

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## Mariama Bâ, Younoussé Seye, and the Ambivalence of Canonization

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Mariama Bâ and Younoussé Seye were once neighbors in Dakar.<sup>1</sup> They shared friends and acquaintances and they both wrote poetry, among many other creative pursuits—in Bâ’s case as a multidimensional writer, and in Seye’s as a multimedia artist. Whereas Bâ penned “Festac . . . Memories of Lagos” in 1977 as a response to the sprawling event, Seye wrote a poem that was circulated during the Pan-African Festival of Algiers (PANAF) in 1969. Though not quite of the same generation (Seye is a decade Bâ’s junior), the two were equally shaped by the sense of vocation among those of the *trentes glorieuses* of decolonization (1940s to 1970s). For both, too, “l’évolution de la femme” (“women’s advancement”) was indivisible from this vocation, of forging liberatory postcolonial Black futures (Seye).<sup>2</sup>

Two women, two different festivals, two poems: these are the elements that have prompted my reflections. These convergences interest me, however, because they were commonplace. That Seye and Bâ knew each other, or that their circles overlapped, is in fact no great surprise. In a context where postindependence African intellectuals typically belonged to small circles of educated professionals, this was the rule rather than the exception. Neither was their recourse to poetry unexpected. Given that the novel’s ascendance in Africa was not assured until the late 1950s, poetry was as much, if not even more so, the genre of enshrining nationalist and Pan-African ideals (Suhr-Sytsma 10).

The fact that Seye’s poem, like Bâ’s, was printed in an evanescent format is also in keeping with larger patterns. As a rich literature has shown, Black women’s writing in Africa and the diaspora was often found in ephemeral printed material.<sup>3</sup> Women’s writing was already

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PMLA 139.5 (2024), doi:10.1632/S0030812924000841

in print well before the first novel authored by a francophone African woman, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, was published in 1969. Young women across colonial French West Africa—including Bâ herself—sent contributions to newspapers as early as the 1940s (Barthélemy). By 1964, women were writing poems for the magazine *Awa*. Seye contributed an interview rather than a poem to *Awa*, but the woman who interviewed her was a mutual friend of Bâ's. This friend, Annette Mbaye d'Erneville (*Awa*'s editor), was the woman who urged Bâ to publish *So Long a Letter*.

If all this is commonplace rather than remarkable, what then remains to be learned by reading two festival poems together? I hope that such a reading expands the feminist methodological and interpretive repertoires for dealing with “discoveries” of texts like Bâ's and Seye's. As I show, their two poems reward readers with original aesthetic and political thinking about negritude. Their poems waded into the negritude debates that consumed both festivals, yet the poems refused to either renounce negritude in the face of opposition or take part in officially sanctioned definitions. Even more importantly, however, the very ephemeral circulation of both poems offers an instructive counterpoint to the official statist records of the two-decade “festival complex” and to the male-dominated debates that appeared in print (Malaquais and Vincent). Such ephemerality was not incidental, but rather a mode of dissemination often preferred by West African women for creative possibilities not afforded in more “enduring” printed formats. Reckoning with ephemerality as a practice, therefore, can help illuminate the ambivalence with or even disinterest in print itself that informed women's creative choices.

To be sure, Bâ's and Seye's festival poems reiterate the ongoing need for expanding the archive beyond conventional sources. For some, they may even invite the possibility of knitting together the earliest writing of francophone Black women with these poems in a freshly assembled, more gender-inclusive (if still binary) genealogy of negritude. As I have written elsewhere, however, gestures of retrieval that expand the canon must be paired

with investigations into gendered relations of power that determine why women may have avoided, refused, or lacked interest in canonization (Fejzula). Bâ described herself in a letter as “obstinée, je suis d'un temperament qui défie” (“obstinate, I am of a temperament that defies”; Ndiaye 48), and Younoussé Seye remains proud of her self-described “pimenté” (“spicy”) character. I take these self-descriptions up as an invitation to reflect on the reasons so few West African women published poetry, despite their love of the genre. For the festival poems were only two examples of a lifelong lyric habit: Bâ's daughter testifies that her mother was “[d]ouée pour la poésie—sa première vocation” (“a gifted poet—her first vocation”; Ndiaye 37), while Seye periodically wrote poetry for her own art exhibitions (Fall). Contextualizing their creative choices within the longer history of published West African poetry in the long moment of decolonization reveals a wider pattern of ambivalence about publication.

