Starting in the late 1980s the far-reaching results of colonialism accelerated France’s identity crisis to a point where the nation today is at odds with its colonial past, confused by its present situation, and uncertain as to its future. Capturing the significance of France’s reaction to its current milieu, Duncan Petrie states: “The onus is placed on France to recognise the multicultural realities of its modern society and to dismantle the structures of institutionalised racism . . . The legacy of post-colonialism is this virtual transformation of cultural identity in the heartland of nineteenth-century imperialism.”

France’s recent films have focused on efforts to negotiate its shifting cultural identity in the attempt to reconfigure different notions of “Frenchness.” National identity crises, such as France’s, dually elicit “opportunities for the state to activate its strategies of containment and to reimpose its normativities” and offer “dissenting subjects the possibility of producing contestatory practices, narratives of resistance that may reconfigure . . . ‘the political.’” Addressing “strategies of containment” and “narratives of resistance,” three French films, Indochine (Régis Wargnier, 1992), Chocolat (Claire Denis, 1988), and Chaos (Coline Serreau, 2001), articulate varying constructions of post-colonial France and its struggle for a new identity. Here I take the term “post-colonial” to imply more than a temporal dimension; it applies to structural positions in which the former colonizing power continues to dominate while it is simultaneously confronted with the increasing and increasingly visible power of the formerly colonized ‘other.’

France’s identity crisis began to crystallize in the 1980s when a convergence of factors pushed the country’s changing face to the forefront of the society’s consciousness. In 1981 newly elected socialist President Mitterand decreed that the immigrant workers from the former colonies had the right to be reunited with their families and to live with them on French soil, thus creating the second generation of French immigrants. As immigration increased, so too did paranoia, bringing a return of the extreme Right led by Jean Marie Le Pen with slogans such as “Let’s Keep France for the French” (“La France aux Français”). In light of the new cultural policy promoted by Jack Lang, Mitterand’s Minister of Culture, the film community was encouraged to produce pictures of ‘high quality’ that addressed French history. The historical, ‘high quality’ films are best exemplified by the so-called heritage films, which follow in the “tradition de qualité,” are classical in form, emphasize production values and stars, place visual pleasures over narrative ones, and privilege the visual arts as a subject. With Lang at the helm, the heritage films addressed well-known periods in French history such as the Revolution and the Reign of Terror. At the end of the decade, as Mitterand and the Socialists slipped from power, attention shifted from France’s past in general and turned towards the moment of decolonization and the collapse of the French Empire.

The three films, Indochine, Chocolat, and Chaos call attention to two primary places of identity formation, distinct, yet overlapping: the female and the cultural ‘other.’ All the three narratives explore France’s hegemonic
dominance, by confronting the positioning of the cultural ‘other’ in its colonial past and in its post-colonial present, as they intertwine with an investigation of the positioning and role of women. Engaging with prevailing feminist and cultural discourses on the structuring of power in the era of European colonialism, and the continuing consequences thereof, these films employ the trope of “nation-as-woman” to depict France’s relations with the colonial and post-colonial cultural ‘other.’ The idea of the cultural ‘other’ refers to the modern notion of European identity as defined in relation to the world beyond it. This idea rests, in a large part, on Edward Said’s conceptualization of Orientalism, which he describes as “a will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different . . . world.”

Europe’s interactions with and representations of these “different worlds” serve to create and solidify an “idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying ‘us’ Europeans as against all ‘those’ non-Europeans.” This definition of European identity generated a position of dominance, which evolved into the pervasive hegemony of European culture both in and outside the continent. With European culture placed as the crux of the modern world that climaxed in the nineteenth-century, the cultural ‘other’ came to be represented, in European thought, by “its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability.”

