante une curiosité légère, individuelle” (68). When Cousturier describes her presence in these terms, she portrays herself as unique in comparison to other Europeans. In other words, her behavior allows her to have authentic interactions with the people and culture and produce a narrative that is more accurate than others’. Cousturier continues by describing the advantages of her behavior. She says, “Hier encore, à Kindia, où je n’étais pas annoncée, j’éprouvais avec joie la spontanéité des contacts avec les indigènes” (70). Once again, Cousturier states that she is unlike the masculine explorers and conquerors she has been compared to and reiterates the authenticity of her study. She also highlights that she is able to have real encounters with the native people because she is able to eliminate the feeling of superiority other Europeans openly embrace and exhibit.

However, Cousturier admits acting like a colonizer when fatigue overcomes her. When she arrives in Diangana, Sudan, she watches the inhabitants clean and prepare her

lodging and then line up to bring her a succession of gifts. She offsets the patronizing role through this confession and admitting a feeling of shame. She declares:

[V]oici la première fois depuis mon arrivée en Afrique, que j'interviens activement, autoritairement, dans la vie nègre, en coloniale. Durant mon séjour à Conakry j'étais restée perdue dans la foule indigène sans avouer de titre qui me recommandât à elle, sans relations et sans prestige ... En ce temps-là je pouvais donc juger de très haut les Blancs en fonctions ... Mais aujourd'hui je venais de prendre parti justement pour ce destin ... J'en étais honteuse. De cet homme qui avait tremblé devant moi j'avais tiré de la gloire et de la magnanimité personnelles.

(116)

Cousturier recognizes her position of superiority in relation to the native people and yet she attempts to neutralize it by declaring her shame to the reader. Rather than seeming like a colonizer, she distinguishes herself from them via her self-awareness.

Once again, she admits feeling ashamed as she is being carried in a hammock through the brush. She says:

Mes privilèges avaient été trop flagrants; je me croyais devenue précieuse comme un blessé. Au milieu de la nature africaine, j'avais trop vécu en être d'exception, traité comme tel dans un exceptionnel décor. Cela m'avait donné, au lieu du sentiment de force et d'autorité répandu chez mes congénères, une sensation de faiblesse" (*Mes Inconnus chez eux II* 32-33)

Whereas other Europeans would have felt powerful as a result of being carried by others in a hammock, Cousturier dislikes the association with the colonizer. Of course, the weakness she describes is connected to her physical inability to complete the rigorous journey rather than the superior-inferior relationship between Europeans and non-Europeans.

### **No Longer Her Children**

In *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, Cousturier breaks from the maternal role she assumed throughout *Des Inconnus chez moi*. While Cousturier embraced playing the role of the mother-figure to the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in France, it is no longer suitable to adopt this role as she is working to undo the patronizing attitudes of Europeans toward Africans. Moreover, she recognizes that the *tirailleurs* she taught in France during the war, whom she referred to as children in *Des Inconnus chez moi*, because they are now in their own space. When Cousturier sees Ghibi, whom she often describes in childlike terms in her first work, she says, “Ghibi est un de mes anciens élèves noirs. Avant de quitter Fréjus, trois ans auparavant, il était un jeune et élégant ordonnance ... Aujourd’hui c’est un solide paysan barbu ... J’ai eu de la peine à le reconnaître” (27). Difficult to recognize, Ghibi is no longer the youth Cousturier remembers from France. Besides the fact that the *tirailleurs* have grown up since she last saw them, Cousturier also recognizes that referring to them as children only serves to strengthen the notion of African inferiority.

In several statements, Cousturier acknowledges that calling Africans children is used by the Colonial Administration to reinforce their superiority over them. She warns the reader about the implications of calling individuals children based on their belief systems. She says

that, others have asked, “Pourquoi donc regretter ces primitifs cruels, ces enfants attardés, sournois?” and Cousturier responds:

Lorsqu'on dit 'enfant' d'un primitif, il faudrait bien savoir de qui ou de quoi l'on parle. Ne fait-on pas de confusion entre l'individu et la cellule sociale déformante où il est muré? Parmi mes chers parents et amis j'en connais dont les certitudes: la foi, les fois, ne doivent rien à la raison. Dois-je les qualifier d'enfants? Faut-il qualifier d'enfants tous les mystiques, tous les suggestionnés par la magie de l'autorité et de la religion? Et faut-il les traiter comme l'Europe traite les Noirs? Ce serait logique. (136-137)

Cousturier uses logic to explain why it is nonsensical to call Africans children based solely on their religious beliefs. She criticizes religion in general when she compares West African mysticism to European religions, which she implies are equally irrational. She describes belief systems as being tied to larger cultural structures and explains why they cannot be used to make judgements about individuals, or that the same argument must also be applied to Europeans who subscribe to a certain faith. She ultimately attempts to show that there is no inherent difference between the two cultures.

