

## On m'appelle Nina.

Antoinette Tidjani Alou.

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*On m'appelle Nina* (*They Call Me Nina*) tells the story of a Jamaican woman by the name of Vilhelmina who, married to a Nigerien man whom she meets in France, decides to follow him to his home country. The recounting of such a trajectory is not new in Francophone literature. It is precisely the trajectory taken by any number of Maryse Condé's heroines from her first book, *Heremakonon*, through to her recently published autobiography. It is also the trajectory of the eponymous protagonist of Myriam Werner-Vieyra's *Julétane*. Like its predecessors, *On m'appelle Nina* is a narrative of disillusionment: disillusion born of the incomprehension that grows between the African spouse attached to his cultural male prerogatives, and the Caribbean spouse, forced to adapt to a foreign culture and land. Added to experiences of both personal, intimate, disillusion and professional disappointment, is the difficulty of daily life. For Vilhelmina, that difficulty consists of living with the indiscreet omnipresence of her husband's family, constraining social obligations, and a lack of money, since a professor's salary is inadequate. Everything, moreover, is inadequate: the country's overall economy, the infrastructure, and the healthcare. Vilhelmina will have a bitter experience of the latter when her own daughter Leila, "the blue child," is born with a heart malformation that affects her circulation

and makes her lips and extremities turn blue. She is diagnosed but late, well after her birth.

The Dubrovskian subtitle—*autofiction*—suggests autobiographical narrative told in a fictional mode. The narrative is indeed rendered in the first-person: the "I" dominates. Even the dialogues are reported, "seen" through the eyes of the omniscient author. But, more than an autobiography, *On m'appelle Nina* seems an attempt to exorcise the loss of the "blue child," and the loss, as well, of the husband-lover who, from then on, absorbed by his extended family and his social obligations, becomes his wife's teacher in a country the cultural codes of which she does not understand. This text is a therapy of sorts considering that, in the central chapter of 90 pages (a disproportionate length compared to the three other, much shorter, chapters of the book), Nina recounts the birth and the life of her third child, the "blue child," whom she loses after "five thousand nine hundred and two days."

If love is at the center of this work—the disappointed hopes for conjugal love, the enchantments of maternal love, sensual delight with the imaginary lover—many other elements make of it a composite text. Satirical social commentary, first of all: a satire of the social codes that impose respect for stifling traditions. Denunciation of the fate of women who, divorced without their consent, watch their children, understood to belong to their father, taken from them. A flawed medical system in which the patient is often left to himself, the doctors and nursing staff treat the fam-

ily with scorn, the poorest patients wait for hours, sometimes in vain, in order to be seen by the doctor or his assistant. It is also a satire of a political elite uninterested in the fate of ordinary people. The final sections of the book portray a utopia. We are in the year 2023. Now known to the world as The Republic of Sands (and to its inhabitants as Sahelia), the country prospers due to a renegotiation of the rights to the exploitation of its mineral resources. Its GDP rises, beggars and cripples disappear from the streets, absorbed into the social fabric that provides them with befitting work. New schools and universities open, ones named for illustrious figures, for the men and women who had helped to build the country. But Tidjani Alou refuses to indulge in facile optimism. The lifespan of this ideal society is only a decade.

The final chapter is entitled "Renaissance." But Nina remains skeptical about the "African Renaissance": "I do not believe in Renaissance by decree," she says. The book concludes with Nina's declaration of love for her new country. She chooses to be and declares herself a Sahelian. In discovering the blue mountains, the desert, and the meadows of dead grass in the country's north, she also discovers her own love for the Republic of Sands. Her litany of the landscape's features resonates as an echo of Thabo Mbeki's speech, "I am an African," which begins with reference to the "valleys," "mountains," "deserts," "trees," and "flowers" of the African continent.

*On m'appelle Nina* also consists of a struggle to reclaim one's individuality and affirm an identity. Nina affirms a personal

and individual "I" against an invasive "we": "I resist," she writes, "I give myself a new name. I call myself Iva." "Iva, insisting upon the letter I." This is a meaningful claim since from the beginning of her Nigerian life, Vilhelmina was abbreviated to "Nina," because, so she explains to us, the "v" does not exist in Hausa, the language of her in-laws.

This book, a confidence or perhaps a confession, is a composite narrative made of opposites, like the image on the book cover: luxuriant vegetation and verdant mountains in the foreground, sand dunes in the middle distance, then a sea of sand, and along the line of the horizon, violet-blue mountains.

Antoinette Tidjani-Alou's text is a lyrical one, now cutting, now exhilarating, and run through with literary illusions, from Paul Verlaine to Aimé Césaire, from the Books of Ruth to the Song of Songs.

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### **The Printmaker.**

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Bronwyn Law-Viljoen was interviewed about her novel on RSG (radiosondergense) this year by Corina van der Spoel during *Skrywers en Boeke*, and I was intrigued by the discussion. It appears that she had been asked to curate the work