The nation-state, as constructed in the nineteenth-century, came to be associated with the image of woman, in such a way that “the power of the nation is invoked... couched as a love of country: an eroticized nationalism.” France provides a prime example of this eroticized nationalism with Marianne, the gorgeously enticing woman who serves as the personification of the nation. The media, particularly films, perpetuate this analogy of nation-as-woman as “an erotic investment in the national romance,” by representing the “image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal.” In this patriarchal structuring, there emerges a sexual imbalance in the evocative power of the concept of “homeland,” for, as George Mosse states, “nationalism had a special affinity for male society and together with the concept of respectability legitimized the dominance of men over women.” The image of nation-as-woman, as represented by tropes of ideal femininity such as mother and daughter, has served as an ideological tool with which the European patriarchal order “legitimized” its position of power in relation to the world beyond as well as the hierarchy within, where men were acting as agents while women came to be the objects of that agency. Since the female and the cultural ‘other’ occupy similar positions as those against which the European patriarchal identity defines itself, the two frequently coalesce in cultural representations of Europe. The filmic representations offered by Indochine, Chocolat, and Chaos invoke the trope of nation-as-woman in order to enter into a discourse upon, and present a depiction of the cultural ‘other.’
Indochine, emerging in 1991, first represents France through actress Catherine Deneuve who is strongly identified as a symbol of France, not just in terms of her star presence, but also because she has been the model for Marianne, the personification of France. As wealthy, landowning Éliane Devries, a self-described “Asiate” who, born and raised in Indochina, identifies highly with that culture while still maintaining an undeniable association with the bourgeois, European colonialist culture, she embodies the nation as mother. She entertains a maternal relationship with her “coolies,” with her young lover Jean-Baptiste (Vincent Perez), and, most importantly, with her adopted Indochinese daughter Camille (Linh Dan Pham) who, representing colonized Indochina, struggles between the hegemonic European identity she has been raised in and the identity of her native people. In Chocolat, France is represented by the aptly named France (Mireille Perrier), a young woman who returns to Africa to visit her childhood home. The majority of the film centers upon a flashback where young France (Cécile Ducasse) leads the spectator into the tail-end of colonial life, a life in which the young girl occupies the feminine trope of daughter; yet, this depiction of dutiful daughter is complicated by France’s relationship with her servant, Protée (Isaach De Bankolé), the African houseboy, who in his turn serves as a surrogate father. Leaving the colonial era for contemporary Paris, Chaos’s France is split between Hélène (Catherine Frot), a white, bourgeois wife and mother, and Malika (Rachida Brakni), a Maghrebian prostitute whose double life comes to represent the complex identity positioning of the post-colonial cultural ‘other,’ an ‘other’ who now calls the heart of French culture home. Through the construct of nation-as-woman and its interactions with the ex-colonies, Indochina, West Africa, Algeria, these films illustrate France’s various relations with its colonial and post-colonial ‘others.’

The inferior positioning of females and cultural ‘others’ can be grounded in psychoanalytic terms and the prevailing theories on the psychological construction of “difference,” a construction that further impacts the cultural representations of these two ‘others.’ In developing the castration theory, Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan pointed to a “reading of an absence” where instead there is “difference;” since the mother’s difference is perceived as the absence of a penis, “difference” is equated with “lack,” originally the lack of penis. The culture constructed by the psychology of the European male endowed the “lack” with broader societal and cultural connotations: when talking of the “feminine penetrability” of the cultural ‘other,’ the difference of the ‘other’ is read, and justified, as lack of masculinity. Because the female and the cultural ‘other’ are inherently different, both belonging to “a manifestly different . . . world,” they are perpetually deemed as “lacking” in the dominant patriarchal culture’s view; the consequence of which is twofold. Firstly, the dominant culture wants to put a “fullness” in place of a “lack” by resorting to a fetish, so that the object . . . can be desirable again without excessive fear.” This substantiates the European hegemonic position that the two ‘others’ are in need of being fulfilled by the superior European patriarchal culture, a belief that is held so persistently that even the ‘others’ come to accept it. Secondly, the female and the cultural ‘other’ defy such attempts at fullness and constantly stand as threats to the dominant culture.