### **Africanist Discourse**

Christopher Miller explains Africanist discourse as practices in which French and other Europeans create their own conception of Africa (2). Miller traces the history of the word Africa and describes how it changed from referring to a small area around Carthage to

being used to designate a whole continent. He says, “From this moment on ‘Africa’ will be a trope—a part for a whole or a whole for a part—recounting a colonial history, designating a difference” (10). By looking at the etymology of the word Africa, Miller shows how place names have been invented and are used to represent difference. That its name either meant sunny, dusty, or colony in Latin, Hebrew and ancient Phoenician are three hypotheses, but for Miller, the importance is that each one implies a difference and in opposition to another place (10-12). Miller compares and contrasts Africanist discourse to Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. Both Orientalist and Africanist discourse set the West against an Other, non-European culture. Said explains:

Orientalism is never far from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and Cultures.

(7)

The idea of using the Other as a way to measure Europe’s self functions the same in Africanist discourse and Orientalism. Miller says the difference is based on the fact that Europeans have seen Africa as a blank space onto which they have projected their own ideas about Africa. Miller describes the three-part relationship as one in which Africa becomes a blank space, cancelled out by the dualistic nature of the Occident/Orient association. He says, “Africa often occurs as the third part in cultural hierarchies, but, from the moment it is

spoken, 'Africa' is subsumed by one of the other two. In the relationship between the self and the other, the third is null" (16).

Although Cousturier wants to give readers an authentic portrayal of Africa and its people, many of her descriptions rely on tropes that were first created in ancient times and reproduced in European literature about Africa through the centuries. These tropes include the notion of darkness and the idea that Africa is an unclaimed space that Europeans can conquer. Although Cousturier subscribes to Africanist discourse in her work, she undermines the ideas of darkness and emptiness in her attempt to provide a different representation of Africa and African people. For example, in Dakar she describes being overwhelmed by the abundance of color around her. She says, "Où donc la couleur est-elle la plus vive, la plus forte ici? Dans le ciel rose, les terrains orangés tachés d'herbe émeraude, les mouchoirs bigarrés des femmes, les bâtisses multicolores? J'ai le vertige au milieu de la rue parce que les sons m'y aveugle autant que les murs vermillons" (*Mes Inconnus chez eux I* 11). In addition, her focus consistently remains on the people she is learning about. There is rarely a sense of emptiness that Miller describes, because she emphasizes the culture and lives of West Africa.

In addition to her painterly descriptions, Cousturier portrays Africans in paintings she worked on while traveling. One of her paintings, titled *Femme Kissienne*, is a portrait of a Kissi woman she likely met while staying in her village. The painting is in the same Post-Impressionist style seen in many of her works. It is not nor was it intended to be a lifelike representation, but rather a fleeting glimpse captured in time. The woman in the painting is posed sitting on a stool with her head positioned slightly to the right, the same direction as her gaze. She is using her right hand to hold the seat of the stool while the left hand is lying

in her lap. She is fully dressed in a flowing red top and black skirt and is also adorned with a matching headdress and two simple bracelets on either wrist. There is a noticeable void in the background of this painting and there are no objects present besides the stool the woman is sitting on. This absence serves to emphasize the woman in the painting as opposed to any other objects which could take on significance and lead to assumptions about the woman. Instead, the viewer comes face to face with the woman in the painting and must consider her in and of herself.

By choosing to paint a portrait of the woman, rather than depict her amongst a group of villagers, Cousturier establishes the woman's individuality. Indeed, depictions of Africans at this time tending to be of large groups and failed to show their individuality. In addition, by painting her portrait, Cousturier demonstrates that she shared an intimate moment with the woman. Similar to her descriptions of Africa and Africans in *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, Cousturier's *Femme Kissienne* is a colorful representation that illustrates her vision of Africa, different from the "Blank Darkness" Miller describes.

## **Reception of Cousturier's Work**

Before *Mes Inconnus chez eux* was published in its entirety, sections of it appeared in the publication *Les Cahiers d'Aujourd'hui*. In addition, Cousturier submitted her official report to the Minister of Colonies on August 26, 1921 following her return to France. Cousturier's work exposes the negative treatment of West Africans in the French colonial structure and as a result, her work received mixed reviews from her contemporaries that were in line with their political agendas. René Maran, the first black writer to receive the prestigious *Prix Goncourt* in 1921, praised Cousturier's work in an article titled *La Harriet*

*Beecher Stowe française* written for *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* in 1925. In his article, he stresses the truth value of Cousturier's work when he says, "ayant été moi-même fonctionnaire colonial, je sais de première main que dans ses livres il n'y a ni mensonge, ni exagération, ni déclaration inexacte" (xxxv). On the other hand, some accused Cousturier of bolchevism, an allegation that damaged her reputation after the publication of her works (Boittin 201).