Centering this ambivalence can help scholars rethink the gendered, “constitutive blind spot” not only within negritude's masculinist genealogy but within that of twentieth-century West African printed writing more broadly (Edwards, “Unsettled Legacies” 684).<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, Bâ's and Seye's festival poems and the larger contexts in which they circulated can help excavate the conditions that governed women's selective engagement in West African print for two thirds of the twentieth century. In what follows, I unpack this idea by analyzing Seye's 1969 festival poem followed by Bâ's 1977 FESTAC ode, and conclude with some conjectures about West African women's poetry from the 1940s to the 1970s.

### Revolutionary Ardor

Unlike most members of the Senegalese delegation, Seye experienced PANAF in 1969 as an auspicious occasion both professionally and personally. Although Seye was the only woman artist among the Senegalese delegation and exhibited just one painting, her work captivated viewers. It attracted such a large audience that based on the strength

of this painting alone, UNESCO offered Seye funding to undertake a residency anywhere in the world (she chose Côte d'Ivoire). Seye's peers, meanwhile, were embattled because "several French African nations seemed intent on discrediting the intellectual leadership which Senegal has long provided in matters pan-African" (Lindfors 5).

Famously, PANAF became the festival at which negritude was vehemently rebuked as counter-revolutionary. The Guinean president Sékou Touré led the charge in his address on opening day: "negritude is a false concept" that only inverted, instead of overturning, "racial discrimination as arbitrarily practised on the people of Africa and Asia and the coloured population in America and Europe" (32). Stanislas Adotevi, General Commissioner for Youth and Culture in Dahomey (now Benin), followed by decrying negritude as neocolonial "political mysticism" (85). He insisted, "There is no more place in Africa for a literature situated outside of revolutionary combat. Negritude is dead" (86).

In their responses, Senegalese delegates defended negritude, or sought to reconcile it with the revolutionary solidarity that pervaded PANAF. While not originally slated to speak beyond reading President Senghor's address, the Senegalese Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sport, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, decided it was necessary to answer the attacks. His address reframed negritude in the more popular idiom of Africanity, "a symbiotic alliance, the bringing together of cultures" from northern to southern Africa (149). M'Bow affirmed the significance of this form of culturalist solidarity for the diaspora, too, since "[t]he struggle of the Afro-American people today is taking place within this framework" (150).

After this speech, a poem written by Seye was distributed by the Senegalese delegation to symposium attendees. As with Bâ, the poem was attributed to Seye under the surname of her then husband, N'Diaye.<sup>5</sup>

Je crierai la Négritude  
tant que la liberté  
de l'Afrique ne sera pas totale

Je crierai la Négritude  
tant que toutes les races  
de l'Afrique ne seront pas symbiose . . .

Je crierai la Négritude  
tant qu'elle sera considérée  
comme doctrine raciste . . .

Je crierai la Négritude  
tant qu'à l'heure de l'exploration du cosmos  
le Nègre Américain  
n'aura pas brisé la segregation raciale . . .

Je crierai la Négritude  
car c'est ma liberté  
d'être Nègre (qtd. in Faik-Nzuji et al. 388)

I shall cry Negritude  
as long as the freedom  
of Africa is not complete . . .

I shall cry Negritude  
as long as all the races  
of Africa are not symbiotic . . .

I shall cry Negritude  
as long as it is considered  
a racist doctrine . . .

I shall cry Negritude  
as long as the American Negro  
at the hour of the exploration of the cosmos  
has not broken down racial segregation . . .

