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GESTURING TO AN EMPTY THEATRE?

Author, Text and Audience in the Fiction of Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland

Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland are Senegalese women migrant novelists who have addressed the theme of irregular migration between Senegal and France in their literature. The authors, who live in France, write within the context of increased irregular migration and its associated dangers. They also write during a time of increased, and often hyperbolic, public and official discourses surrounding the extent of irregular migration. The authors' treatment of the theme of migration raises questions concerning the relationship between the Senegalese novelist, her text and her audience. It also raises questions regarding the unique and complex positioning of the migrant writer.

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Fatou Diome's novel *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003) became a bestseller in France and was published in English in 2006 as *The Belly of the Atlantic*. The novel is the story of Salie, a legal Senegalese migrant living in Paris, and her brother Madické, who lives in Niodior, Senegal. Salie attempts to discourage Madické from migrating and is eventually successful. Madické, in hoping to migrate, symbolises a trend among the Senegalese youth. Diome thus uses Salie as a construct to discourage would-be irregular migrants from leaving Senegal.

Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland's *Patera* (2009) is the sequel to her 2007 novel *Le Pagne Léger*. Her first novel addresses the constraints facing women in Senegal, whereas her second focuses on irregular migration. *Patera* is the story of Soukeyna, a Senegalese woman who migrates to France, by regular means, because she feels restricted as a woman in her own society. Soukeyna becomes a novelist and devotes her life to highlighting the risks of irregular migration. Reminiscent of Salie in Diome's novel, Soukeyna speaks directly to would-be irregular migrants in Senegal to try to discourage them from

attempting a dangerous journey to Europe.

Diomé's literary talent and subsequent acclaim place her in a different bracket to Diamanka-Besland, whose fiction is marked by a more informal and "popular" style. However, the authors are worthy of comparison. Both writers migrated to France in adulthood, where they continue to live and work. Both writers privilege the theme of irregular migration in the light of increased irregular migration and the inflamed discourses that often accompany it. Finally, a closer reading of these novels reveals the difficult position of both authors as they direct their appeal to multiple readerships, all the while straddling divergent worlds and disparate cultures.

The Writers in Context

Diomé's and Diamanka-Besland's novels can be situated within a broader corpus of Senegalese migrant writing and within a substantial and growing field of writing by West African women migrant authors in France. The authors attempt to deconstruct what they consider to be a myth of France in the Senegalese imagination. Their Senegalese characters imagine life in France to be synonymous with wealth, prosperity and luxury. The authors seek to revoke this idealisation through their protagonists, Salie and Soukeyna. These characters, as migrants, reveal the realities and difficulties of migrant life in France as perceived by the writers.

The authors' attempts to dismantle what they perceive as idealised notions of France are echoed in earlier Senegalese writing. For example, Ousmane Socé's aptly named *Mirages de Paris* (1937) and Ousmane Sembène's film *La Noire de...* (1966) sought to demystify romanticised notions of France. While earlier narratives tended to focus on a temporary stay in France for work or educational purposes, contemporary writings are often framed in terms of more permanent migration. If earlier writers sought to challenge French discourses in the light of colonisation and its aftermath, contemporary writers often consider the difficulties facing immigrants, the Senegalese in Senegal and African populations in general in the midst of the inequities of an increasingly globalised era.

The authors can be situated within a wide and growing body of Francophone African women writers who live and write in France. Women writers are increasingly addressing irregular migration. Marie NDiaye, who has a Senegalese father but was born in France, won the Prix Goncourt in 2009 for *Trois Femmes Puissantes*, a novel that gives mention to the risks of irregular migration. There has been an increase in more "popular" works by lesser-known Senegalese women writers, often published by smaller publishing

houses with a particular interest in African fiction. Diamanka-Besland might be included in this category, alongside writers such as Mame Seck Mbacké and Khadi Hane, both of whom explore problems facing immigrants in France.

An increase in Francophone African women novelists in France corresponds with growing numbers of independent women migrants, many of whom, like Diamanka-Besland, migrated to France for educational reasons. Senegalese women writers have long impressed an international audience with their literary talent. Diamanka-Besland, through Soukeyna, situates herself within a lineage of Senegalese women novelists: “Leur fille était devenue écrivain à l’image de Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Aminata Sow Fall [...] qui faisaient la fierté du pays” (“Their daughter had become a writer in the image of Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul, Aminata Sow Fall [...] who made the country proud”¹) (2009, 116). Diome, whose narrative has a less feminist stance than Diamanka-Besland’s, alludes to Sembène, Bâ, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, thus aligning herself with earlier Senegalese writers, irrespective of gender.