Strategies of fetishism and narrative containment are at work in the films considered here. Before the narratives even begin, the cultural ‘others,’ Camille, Protée, and Malika, have their difference neutralized and their lack fulfilled, through their adoption of the hegemonic European culture, where, by accepting the cultural traits of the European colonizers, they present less of a difference and are thus more acceptable to the dominant culture. Camille, raised in a colonialist, bourgeois household, bears almost no trace, aside from her physical appearance, of her native cultural ‘otherness;’ Protée, although more problematic, in the beginning dresses like the Europeans, speaks like the Europeans, and lives within the European realm in
Africa, in the home of the French colonizers; Malika, as the post-colonial ‘other’ who now participates in French society in France, is, like Camille, so ingrained in the hegemonic culture that she is barely recognizable as an ‘other’ by her physical appearance, for she is, in the traditional style of the acceptable ‘other,’ beautifully light-skinned. The cinematic techniques employed by the films further the fetishism of each of these ‘others.’ Camille’s desirability is highlighted by the mediation of her lover Jean-Baptiste’s tender gazes and through overt displays of her beauty, such as when she tangos with her mother. Protée, played, not coincidentally, by a very attractive actor, becomes an object to behold when France’s mother Aimée (Giulia Boschi) does so with her friends who praise the beauty of her houseboy and in a scene where the camera foregrounds his naked body as he baths. The spectator repeatedly watches Malika, who is skimpily and seductively dressed in her role as a prostitute through a large portion of the film, through the leering gaze of the many men who want to possess her, which bluntly reveals the fetishizing of both the cultural ‘other’ and the female.

Since the cultural representations both reflect and produce power, attention must be paid to whom the power of the site of identification is given and to whom the power of the gaze and the voice is given. Narratives of resistance can emerge only when these powers are granted to those that occupy inferior positions, when they can serve as more than “raw material” in a patriarchal hierarchy. Specifically, Stuart Hall calls for representations that establish “new kinds of subjects,” ones who place “the dialogue of power and resistance . . . rather than being forever placed by it.” Indochine, Chocolat, and Chaos seem to endow the female and the cultural ‘other’ with more power, since these are presented as central agents within the narrative; do they, however, reconfigure these ‘others’ as true subjects on their own? The three narratives are all grounded into the context of post-colonial France, a context that is ripe for a re-alignment of the power players and possibly for new subjects. Each of these films responds to their specific historical moments, and might offer the opportunity for a transformation of the hegemonic power through a redefinition of French identity in a post-colonial era.

As mentioned earlier, Indochine’s Deneuve epitomizes France in her role of mother; she is the ‘protectorate’ of her workers, the adoptive mother of Camille, the maternal substitute for Jean-Baptiste, and, eventually, the surrogate mother to Camille’s son. While the film, through forcing the audience to identify with a woman, presents the opportunity for a narrative that challenges the hegemonic European patriarchal order, it ultimately fails to deliver a narrative of resistance, presenting instead a melodramatic endorsement of the beauty and glory of French colonialism. Thus, it reasserts nostalgia for the empire and fulfills the essence of a heritage film as one that privileges “aesthetic values rather than political content.” Although placing Deneuve’s Éliane as the site of identification could have reversed the narrative power, she is instead trapped in the pacifying role of mother, made a fetish by the film’s insistence on her beauty (as all of Indochina is presented in its fetishized picturesque beauty), and ultimately ‘saved’ through her return to the actual homeland, France. She may identify herself with the Asian culture, but this only reinforces the colonialist position of having assimilated Indochina; as a landowning,
bourgeois French white lady, she upholds the bastions of colonial European culture just as she upholds the bastions of colonial European power through her dedicated maintenance of her rubber plantation.

As Éliane personifies the protective mother, the film, conversely, denies Camille the honor of motherhood, and thus refuses Indochina the love that goes with the role. Camille’s narrative could also have been one of resistance; instead it turns into a disavowal of her potential power. Raised in the hegemonic European culture, Camille rejects this identity for solely personal reasons when she departs to find Jean-Baptiste. Although on this journey she finds her ‘native’ identity and takes up the political causes of her country, her ‘native’ identity possesses no power, for it is Éliane who, through the power of her voice, narrates Camille’s discovery while the camera further undermines it by simultaneously fetishizing the glorious countryside. Similarly, the political causes of her adhesion are de-politicized, for she accidentally realizes them while on her search for her white love, which continues to tie her to the European culture, and for whom she would have abandoned her country’s cause and her country if he had not been captured just before they could enter China. The climax of the refutation of her power occurs when, just released from prison, she tells Éliane to raise her son for she is going off with the Communists to fight for her country. This scene revokes Camille’s right to motherhood at the moment when she identifies with her country. The power of the future, as posited in the child, is bestowed upon France, as the child is given to Éliane, while Indochina, as Camille adopts the identity of her country, she loses the power of motherhood. The potential political challenge of Camille’s identification with her country fails to be achieved, for although she tells Éliane that her Indochina is no more, she also tells her to take her son to France so that he may be happy and will not find out about his mother’s suffering. In wishing her son to be happy in France and regretting all that she has suffered, Camille reveals that she would bring back the old Indochina if she could, that she would trade her country’s freedom for the former happiness of European colonialism. Her longing for those happy times cancels any force in her new identification and reinforces the European hegemony.

