

THE LIGHTS OF POINTE-NOIRE

A Memoir

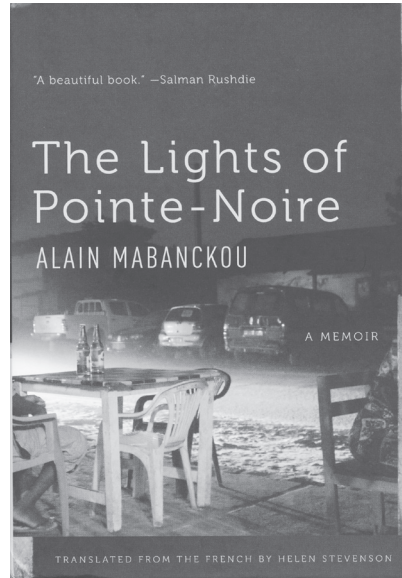
Alain Mabanckou

Translated by Helen Stevenson

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Shortly before on old writer named Broken Glass is fired for misconduct in Alain Mabanckou's novel *Broken Glass* (2010, Soft Skull Press), he tries to explain French grammar to his bewildered grade school pupils by asking them to imagine that "the French language isn't a long, quiet river, but rather a river to be diverted." During a March 2016 lecture entitled "Negritude After Senghor, Césaire and Damas," Mabanckou commented on the pronunciation of the American writer W.E.B. Du Bois's name, and implied that the relationship between English and French has become more complex as a result of globalization: "You know the courts of the Collège de France are a chamber where the entire world is watching us, so from time to time we have to try to play the game of explaining in English what's in English, even though we're in France. Although a day will have to come when the world reciprocates."

In *The Lights of Pointe-Noire*, a 2013 memoir that's now available in an English translation by Helen Stevenson, Mabanckou's high



school philosophy teacher admonishes him, "Don't forget: some philosophers only interpreted the world; what we have to do now is transform it." This book repeats the themes of Mabanckou's fiction within the conventions of autobiography, and it's a key text in the Congolese artist's body of work.

Once a boy who read comics "to travel, to go far, to see other horizons" like Grégoire Nakobomayo in *African Psycho* (2007, Soft Skull Press), Mabanckou returns to Pointe-Noire as a famous author, invited to attend a conference at the French Institute, and extends his stay to write and visit family. A few chapters deal with ethnography (tribalism and the tensions between North and South), culture (the conversion of the Rex Cinema into a Pentecostal church), and politics (the kleptocrat Mobutu and the aftereffects of French colo-

nialism), foregrounding a few more personal chapters that detail Mabanckou's complex reckonings with the men in his life: a half-brother, Grand Poupy, who now has a family with Mabanckou's high school crush; and two uncles, Mompéro (who still feels guilty for the death of the family dog and simply needs to be forgiven), and Matété (who long ago took Mabanckou hunting in the bush where he met his animal double, a stag, and who now requests a peculiar token—a jar of urine—to remind that counterpart of Mabanckou). Animating the entire book, especially these sections, is the memory of Maman Pauline, "who, in my most troubled dreams, turns her back on me, so I won't see her tears"—the author's mother, whom he never saw again after leaving Pointe-Noire, whose funeral he did not attend, and whose grave he does not visit. With his uncle, he declares, "We leave that chapter unopened, though it's there in both our minds."

"I don't know why I write," admits Mabanckou, now a professor of literature at UCLA, to the young aspiring authors visiting him, manuscripts in hand, before his departure. In many ways *The Lights of Pointe-Noire* is a companion volume to *Letter to Jimmy* (2014, Soft Skull Press), Mabanckou's study of James Baldwin, where he writes that "the life of every author is often its own novel." This memoir makes poignant discoveries, even though, as Massala-Massala alias Eric Jocelyn-George alias Marcel Bonaventure says in Mabanckou's 1998 debut novel *Blue White Red* (2013, Indiana University Press), "At times memory seems like a mountain of garbage that has to be patiently sifted through just to retrieve a miniscule object."

—Erik Noonan