Migrants Addressing Migration

The authors can be situated within a wide field of migrant writers. Many experiences are common to migrants, irrespective of location. Although this experience varies according to issues such as race, levels of tolerance towards immigration, and the historical relationship between sending and receiving nations, many commonalities are found across migrant narratives. Thus, the way in which Diome and Diamanka-Besland portray the migrant experience, and the manner in which they seek to delineate mythical notions of France, finds its echo in numerous works of migrant fiction irrespective of place or time. For example, Brian Chikwava’s *Harare North* (2010) examines the difficulties facing a Zimbabwean migrant to the United Kingdom, while deconstructing mythical or idealised notions of London. Furthermore, literary and didactic works seeking to educate potential migrants are not new. Ambrose Pratt’s *The Real South Africa* (1913) aimed to enlighten would-be English-speaking miner-migrants as to the realities of life in South Africa. There are also countless examples of Francophone African writers who have sought to deconstruct romanticised notions of France.

While idealised or “mythical” notions of France are indeed common among many would-be migrants in Senegal, many Senegalese no doubt have a far more mixed view of life in France than Diome and Diamanka-Besland at times allow. In countries with high unemployment and poverty, the myth

takes on more of a reality, as people witness the relative prosperity of returnees and believe such wealth to be tangible. The myth of France is thus inseparable from the realities of life in Senegal. However, informing Senegalese readers of the difficulties of migrant life is something to which the authors can contribute.

Although Diome's and Diamanka-Besland's literary themes and didactic intentions could be considered common to much migrant writing, the attention devoted to the theme of irregular migration is new. The authors respond to a very real and serious issue that has resulted in a great loss of life. However, they also write within a context in which the extent of irregular migration is often inflated. The financial costs of irregular migration are high and most undocumented immigrants in France entered the country legally and overstayed their visas. If many in Senegal express desires to migrate, relatively few attempt, or manage, to do so. To provide an overview of migration between Senegal and France would be beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to acknowledge the particular context that has led to authorial depictions of irregular migration and the (undocumented) immigrant experience in present-day France.

Didacticism, Realism, Semi-Autobiography

Diome's and Diamanka-Besland's writing is strongly didactic. The use of the first-person narrative in both novels allows for the voice of the protagonist, and by association that of the author, to speak directly to the reader. Both novels are also marked by realism and semi-autobiography, which shapes and informs the relationship between the author, her text and her readers.

In an essay of 1966, Cheick Hamidou Kane attributed the didactic nature of Senegalese literature to Senegalese oral tradition, referring to "a constant effort to capture reality and to actualise it, even if this means a certain didacticism" (69). "Our literature is functional," he stated, "What it wants to do is to be at the service of man and thus engaged in life" (69). In 1956, the first International Congress of Black Writers and Artists (Paris) established that "African literature is a committed literature, destined from its origins to fight against colonisation and all forms of oppression of the 'black race'" (cited in Midiohouan, 184). This found its echo with Sartre, a key supporter of the Négritude movement. For Sartre, the "committed writer" was the one who knew that "to speak is to act" (cited in Midiohouan, 184).

Ousmane Sembène² famously likened himself to a griot.³ His aim, argues David Murphy, was "to voice resistance to domination that would otherwise have no public outlet" (219). Reminiscent of Sembène, Diamanka-Besland,

through Soukeyna, likens her role as author to that of a griot: “Je serais leurs yeux [...] Comme un griot, je leur relaterais le quand, le pourquoi et le comment” (“I would be their eyes [...] Like a griot, I would relate to them the when, the how and the why”) (2009, 98). Although equating West African authors with griots has become something of a cliché, the aforementioned authors invoke the griot to signify their role as a spokesperson for their people. Diome, who does not allude to the griot, makes her didactic intentions less explicit. However, the repeated refrain “Everything you want, you’ve got it” is emblematic of Salie’s (and Diome’s) central message to disaffected youths wishing to migrate. The refrain stresses that it is possible to find what one desires in Senegal.