While the 1980s saw an older generation of directors, like Indochine’s Régis Wargnier, who perpetuated a colonialist construction of the histories of oppressed peoples, the era also produced a younger generation of directors who attempted to construct new identities by “re-telling” the colonial past, that is by producing narratives and identities from positions outside the dominant patriarchal culture. Claire Denis’s Chocolat (1988) belongs to this younger generation; although released three years prior to Indochine, the film deconstructs many of the problems that Indochine reinforces. Despite the fact that, as mentioned before, Protée’s dress, speech, and position within the French household seem to indicate his assimilation, the film, in contrast to Camille’s shallow identity issues, effectively depicts his struggle in trying to balance this identity with his native one, for he also appears in native dress, speaks his native language, and belongs to the African/servant section of the household. The film articulates his resistance through provocative juxtapositions; after having set the table for the Dalens, complete with white tablecloth, he kneels beside young

Protée (Isaach de Bankolé) and young France (Cécile Ducasse) in Chocolat (Claire Denis, 1988)
France and eats several live moths. This recalls and reverses a previous scene in which young France had him kneel and eat her soup; for, instead of lowering himself to her demands of participating in her culture, he proactively enters her space to affirm his. The dynamic of the relationship between Protée and young France provides the momentum for much of the film’s social commentary, for both are inferior within the hierarchical order, one as the colonized, cultural ‘other’ and one, not only as a female, but as a female child, yet who still, by grace of her Frenchness, ranks above the ‘other.’ Protée eventually comes to claim his power, or at least draw a line in his level of submission, when he tosses out a European nomad and when he refuses France’s mother Aimié’s sexual advance. Even more poignantly, having been banished from the house, he refuses to answer France’s question of whether or not the machinery is hot, and instead teaches her the power of acquiring knowledge herself, even if it involves suffering; for yes, the machinery is hot, but Protée would rather they both be burned by it so that France may learn the lesson well. Protée serves as a surrogate father to France, whereby the film subtly discusses the possibility of the African ‘other’ as father, and proposes a disquieting reconfiguration of the family with Protée in the place of the French, white, bourgeois patriarch.

Unusual cinematic techniques challenge previous portrayals of colonialism; most notably, the position of the gaze is complicated as the female child is granted the power role of the subject and as Protée inhabits an ambiguous space that is beyond the role of object but not fully a role of subject. Whereas Indochine maintained an objectifying gaze at Deneuve even though she was the narrative subject, Chocolat actually introduces the gaze of France from her first scene, where the now older France watches an African father and son play in the ocean, which may well trigger the memory of her African father. Protée’s ambiguous positioning is also located in his first scene. The spectator does not view him through the eyes of the colonial mother and father, who are relegated to another part of the truck; instead, she watches from the rear-view with Protée and France, who are lying in the bed of the truck as they lean against the cabin’s glass window and look at the land rush behind them. While the subject who gazes at the road is most likely France, this is also Protée’s gaze. Thus, while he may not have the full power of subject, he is not merely an object. Even the scene described earlier, which fetishized Protée’s bathing body, complicates the objectifying gaze, since here the fetish is desexualized and thus may retain some of its power. The spectator gazes at Protée’s body, but, as Aimié and France pass behind him, Protée expresses humiliation at being seen by them; observing Protée’s humiliation, the spectator becomes aware of his own objectifying gaze, and the pleasure derived is lessened.