I shall cry Negritude  
because it is my liberty  
to be Negro (Lindfors 7)

Given the reference to the *Apollo 11* moon landing ("hour of the exploration of the cosmos"), which occurred on the same day that the festival opened, it is clear that Seye had written this poem expressly for the occasion. Considering that Touré had concluded his address with a (rather wooden) poem himself, Seye's poem offered a rejoinder to the symposium in more ways than one. She located the ongoing necessity for negritude, for instance, in denunciations like Touré's that misread the concept as a "racist doctrine." Even the repetition of "I shall cry" responded to another, earlier critique from Wole Soyinka in 1962: his infamous quip—"a tiger doesn't proclaim its tigritude, it pounces." Because the English "proclaim" was often translated as "crie" ("cry") in French, each stanza offered a satirical riposte to Soyinka.<sup>6</sup>

The use of “shall” secured negritude’s future necessity, while her examples related it to the urgent present: anticolonial liberation, Pan-African unity, American desegregation. There are even moments—language like “symbiotic” and references to segregation—that make one wonder whether M’Bow took cues from Seye, or if they at least shared their work with each other. Yet Seye chose irony and defiance in lieu of M’Bow’s mollification. With the unequivocal and chant-like anaphora, Seye refashioned negritude into what critics would have least expected: a revolutionary anthem. She accumulates three stanza’s worth of negation (“not complete,” “not symbiotic,” “not broken down”) only to conclude with affirmation. True liberty is made to be synonymous with Black being, without qualification or precipitating oppression. Not only does the negative anaphora recall Aimé Césaire’s foundational nondefinition of negritude in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*), but the choice of “Negro” rather than “Black” echoes Césaire’s earlier defiance in appropriating “Negro” for his neologism in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

### Festive Feelings

Eight years after PANAF, the controversy around negritude had not diminished. Before Bâ ever landed at “Lagos airport” to witness FESTAC (Bâ [2023]), the planning committee was in full uproar. M’Bow’s successor as minister of culture, Alioune Sène, had “gone as far as to threaten that Senegal will not participate in the festival, if the Colloquium, which is the heart of the Festival, is not restricted to Black countries and communities,” which effectively translated to exclusion of northern African countries (Apter 314). The former Nigerian president Chief Anthony Enahoro settled the matter unequivocally: “North African countries should participate fully in Festac” (Enahoro). Subsequent resistance from Senegalese delegates was met with greater alienation: President Senghor was stripped of his copatron status and a Cameroonian appointee replaced Senegal’s Alioune Diop as FESTAC’s secretary general (Apter 316).

Though Bâ was never party to these disputes, she would have witnessed much of the controversy replayed at FESTAC’s eventual Symposium on Black Civilization and Education. Bâ even mirrors Sène’s phrasing to describe it: “heart of the festival” (Bâ [2023]). Once again, Senegalese delegates felt besieged as attacks against negritude were reprised. Even M’Bow had returned to offer an address, this time in his role as director general of UNESCO. Yet for Bâ, debate was to be expected, and so too its resolution:

Malgré des heurts inévitables dans un débat de cette dimension,

Leurs efforts sont couronnés.

Le rapport générale de synthèse, fruit de travaux de groups,

Contribue à l’épanouissement de la culture noire.

(Bâ [1977])

Despite the inevitable conflicts in a conversation of this scale,

Their efforts are rewarded.

The general report, the fruit of the working groups,

Contributes to the flowering of Black culture (Bâ [2023])

In lieu of Seye’s defiance, Bâ chooses to undercut the tit for tat of dispute by smoothing it over. Though the two women share rhetorical devices and punctuation that contribute to their poems’ respective incantatory qualities—like anaphora and ellipses—Bâ uses them to create breathless wonder. In such a tonal context, there is no need to mount a defense of negritude. Instead, the poem culminates in a joyous choir: “I hear, accompanying your progressions, not ‘the veiled tom-tom of Black despair’ / But the ‘thousand choirs of negritude rediscovered’” (Bâ [2023]).

Here Bâ samples David Mandessi Diop, who, despite his untimely death in 1960, had already been anointed a great poet. Unlike Senghor, however, who had been his teacher in high school, Mandessi Diop was known as more militant—in the words of one critic, the “extremist voice of Negritude” (Roscoe 3). Given the debates Bâ would have witnessed at FESTAC, her manner of celebrating negritude is circumspect. By citing a

negritude poet other than Senghor, Bâ sidesteps a textual alliance with his cultural regime, despite her fondness for his poetry (Ndiaye 115). Since his death in 1960, however, Mandessi Diop had been absorbed into the Black poetic canon, militant or not. Quoting Mandessi Diop could have been a surer way to model cultural diplomacy—a poet who would have appealed to the militant as well as to the moderate parties at FESTAC.