Senegalese writers have long constructed what might be termed committed or didactic narratives. Diome and Diamanka-Besland’s engagement is reminiscent of many of their predecessors, who sought to challenge or subvert French discourses throughout the colonial era and beyond. The writers set their narratives within a framework of real historical events that gives the impression that what they write about *is* true. This narrows the distance between the audience and the text and its subject, as the reader is able to envision and / or relate to the events to which the narrator alludes. The authors’ repeated references to the *affaire des sans-papiers*⁴ may resonate with a French and diasporan readership, while Diome’s references to Senegal’s defeat of France in the 2002 World Cup might be particularly pertinent to a Senegalese public. By punctuating their narratives with events that their readers can identify with, the authors are able to both inform and to instruct.

Both novels are strongly autobiographical. Philippe Lejeune has argued that for a work to constitute a true autobiography, there must be identity between author, narrator and main character (15). In both novels, the protagonists’ (who are also the narrators) lives strongly echo those of the authors. Like Salie, Diome was born in Niodior and raised by her grandmother. Mirroring the author, Salie marries a white Frenchman, moves to France and is rejected by her in-laws on racial grounds. *Patera* is also largely autobiographical. Both author and protagonist were born and raised in Dakar and studied there before coming to Europe. Just as Soukeyna devotes her life to addressing the issue of migration, Diamanka-Besland is currently writing a PhD dissertation on the subject.

Both protagonists are writers. This allows the authors to establish their own positioning. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, the act of writing becomes integral to Salie’s (and one can assume, Diome’s) search for identity: “Always in exile,

with roots everywhere, I'm at home where Africa and Europe put aside their pride and are content to join together: in my writing" (127). In *Patera*, writing is a vehicle through which to speak for the collective: "J'écrivais pour crier ma colère [...] L'envie me brûlait de l'intérieur de parler pour les sans-voix" ("I wrote to proclaim my anger [...] I was consumed by a burning desire to speak for the voiceless") (111). Coupled with didacticism and realism, the semi-autobiographical nature of the novels means that the authors' voices strongly permeate the narrative. This narrows the distance between the author and her addressees as the novelist, through her protagonist/ narrator, appeals directly to the reader.

Multiple Readerships

Both authors write for what might be considered a triple readership. Firstly, they address the Senegalese in Senegal by creating a direct dialogue between their protagonists (who echo their attempts, as authors, to discourage irregular migration) and would-be irregular migrants. In *Patera*, Soukeyna discourages her friend, Ramatoulaye, from migrating: "Arrête de rêver [...] La vie est dure aussi [en France]" ("Stop dreaming [...] Life is also difficult [in France]") (155). In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie warns youths intending migration: "You mustn't go there [...] illegally, it's suicide" (123). The protagonists (and by association the authors) also criticise families and communities who encourage migration. In *Patera*, Soukeyna reflects that parents should stop pressuring their children to migrate (130). The authors' appeal is also intended for other communities where irregular migration is a serious issue.

Secondly, the authors, through their protagonists, instruct Senegalese immigrants in France to tell the truth when they return to Senegal, rather than perpetuating what they (the authors) perceive to be a myth of France in the Senegalese imagination. In *Patera*, Soukeyna instructs returning migrants to "Dire la vérité pour éviter ces vies sacrifiées! [...] Dire la vérité pour faire comprendre aux jeunes que tous les immigrants ne réussissaient pas en Europe." ("Tell the truth to avoid these sacrificed lives! [...] Tell the truth to make these youths understand that immigrants weren't all successful in Europe") (166). In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, the 'man from Barbès' continues to romanticise his experience of life in France: "He denied to himself he was lying [...] His flood of tales never hinted at the wretched existence he'd led in France" (59). Diome uses this character as a vehicle for revoking the myth, while implicitly appealing to returnees to tell the truth. Again, this appeal is

also directed towards non-Senegalese immigrants for whom the same issues might apply.

Finally, the authors address a French readership. In depicting the difficult socio-economic conditions in Senegal that inspire migration, they aim to encourage greater sympathy for immigrants in France. Furthermore, they attempt to raise awareness of the hardships facing many immigrants. Moreover, references to the continued exploitation of Senegal by France, and Africa by the West, may be directed primarily to a French readership. The authors, by invoking the history of slavery, the colonial past and the continuation of racism as experienced by some Senegalese immigrants, seek to counter discriminatory discourses in France. Although this address is clearly directed at the French, the narratives also challenge European or “Western” discourses.

The authors also provide a commentary on problems within Senegal. This allows the authors to empathise with their Senegalese addressees and to exact more sympathy for immigrants among their French readers. For example, Diome criticises how the Senegalese state has sold off large areas of Senegal’s coastline to foreign investors (140). To similar effect, Diamanka-Besland criticises how productive areas of coastline have been sold to foreign companies, thus resulting in a fishing crisis and a subsequent rise in migration (2009, 85).