However, Chocolat achieves only partial success in presenting a narrative of resistance. Tellingly, the film resists representing a fetishized land to some degree, avoiding the lush settings of Indochine and focusing on the vast, dry African desert; yet, the land becomes fetishized anyway, for it is innately magnificent in its vastness. Although the ‘others’ occupy positions beyond simple objectification, one of them, whose story the film recounts, is the good daughter, who ultimately does not resist her role. This role may be problematized by the role of the cultural ‘other’ as a surrogate father, but the film does not fully seize the power of subverting patriarchy; for in the end Protée refuses Aimié and thus refuses total assimilation, whereas the adult France is fully assimilated into the colonial culture.

In the end, France does not serve as the catalyst for change and resistance; in fact, she never does much of anything, standing primarily as “a bystander, an invisible onlooker.”18 This position of “bystander” allows the film to present an admirable and ambiguous narrative, asking the spectator to make connections and derive meanings. The film is framed as a personal narrative, as the flashback of the adult France; yet, France nev-
er possesses the power of the voice. Barely speaking throughout the film, she never comments on the situation, nor articulates the effect of it all. The end, with France returning to the country, France, and not being able to visit her childhood home, clearly illustrates that contemporary France has no place in Africa: the two cannot be reunited. Yet, the film goes further and raises questions as to the nature of “home.” Plagued by a longing for her childhood home, no longer existing for her, and the “home” she is returning to, France itself, which cannot be called her home, France the protagonist of Chocolat is in between homes. She cannot be equated with a single location and one unitary identity; neither can she be neatly encapsulated in the colonial opposition of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ In the end the film falls short of an authoritative “re-telling” of the past. However, through the open narrative and the many identity questions that are raised, Chocolat does offer a contemplative and progressive re-visioning of the past, where the colonial constructions are consciously examined.

In the 1990s France became increasingly fractured in the political realm due to an increase of both the support for the Right and the numbers of disenfranchised immigrants. A seminal moment in the heated cultural atmosphere occurred in 1997 when the National Assembly was debating the conservative Debré immigration law which would require sans-papiers immigrants to declare themselves to their town hall; joining in the protestations, a large community of prominent directors signed multiple petitions voicing their support for the sans-papiers. This sans-papiers movement brought about the ‘retour du politique,’ a rekindling of a past tradition of political involvement and social consciousness within the French cinema. It is in such a context that Coline Serreau’s Chaos (2001) addresses the problematic post-colonial positioning of both the female and the cultural ‘other’ of the second-generation immigrant. Chaos’s first site of identification is what seems to be the female main character Hélène, which seems to be empowered by being the subject of the narrative. Hélène represents France in her role as a white, bourgeois wife and mother; yet, these roles limit and confine her, leading her to seek a variation in her life, a variation which she finds in the cultural ‘other.’ The cultural ‘other’ appears in Malika, a young Maghrebian prostitute. In the beginning, Malika bangs for help on the car of Hélène and her husband Paul; they lock their car doors against her and leave her to be beaten by the three nefarious men from whom she was running. In a quest for redemption, Hélène finds, nurtures, and protects Malika, after which, Malika reveals that there is more to her: she is not actually Malika, as her name is also Noémie. As the post-colonial cultural ‘other’ of the second-generation immigrant, Chaos’s Malika brilliantly reflects the many contradictions such an identity is constructed upon. In fact Noémie is a French citizen complete with a French passport; the narrative, reminiscent of the sans-papiers movement, repeatedly stresses the importance of possessing a passport as proof of identity, and much...
of the story is being driven by Noémie’s need to reclaim her hidden passport. Noémie was raised in French schools and instilled with the values of modernization; Noémie claims her French identity and her power as an individual by refusing to be married off and sent back to her ‘homeland,’ as a consequence she loses the support of her family and her identity as Noémie, becoming Malika the powerless prostitute, trapped in the lowest realm of the hierarchy. Unwilling to accept it, Malika uses her intelligence and determination to work the system, using her seductive power to guarantee a private fortune that will enable her freedom. The real power of this narrative of fighting and reversing the dominant order lies in how the film presents Noémie’s story. The character of Noémie begins as unable to even speak, but by recovering and aligning with Hélène, she assumes the power of both voice and gaze; her story is actually presented through her perspective and her voice over narration. She is granted the respect and the power of telling her own tale. After Noémie reveals her true identity, the narratives of Hélène and Noémie converge to doubly reverse the dominant power with both Noémie reclaiming her fortune and her freedom and Hélène, ‘saved’ by the ‘other,’ embracing her independence by leaving her ungrateful husband and son.