Tucked into the final lines of the poem is a suggestive reason for all the celebration: “A hope for the quenching of sharp thirsts!” (Bâ [2023]). By 1977, the beginnings of an economic crisis that Thandika Mkandawire has called the “Great African Depression” were already being felt (Meagher 11). Prolonged drought in the Sahel had led to poor groundnut harvests and intense suffering, especially in rural Senegal—giving an acute meaning to “sharp thirst.” Only two years after FESTAC, Senegal would become the first African nation to accept a structural adjustment loan from the World Bank, suturing neoliberalism to neocolonial economics. As the embers of decolonial reverie waned, festivals were one of the few places where an exuberant, forward-looking energy could be relived. That Bâ might reclaim such futurity in her poem would have been a hope dearly bought.

### Historicizing Ambivalence

Bâ and Seye memorialized two separate Pan-African festivals with very different poetic sensibilities. Even so, there is something striking about these two women enjoying themselves to the hilt, while their male colleagues scampered around symposia defensively. As it happens, they also enjoyed the same festival, too. While Bâ traveled to FESTAC in her capacity as contributor to *L'Ouest Africain (The West African)*, Seye represented Senegal in her dual careers as artist and actress. Both women would have heard the FESTAC anthem booming from the stadium—which had been excerpted from a poem by a Black woman, Margaret Walker’s “For My People.”

It is not inconceivable that both Bâ’s and Seye’s poems could have been delivered from podiums;

lecterns and speechmaking were foreign to neither writer. However, improvisational formats were perhaps more ideally suited to their unique takes on negritude and Pan-Africanism. In lieu of the somber volumes collecting symposium speeches, both Bâ and Seye opted for forms of circulation that matched the ephemerality of the events themselves. Such choices were in keeping with a longer tradition of women’s writing in West Africa, which rarely appeared in official tomes from the 1940s to 1970s. Bâ’s oft-remarked late turn to published writing, in contrast with a more considerable private archive and newspaper contributions, is representative of Black women’s archives. Given the number of women who pursued civil service posts—including Bâ herself, as regional inspector of education in Senegal—bureaucratic records ought to be considered as a space of underacknowledged textuality. If one looks beyond European languages, too, one would find even more female compositions in ‘*ajami*, the modified Arabic script used for African language transcription.<sup>8</sup>

As scholars continue to search for and take seriously such texts, however, they also continue to grapple with the reasons they find such little printed material. As many have noted, the differential colonial educational regimes under British, French, and Portuguese rule explain part of this, as do the dual labors of work and home. Even in British West Africa, where women appeared in print much sooner, poets in the early anthologies of anglophone West African poetry stopped contributing to such collections in later editions. Minji Ateli, who outnumbered many of her male contributors with four poems in *Nigerian Student Verse* (1959), stopped sending poems out for publication after her marriage (Bower). Others, like Mabel Segun, the only female poet included in Frances Ademola’s collection of Nigerian writing, *Reflections* (1962), joined Ademola to work at the Nigerian Broadcasting Service in 1961, and only in the 1980s returned to publishing poetry.

The lack of a robust printed archive, however, could have to do with ambivalence toward or disinterest in print itself. The reasons for this ambivalence are numerous, but two accounts by Stephanie

Newell and Tobias Warner are useful in making sense of it. As Newell shows, the twentieth-century fetishization of print, a male-dominated technology in which men's authority was being literally produced and reproduced, represented a deliberate attempt to wrest intellectual authority from women's oral genres (*Newsprint Literature* 129). For instance, as late as 1975, Soyinka included only one woman, Noémia de Sousa, in *Black Poems of Africa*. Tellingly, the West African women who took jobs in radio broadcasting after independence (such as Segun, Ademola, and Mbaye d'Erneville) would quickly come to outnumber anthologized women poets. Perhaps technologies that prioritized the aural and oral afforded women a more hospitable medium than print. Beyond this, moreover, Warner has noted the sustained ambivalence surrounding textuality that marked West African literary production. Using Bâ's very own *So Long a Letter*, Warner unsettles the prevailing triumphalist critical treatment of print as a preferred mode of expression.