Authorial Positioning

The diverse public for which the authors write places them in a complex position. In addressing a broad readership, the authors may unwittingly romanticise life in France or reinforce certain stereotypes. Furthermore, the authors’ geographical and experiential distancing from a large section of their public compromises their position. The causes and catalysts that incite people to migrate by risky means are manifold. If the authors’ positioning appears contradictory at times, this is also a reflection of the complexities of migration – a process both beneficial and detrimental to Senegal.

Diome and Diamanka-Besland are educated and documented immigrants, which immediately distances them from their Senegalese addressees. Unlike the authors, many irregular migrants are uneducated, with limited employment prospects, overwhelmingly male and often very young. If the authors are distanced experientially from those whom they address most explicitly, it is precisely these same circumstances (being educated and documented migrants) that have enabled them to become spokespeople on the subject of irregular migration.

Both the protagonists and authors seek to dissuade would-be irregular migrants from migrating, yet have themselves chosen to remain in France. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie wonders “How could I make these kids understand that it wasn’t easy to live in France, when I myself have lived there so many years?” (126) As Salie tries to discourage the Niodior youth from migrating they respond: “...now she’s made a packet, she’s closing the door [...] so that she doesn’t have to put us up” (123). In *Patera*, Soukeyna reflects: “...c’est difficile de faire comprendre ça aux jeunes. La plupart de ceux avec lesquels j’ai essayé de parler me répondent ‘et toi, pourquoi tu ne reviens pas?’ ou bien ‘tu ne veux pas que l’on vienne en Europe, c’est ça?’- et je ne sais plus quoi répondre” (“...it’s hard to make the youth understand. Most who I’ve tried to speak to have replied ‘and you, why don’t you return?’ or better ‘you don’t want us coming to Europe, is that it?’- I no longer know how to reply”) (74). The authors explicitly present the contradictions of their positioning and preempt the potential responses of would-be irregular migrants. This serves to strengthen their position.

The writers seek to discourage irregular migration rather than migration *per se*. The fact that the authors entered France legally somewhat removes them from the process of irregular migration. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie discourages Madické from migrating: “Madické summed up what I’d said with the following words: ‘She says we shouldn’t go to France!’ ‘I didn’t say that,’ I corrected him. ‘I said you shouldn’t go there under any conditions’” (122). Salie reaffirms her position: “If you turn up without any papers, you’re going to run into serious problems and have a miserable existence in France” (123). The authors are aware of the difficulties facing many in Senegal as well as those who migrate – by regular or irregular means. Their geographical and / or experiential distance from their addressees does not mean that they have not been personally affected by irregular migration. For instance, *Patera* is dedicated to a number of people, known by Diamanka-Besland, who died attempting the crossing.

The authors and protagonists have, to varying degrees, found success in France as writers. This success is at odds with the experience of undocumented immigrants, who are represented as living in dire conditions. Although the protagonists (and by association the authors) experience isolation and crises in identity, migration was necessary in their own struggles to locate a sense of identity. Both protagonists’ crises of belonging preceded their migration. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie, as an illegitimate child, was never fully integrated into Niodior society. Ndétare (a character non-native to Niodior) tells her “You’ll always be a stranger in this village, like me” (51). In

Patera, Soukeyna feels repressed as a woman in her own society. She fails to find her “voice” in Senegal (“J’avais le droit de faire entendre ma voix [...] je ne voulais pas rester une éternelle ‘je passive’”; “I had the right to have my voice heard [...] I didn’t want to stay passive forever”) (19) and it is only through migrating that she locates the “voice” with which to speak to, and on behalf of, the voiceless (“Je cherche une voie pour les sans-voix [...] Je suis l’âme des sans-voix”; “I’m looking for a route for the voiceless [...] I am the soul of the voiceless”) (207). These representations complicate the authors’ positioning as the writers discourage migration while simultaneously invoking what they perceive to be its benefits.