Cousturier and her literary contributions had been forgotten until recently, despite being relatively well-known in her day. Jean-Marie Volet gives three reasons as to why this is so. First, he notes her gender undoubtedly played a part in her being overlooked, but that other reasons far outweigh this one. Second, he explains that her political ideology and pacifism were viewed negatively after the war. Indeed, Volet explains that pacifists were considered defeatists and traitors by their compatriots after the fighting ended. Finally, he argues that her anti-colonialist views and rejection of racist theories were not well-received by the French government leading to "her work being buried with her" (48-50). While each of Volet's reasons is accurate, her gender plays a larger role than Volet is willing to admit. This is supported by the fact that male writers, such as Gide, who shared some Cousturier's progressive and anti-colonialist ideas, have not been forgotten and have been celebrated for their courageous opinions.

## CONCLUSION

As Cousturier returns from the Upper Niger, she acknowledges others' perceptions of her. She says:

Sauf exceptions, les indigènes m'ont accueillie avec plus de méfiance qu'à mon arrivée et les Européens avec plus de confiance. Les indigènes pensent que mon contact répété avec des coloniaux a dû me faire perdre l'âme métropolitaine dont ils avaient plus à espérer. Les Européens, au contraire, pensent que j'ai acquis dans la brousse ce sentiment confortable de puissance, de domination, qui dispose à voir sous un angle péjoratif les actes des 'sujets' français. (*Mes Inconnus chez eux* II 144)

At the end of *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, Cousturier reiterates the same message she has communicated throughout her work. After nearly a year traveling in West Africa and having countless interactions with the native people, Cousturier insists upon her original theory—that Europeans need stop accepting prevalent stereotypes about non-Europeans as true and make their own judgements based on real interactions rather than hearsay.

Lucie Cousturier's two major works, *Des Inconnus chez moi* and *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, demonstrate the ways in which she navigated relationships with an unknown culture, and how she dealt with and presented herself within the colonial structure. In her first work, Cousturier, intrigued by the *tirailleurs sénégalais* who are training next to her home in Fréjus, becomes a teacher and mother-figure to them, which allows her to discover the transplanted West African culture of France's colonies. She confronts the undesirable treatment of the *tirailleurs* in France, based on their skin color, and the historically negative stereotypes of Africans that inform European perceptions of them. However, Cousturier ultimately presents herself as playing a role in France's colonial agenda by teaching the

*tirailleurs* French. This is not to say that Cousturier is aware of her role, but she clearly values European conceptions of education and privileges the French language over others when she describes it as a tool of power that will benefit the *tirailleurs*. Moreover, while the feminine roles she assumes are a reflection of the feminine discourse of her time, Cousturier inadvertently reinforces the superior-inferior relationship between the two cultures when she takes on the roles of teacher and mother-figure and refers to the soldiers as children or as child-like. In *Mes Inconnus chez eux*, Cousturier attempts to reinvent French perceptions of West Africans and humanizing them by emphasizing their individuality.

Shortly after the war, Cousturier makes her journey to West Africa, a journey that has many motivations. Officially traveling on behalf of the Colonial Administration, Cousturier carries out a study on West African women and their role in child rearing and documents the struggles created by the patriarchal attitude of the French administration toward the native people. Although she heavily critiques the effects of colonization, she still offers ways France can help West Africans, whose way of life has been heavily transformed under French rule. Cousturier's role changes in her second work—she no longer presents herself as a teacher or mother-figure, and recognizes that infantilizing Africans is inappropriate when she sees how Colonial Administrators use the designation to display their own superiority. She navigates two conflicting discourses, the masculine discourse of travel writing and imperialism and the feminine discourse that manifests itself in her writing based on her gender. She does so by differentiating herself from other travelers and by disassociating herself from the masculine notion of the explorer through emphasizing her vulnerability and modesty.

It is my goal that this work will serve to give others not only a presentation of Lucie Cousturier's literary works and travels, but an understanding of how she dealt with her identity as a woman, writer, and traveler and interpreted West African culture at the height of French colonization. Furthermore, I hope that this work can be used in conjunction with work that has already been done regarding female travel writing to give a more complete picture of the genre. I also hope to have addressed Sara Mills' call to "[explore] the possibilities of interpreting this writing within its period and its discursive constraints...to take these texts seriously, not simply to reduce them to biographical studies of exceptional spinsters" (5-6). Indeed, it is the intent of this work to give life to the experiences of women writers and their literary endeavors within the history and study of literature.

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