The leering gaze of men turns Malika into a fetish, but Noémie trumps the play by luring the men to the peak of desire and then denying their satisfaction, a manipulation of power that she most pointedly inflicts on Paul, Hélène’s husband. Characteristically, unlike Chocolat, the power of the gaze is not refuted through primarily cinematic techniques; in this generic hybrid of buddy film, comedy, and thriller, Serreau never abandons the satisfying, classic filmic techniques. Instead, Chaos locates its resistance in comedy, tapping into the power of transgressing conventions; when little bourgeois Hélène knocks out Malika’s vicious pimp, not only is it comedic, but it is also a crucial step in Hélène transformation of her identity, and when Noémie surprises the obsessively lusting Paul by delivering him to his mother’s house, it is not only inherently funny, but also the quintessential comeuppance for the patriarchal power.

Although Chaos offers a forceful portrayal of women resisting the order and building themselves anew, the depiction of the cultural ‘other’ is not so triumphant. Noémie/Malika, as both woman and cultural ‘other,’ does rise to the heights of success within the stronghold of French culture, Paris. She accomplishes this through a complete disavowal of her ethnic past, willingly relinquishing her religion, her culture, and her family (aside from her sister whom she rescues, only to encourage her full assimilation into the dominant culture); in assuming the hegemonic culture, she achieves her success through individualism and capitalism, the epitomes of Western society. She is so intrinsically associated with the dominant culture that the end of the film even evokes a classic narrative containment, the ‘other’ becoming more acceptable through a romantic relation with the dominant culture as embodied by a white male. Noémie/Malika intimates that she may develop romantic ties with Hélène’s white bourgeois son, which would make her assimilation complete. Despite her triumph over the patriarchy, Noémie/Malika perpetuates the European construction of the ‘other’ as a means to one’s reaffirmation, for Hélène obtains her freedom through Noémie/Malika; she uses the cultural ‘other’ for her own interests. Chaos reconfigures the parameters of identity for both Hélène and Noémie in a nearly mythic tale of female solidarity and triumph; this narrative of resistance would be really empowering if the ‘otherness’ of the cultural ‘other’ were not so wholly abandoned, if Malika’s ethnic identity were not cancelled.

As seen in these films, France’s identity crisis stems from its confrontation with its colonial past, from the volatile issues surrounding present day immigration, from the increasing strength of the ‘others’ demanding to be accounted for. As the former hegemonic patriarchal identity finds itself in the position of “the father, whose law is being undermined,” 20 the reality is that that law cannot be
fully reenacted, the voices can not be stifled, and the ‘others’ are there to stay. To meet the new historical times and for a successful future, France must transform its ideological boundaries and re/create, “a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.” The hybrid identity gains power through its ability to destabilize and enter the dominant structure. While Indochine, Chocolat, and Chaos present diversified degrees of hybridized identities, they fail to seize the full subversive force of the hybridity, thus falling short of fully realized narratives of resistance. Indochine nostalgically glorifies the colonial era, containing the ‘others’ through sending Éliane home to France and relegating de-politicized Camille into the realm of the unseen. Chocolat provocatively questions the nature of home and identity and provides a template for conceptualizing a hybrid identity, neither one nor the other, but both; yet, the narrative and source of identification remain anchored in the perspective and character of the colonizer. Chaos, a fascinating narrative of feminine accomplishment, verges on an intriguing portrayal of hybrid identity through Noémie’s many layers, but ultimately balks away, containing Noémie’s ‘otherness’ through its total assimilation into the hegemonic culture. As represented in these films, French identity looks a mighty hegemony to deconstruct. In order to grow out of its past and meet the challenges of the present, France should allow its repressed subjects to join in. Films like Indochine, Chocolat, and Chaos might assist France in reconciling with its post-colonial self.

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NOTES
5 Ibid., 44.
7 Ibid., 44.
8 Ibid., 34.
9 Parker et al., Nationalisms & Sexualities, 1.
10 Ibid., 12.
11 Ibid., 6.
13 Ibid., 813, 816.
17 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 111.
21 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 120.