As migrants, there were of course factors that brought the authors to France and encouraged them to remain there. The authors’ relationships to France and Senegal are multi-directional, echoing the complexities of the colonial past, the difficulties of immigrant life and the ways in which migration can irreversibly alter the relationship between an individual and their country of origin. Diamanka-Besland may perpetuate a certain mythologisation of France, albeit unwittingly. In *Patera*, Soukeyna’s passage to Europe becomes synonymous with liberation: “La capitale (Dakar) semblait [...] trop étroite pour nous et pour nos projets européens” (“The capital (Dakar) seemed [...] too narrow for us and for our European projects”) (19). On arriving in Paris, she reflects: “Je sentais au fond de moi que cette ville allait beaucoup m’inspirer. C’était l’endroit idéal pour la culture et la littérature, George Sand, Rimbaud, Flaubert” (“I felt deep down that this city would really inspire me. It was the ideal place for culture and literature, George Sand, Rimbaud, Flaubert...”) (105). Such representations are starkly juxtaposed against the protagonist’s assertion that knowledge in Senegalese universities is “dead” (“mort”) (177). Diome also draws on the influence of education and French literature on Salie’s migration, yet the author’s strong use of irony ultimately overshadows any romanticisation of French culture.

The authors, distanced geographically and experientially from their Senegalese public, may underestimate the awareness of the dangers of irregular migration in Senegal. In *Patera*, a repetition of phrases beginning “if they knew” and “how can they know” presents the Senegalese as altogether ignorant of the hardships facing irregular migrants. This may enhance the author’s appeal to returning migrants to “tell the truth,” yet it has the potential to be very patronising. Diome (through Salie) acknowledges her distance from the realities facing youths in Senegal. When Salie instructs Madické not to migrate by irregular means, he replies: “So how should we go?” (122). This indicates that, unlike Diome, many do not have the option to

get to France by regular means. Similarly, when Ndétare appeals to the youths to stay in Senegal, they wonder “Who was he to ruin their dreams? How easy it is to philosophise on a full stomach” (80).

Madické finally sees the potential in Senegal, and decides to stay. However, he can only open a shop due to remittances sent by Salie. Consequently, it is her migration that stops him migrating and he is thus in a privileged position, unlike many Senegalese who may have little or no income (remitted or otherwise). Therefore, the conclusion to the novel somewhat amplifies the distance of the author from her addressees. Furthermore, successes like Madické’s often inspire further migration. This may somewhat undermine the author’s intentions. Madické is Diome’s fictional ‘reader’ – a character that is emblematic of the disaffected youths intending migration that Salie, and Diome, so clearly address. Salie’s direct address to Madické would seem to reduce the distance between narrator / protagonist / author and addressee. However, Salie’s geographical and experiential distance from Madické can increase the author’s distance from the would-be migrants that she hopes to address.

Diamanka-Besland, in attempting to dissuade would-be irregular migrants, may exaggerate the extent of irregular migration. In *Patera*, Soukeyna refers to a “sweeping wave” (“vague déferlante”) (136) of irregular migrants, describes boat crossings as an “Atlantic marathon” (“marathon de l’Atlantique”) (105) and argues that Senegal will be emptied of its youth (59). The author writes after the extensive departures of 2006.⁵ However, her presentations could reaffirm stereotypes, such as notions of a “wave” or “exodus” of irregular migrants, as discussed by Hein de Hass (1305). Diamanka-Besland may be influenced by hyperbolic discourses. She may also exaggerate levels of irregular migration in the ultimate aim of strengthening her appeal.

The authors, in addressing a French and European public, seek to deconstruct stereotypes of Africa. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie criticises the “West’s fleeting gaze, which usually dwells on the wars, famines and ravages of AIDS in Africa” (172). In *Patera*, Soukeyna argues “Africa isn’t a poor continent [...] Africa is rich! Stay here! Work here!” (“L’Afrique n’est pas un continent pauvre [...] L’Afrique est riche! Restez-y! Travaillez-y!”) (99). However, the authors also attempt to highlight difficulties facing the Senegalese. This can serve to elicit sympathy for immigrants, while allowing the authors to empathise with a Senegalese public. Such representations may at times perpetuate the very stereotypes that the authors seek to dismantle.

In *Le Pagne Léger*, Soukeyna describes “...African brothers, lost in the

turbulent ruins of uncertainty and despair [...] where misery and poverty furnish the daily life of the population!" ("...ses frères africains, perdus dans les abîmes tourmentés de l'incertitude et du désespoir [...] Où la misère et la pauvreté meublent le quotidien de la population!") (92). She cites "...the deplorable situation of the black continent" ("...la situation déplorable du continent noir") (93) and argues that migrants are "...unable to return, because nothing awaits them" ("...ils ne peuvent pas rentrer, car rien ne les attend") (94). In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie refers to Niodior as an "...impenetrable monolithic structure" (50) and criticises the Niodior community: "Rid your heads of some of the deeply ingrained habits that tie you to an outmoded way of life" (126). Such notions could fuel stereotypes among French readers and offend the Senegalese.