This ambivalence is substantiated by Bâ's daughter, who noted her mother's deep suspicion of the public attention that followed *So Long a Letter*. While suffering from the cancer that would take her life, Bâ "paniquait et commençait à avouer que toute cette publicité autour d'elle avait un rapport avec sa maladie" ("panicked and started to believe that all the publicity around her was related to her illness"; Ndiaye 107). Seye, meanwhile, was not one to shy away from publicity, and it was a journalist in the very same *L'Ouest Africain* who vividly remembered her "frémissement des narines pour exprimer sa colère contre les contempteurs de sa négritude" ("flaring of the nostrils expressing her anger against the detractors of her negritude") in Algiers (Brière).<sup>9</sup> Yet when I asked Seye about her PANAF poem, she scarcely remembered it or the colloquium, preferring instead to discuss the success of her painting at PANAF. Whether because of ambivalence or a preference for other media, the production and publication of Bâ's and Seye's festival poems help affirm that ephemerality constitutes not only the archive of so much Black women's writing but also a practice,

a modality in its own right that was deeply enabling of women's creative expression.

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## NOTES

1. During the last quarter of Bâ's life, Bâ and Seye lived roughly in the same neighborhood, though not literally next door to each other. Seye recounted this to me in a conversation we had on 30 May 2024.

2. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

3. See the work of Barthélémy; Bush; Jaji; Joseph-Gabriel; Newell, *Newsprint Literature* and *Power*; and Sharpley-Whiting, among others.

4. Even outside West Africa, the ambivalence over printed publication can help make sense of some of the decisions that informed Black women's creative choices. For instance, one of the women now restored to negritude's genealogy, Suzanne Roussi-Césaire, has a rich but limited published repertoire. Yet her children have testified to a lifelong writing practice, which she opted to dispose of rather than publish (Hunt-Ehrlich).

5. Bernth Lindfors, Clémentine Faik-Nzuji, Abbe Paul Mambe, and Kabongo Ilunga attended the festival colloquium and reprinted Seye's poem (Lindfors in a single-authored report for *Africa Today*, Faik-Nzuji, Mambe, and Ilunga in a joint-authored article for *Congo-Afrique* [Faik-Nzuji et al.]). Lindfors reproduced the poem in an English translation only, while Faik-Nzuji and her coauthors reproduced it in French only. While the French text and the English translation align, the two articles offer different titles for the poem. Lindfors gives the title as "Subject: Non-Liberty: Yes!," while Faik-Nzuji, Mambe, and Ilunga give the title as "Je crierai la Négritude" ("I Shall Cry Négritude"), the first line of each stanza. The variation on titles underscores the ephemeral format in which Seye's poem would have been distributed. Considering that Faik-Nzuji was a poet herself and the first published female writer in Congo, her coauthorship of the festival report is a reminder of the work and citational ethics that Black women performed as critics and journalists, too. I am grateful to Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik for directing me to the article in *Congo-Afrique*.

6. The quip might be translated in French as "un tigre ne crie pas sa tigritude, il bondit." Soyinka's iconic quip was said to have been delivered at the 1962 Conference of African Writers of English Expression at Makerere University, but in fact it appeared, in different wording, in the University of Ibadan student journal *The Horn* in 1960.

7. In the last third of *Cahier* where Césaire introduces the word *négritude*, he does so with three lines of negative anaphora, starting with "ma négritude n'est pas une pierre" ("my negritude is not a stone"; 36; 37). See also Edwards, "Aimé Césaire."

8. Take, for example, the edited collection of the work of Nana Asma'u (1793–1865), a leading religious scholar, poet, and intellectual during the Sokoto Caliphate in what is now northern Nigeria.

9. I am grateful to Warner for forwarding reproductions of articles about Seye in *L'Ouest Africain*.

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