The Writer as Migrant

The multi-directionality of the authors' address, coupled with the complexities surrounding the issue of migration, complicates the authors' positioning. This is complicated further by the protagonists' (and authors') mixed feelings towards both their country of origin and the country to which they have migrated. The historical relationship between Senegal and France and the authors' use of French can also complicate matters, separating the writer still further from her Senegalese public.

Such issues are common to many migrant writers. There is a wide and growing field of scholarship that has sought to assess the complex relationship between the migrant writer and his environment, not to mention his relationship with his audience. Many writers have long articulated these tensions. In 1966, Kane stated: "What is particular to our literature is that it hopes to satisfy two different publics [...] One can imagine the mental tightrope that our writers are condemned to master" (57). He argued that the African public was leaving African writers to their "complicated games" and that subsequently African authors were "...gesturing to an empty theatre" (62). In 1979, Phanael Egejuru spoke of the writers' pressure "...to produce something acceptable to both audiences (African and European)" (cited in Cazenave, 120).

The psychological impact of migration features heavily in much migrant writing. This is true of Diome's and Diamanka-Besland's narratives, as the protagonists / narrators (and authors) struggle to negotiate their lives in an alien, and often inhospitable, environment. The authors may overplay such depictions to strengthen their appeal to a Senegalese public and highlight the difficulties of migrant life to a French readership. That the protagonists (and

authors) choose to remain in France can somewhat undermine the writers' intentions.

Both authors consider the impact of migration on identity. Salman Rushdie's notion of "double-unbelonging" (cited in Thomas, 12) in which immigrants can feel that they neither belong fully in their country of origin nor in their new environment, is useful. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Salie straddles two worlds. She describes herself as "...a double self: the *me* from here and the *me* from over there" (160). On returning to Senegal, Salie is treated like a foreigner and comes to feel like "an outsider everywhere" (162). In *Le Pagne Léger*, Babacar becomes a "...hybrid, torn between two cultures" ("...hybride, tirailé entre deux cultures") (96). This unenviable condition somewhat separates the writer from her Senegalese and French public but aligns her with a diasporan readership that may identify with a sense of "double-unbelonging." It ultimately contributes to the authors' attempts to dismantle an idealisation of France and invoke the potential pitfalls of migration. The authors, through their protagonists, articulate their psychological distancing from both Senegal and France and, in doing so, may somewhat rectify the contradictions and complexities that can accompany such a position.

As outlined, the protagonists' (and presumably the authors') sense of unbelonging preceded their migration. Migrating was thus integral to the protagonists' search for an identity. The long colonial relationship between France and Senegal, including the implementation of French education and the French language in Senegal, often fostered a sense of ambiguity, divisiveness or hybridisation. This came to be reflected in Senegalese literature, such as in Kane's aptly named *Ambiguous Adventure* (1961).

The protagonists' ambiguous relationship with Senegal may separate the authors from their Senegalese public and undermine their intentions to encourage would-be irregular migrants to remain in Senegal. Furthermore, the authors' invocation of the importance of writing and publishing for their own sense of identity (largely made possible through the migration process) somewhat celebrates migration and its subsequent successes. This can enlarge the distance between the author and her Senegalese public.

The way in which Diome and Diamanka-Besland's narratives shift continuously between Senegal and France may echo the protagonists and authors' sense of ambiguity that can accompany the act of migration. The protagonists and narrators struggle to situate themselves fully in Senegal or France and are instead forced to traverse an uncomfortable "third space" as articulated by Homi Bhabha.⁶ Setting the narrative in both France and Senegal

allows the authors to appeal to their intended readerships in a way that may be more personal and evocative. However, the continuous shifting between localities may also somewhat separate the writer from her Senegalese and French readers and align her most strongly with her diasporan readers who can relate to this migratory movement and the feelings that accompany it.

The authors' use of language also has a bearing on the relationship between the migrant writer and her addressees. Both Diome and Diamanka-Besland use many Wolof words, for which they provide a full glossary. This may narrow the distance between the author and her Senegalese readers, for whom the language is both personal and familiar. Inversely, the authors' allusion to seminal French works, such as Diome's mention of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (153), may distance her from those Senegalese readers who are unfamiliar with such works. This is indicative of the complex positioning of the migrant writer who appeals at once to the French, the Senegalese and the Senegalese diaspora in France.

Gesturing to an Empty Theatre?

Diome's and Diamanka-Besland's narratives are directed most explicitly towards those in Senegal who might be contemplating irregular migration. Ironically, it is this constituency that is the least likely to read the novels. As outlined, irregular migrants are often uneducated, with limited employment prospects. Among the literate, most would be unable to afford books, or unlikely to choose to spend money on them. A study by UNICEF suggests that approximately 43% of Senegal's adult population was literate in the period 2003-2008 and that net primary school enrolment constituted 58% in the same period (www.unicef.org). Although literacy is increasing, novels are an extremely limited medium through which to address the Senegalese population. It was this chasm between the writer and his Senegalese public that led Sembène to become a filmmaker.

The Cameroonian novelist Jean-Roger Essomba argues that "African writers [...] are conscious of the fact that what they write is not primarily directed towards an African readership. Still, when they are asked who they write for, most reply without the least hesitation that they are writing for Africans" (cited in Cazenave, 124). Essomba attributes this to the writer's "weight of the guilt which crushes him," suggesting that the author "...always feel(s) a little guilty for leaving" (cited in Cazenave, 125). Although it would be unfair to presume that a sense of guilt is a driving force in the narratives of Diome and Diamanka-Besland, it is an interesting point for consideration. In both novels, the protagonists articulate the importance of

writing in the search for their own identities, while acknowledging the difference in living conditions between themselves and many of their Senegalese addressees. This might suggest that the act of writing, for both authors, is somewhat cathartic.

The authors would undoubtedly be aware of the limitations of the novel in Senegal. However, they also address those who encourage migration – both in Senegal and in the diaspora, and their works may reach a wider public through such channels. Toni Morrison once described the novel as having “...always functioned for the class or group that wrote it” (cited in Gilroy, 219). Diome’s and Diamanka-Besland’s novels serve mainly a French public and the French-speaking (African) diaspora, with Diome’s novel serving a wider public since its translation into English, Spanish and German. In *Patera*, Soukeyna becomes a successful author and travels to America to highlight the plight of irregular migrants. This may represent the author’s vision for what she would hope might one day be achieved through writing.

The extent to which the novels reach a wide readership in France depends on many factors including the publisher, levels of book distribution and the (perceived) “quality” of the novel, and its subsequent popularity. How far novels reach Senegalese immigrants in France depends on literacy levels and income levels that determine people’s abilities, or willingness, to purchase books. Michèle Tribalat suggests that, in 1996, around 20% of black immigrants in France were educated (cited in Winders, 484), and the World Bank estimates that 24.1% of Senegalese emigrants have any tertiary education (cited in Gerdes, 5).

It is impossible to quantify how widely these novels have been read by Senegalese immigrants. Even a comprehensive survey would be inadequate, as it would be confined to documented immigrants, who may constitute less than half of all Senegalese immigrants in France. *The Belly of the Atlantic*, a bestseller in France, has presumably been read relatively widely among literate Senegalese immigrants. Other contemporary works, such as those by Diamanka-Besland or Seck Mbacké, have been far less wide-reaching. However, novels by Senegalese authors may well be passed around among the Senegalese community in France. The extent to which Diome and Diamanka-Besland address their messages to Senegalese immigrants in France would suggest that they expect this group to read their novels. Furthermore, the increasing numbers of Senegalese immigrants in France extends the potential readership.

Diamanka-Besland’s novels were published by a small publishing house, Éditions Henry, and are somewhat difficult to get hold of. Some

scholars attest to the limitations of publishing through specialist publishers. Nicki Hitchcott argues that such publishing houses tend to have short print-runs and limited marketing networks (213). She argues that "... editions such as L'Harmattan are also more expensive than mass-produced paperbacks and suffer from low prestige and a lack of distribution networks" (213). *Présence Africaine*, L'Harmattan and Karthala specialise in African writing. Cazenave suggests that *Présence Africaine* "...caters to readers with a certain level of knowledge of and interest in issues relating to Africa and African literature" (124). Therefore, the readership base is somewhat limited. This only changes when a novel becomes popular and the readership base broadens.

However, irregular migration has become a central issue in French discourses and thus the theme of these novels may influence their popularity. It is possible that the authors had this in mind, and it is conceivable that these themes would particularly appeal to more mainstream publishers (as in Diome's case) in the context of public interest concerning migration.

Senegalese writers have long grappled with the complexities of writing in the language of the former coloniser, and with the fact that their work has more potential to reach the French than the Senegalese. This is somewhat allayed by the possibility for works of literature to make their way into the public consciousness. For example, passages from Diome's novel were incorporated in a play on the theme of migration that was performed in Senegal in 2006.⁷ Indeed, cultural and artistic representations of irregular migration have become very extensive in Senegal in recent years. The subject of irregular migration appears frequently in Senegalese music and theatre performances, where it is able to reach a far wider public than works of fiction. Didier Awadi's 2006 song *Sunugaal* ("Our Canoe"), addressing the risks of irregular migration, was immensely popular in Senegal. The rap artist set the song against a slideshow on his website that showed migrants squeezed into a canoe. The site had 10,000 hits within two days.

Murphy argues that "it would be naïve to overstate the influence that works of fiction can have in fashioning social consciousness and, even if one accepts such an influence, it is impossible to quantify this phenomenon" (221). However, the novels have the potential to influence returnees in presenting more balanced representations of the migrant experience, while informing the French of the difficulties of immigrant life in France. They also have some potential to reach would-be irregular migrants in Senegal, not least through their incorporation into other forms of artistic representation. Diome's and Diamanka-Besland's novels are relatively recent, and the impact that they have may be greater in coming years. Moreover, if literacy levels were to

improve, their work would undoubtedly have more influence. Murphy's assertion, while correct, should not discount the fact that the novels have the potential both to inform and to influence.

The extent to which the novels may have a bearing on the processes of irregular migration is limited. Attempts to dissuade would-be irregular migrants are likely to have a limited impact without a simultaneous shift in the conditions that inspire such migration. The authors seek to have some bearing on the processes of migration, however small. It is very unlikely that they would expect their work to have a great impact on migratory desires in Senegal.

Conclusion

This article has considered how two contemporary Senegalese women writers have addressed the issue of irregular migration through their fiction. The authors' strategies, and the multi-directionality of their gaze, are reminiscent of many earlier Senegalese writers. They are also reminiscent of many migrant writers, irrespective of time or place. The writers address a diverse readership and, in so doing, occupy an unenviable position. In their attempts to appeal to the Senegalese, the Senegalese diaspora, and the French, their stance can sometimes appear confused or contradictory. Yet this can reveal a lot about the process of migration and its impact on the individual, as the protagonists, and authors, struggle to situate themselves within divergent localities and disparate cultures. These narratives can also reveal a lot about the migrant experience in contemporary France and, in so doing, challenge and / or subvert dominant discourses that are often racist or reductionist in tone.

The novel is a limited medium in Senegal and will remain so without a significant change in both literacy levels and livelihoods. However, the authors may influence the attitudes of returning migrants. Furthermore, their messages may spread further than assumed as books are shared among communities, read aloud, or disseminated through alternate means such as in theatrical performances or song lyrics.

The authors do not "gesture to an empty theatre," yet the ability of writers to reach their Senegalese public is still far from what Kane hoped for in his 1966 polemic "that the future of our writing will become concrete in the continent itself" (64). However, the novel is occupying an ever-stronger position in Senegal and across the continent. Furthermore, Senegalese women writers continue to occupy an important place within the field of Francophone literature. Thus, the conviction should remain that Senegalese writing will become increasingly significant within Senegal, allowing writers such as

Diome and Diamanka-Besland to reach the multiple audiences that they so clearly address.

Notes

1. All translations from Diamanka-Besland's novels are my own.
2. The Senegalese writer and filmmaker, Ousmane Sèmbene, is one of the most prominent figures within the world of West African literature and film. Sèmbene, who died in 2007, has often been referred to as the "Father of African cinema."
3. The griot is often defined as an oral historian, musician, genealogist, teacher or witness. See Thomas Hale (19-58) for a lengthier discussion of the griot's role.
4. An event in 1996 in which hundreds of undocumented immigrants (mostly from sub-Saharan Africa) squatted the church of Saint-Bernard in Paris in protest against immigration legislation.
5. In this year, over 30,000 irregular migrants (the majority Senegalese) arrived in the Canary Islands en route to Europe.
6. For a full discussion of the notion of "Third Space", see Homi Bhabha.
7. Les Gueules Tapées (one of Senegal's best-known theatre companies) created a play on the theme of migration titled "Le clan du destin ou Mbëk mi" (the French title means "The Community of Destiny" and is a play on the word "clandestin", while the Wolof title means "to tear down frontiers"). See Christine Ludl (109).

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