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Nafissatou Dia Diouf's Critical Look at a "Senegal in the Midst of Transformation"

MOLLY KRUEGER ENZ

Abstract: Nafissatou Dia Diouf is a Senegalese author who has garnered recognition both in her home country and internationally since she began publishing in the 1990s. Her work, including fiction, poetry, children's literature, and philosophical essays, portrays diverse topics as they relate to her country such as education, marriage, polygamy, maternity/paternity, the influence of the West, the roles of business and government, and the power of the media. Diouf provides her reader with a comprehensive yet critical view of Senegal and shows how her homeland is affected by and reacts to the changes it currently faces. In a recent interview, Diouf stated: "For me, the first role of a citizen, even more when one has the power of influence such as in the case of writers, is to take a critical look (a constructive critique, of course) at one's own country." In this article that combines an interview with the author and textual analysis of her work, I explore how Nafissatou Dia Diouf critically examines contemporary Senegalese society and portrays a country in the process of transition and transformation. Through her visionary writing, Diouf works to construct a new type of Senegalese society and identity of which she and her fellow citizens can be proud.

Senegalese author Nafissatou Dia Diouf has garnered acclaim both in Senegal and internationally since she began publishing in the 1990s. She won several noteworthy awards early in her literary career including the following: *Prix du Jeune Écrivain Francophone* (France; 1999), *Prix Francomania* sponsored by Radio-Canada (Canada; 1999), and *Prix de la Fondation Léopold Sédar Senghor* (Senegal; 2000). Diouf was featured by the journal *Notre Librairie* as an emerging writer of African literature in 2005. The same year, she represented Senegal at the Francophone Games in Niamey, Niger and won the jury prize in the literary category. Despite Diouf's lengthy publication record and international recognition, critical studies on her are very limited with the exception of a handful of articles in various Senegalese newspapers and magazines.¹

Nafissatou Dia Diouf was born in Senegal's capital city of Dakar in 1973 where she attended primary and secondary school. She then went on to complete university studies in Bordeaux, France at Michel de Montaigne University. Here, she obtained a bachelor's degree in applied foreign languages as well as a degree in industrial systems management.² She also earned a master's degree in telecommunications management from the *École*

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<http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v14/v14i3a4.pdf>

Supérieure Multinationale des Télécommunications in Dakar. Although she did not pursue formal literary studies during her career in higher education, she was always passionate about reading, manipulating words, and writing.³ In an article for the online newspaper *Dakarvoice.com* the author explains her origins as a writer: “In my first essay written when I was 12 years old, I described the scene of a birth with so much precision that my mother couldn’t believe it.”⁴ Just over a decade later, Diouf’s short stories were first published in the Senegalese women’s magazine *Amina*, and she has since written and published a wide variety of texts including short stories, poetry, children’s literature, and essays.⁵ In her work, she examines diverse topics as they relate to her country such as education, marriage, polygamy, maternity/paternity, the influence of the West, the role of business, and the power of the media. Diouf provides her reader with a comprehensive view of contemporary Senegalese society and depicts how Senegal is affected by and reacts to the changes it faces. In a recent interview, Diouf stated: “For me, the first role of a citizen, even more when one has the power of influence such as in the case of writers, is to take a critical look (a constructive critique, of course) at one’s own country.”⁶ Combining an interview with the author and textual analysis of her work, I explore in this article how Nafissatou Dia Diouf critically examines contemporary Senegalese society and portrays a country in the midst of transformation.⁷

A New African Image and Identity

In a 2007 interview with *Amina*, Diouf posits that the youth in her country must be able to speak about their society in a critical manner, including “the ills that preoccupy them, situations that touch them or make them laugh.”⁸ These everyday situations are what she explores in her writing and argues that African literature must be reenergized. In my recent interview with Diouf, she describes the potential impact authors can have in forging a new African image and identity.

Molly Krueger Enz (MKE): What is the role of writers in creating a new and positive image of Africa?

Nafissatou Dia Diouf (NDD): Writers are observers by definition, those that sense the weakest of signals who have perhaps this particular sensibility that allows them to perceive social and political happenings well before the public at large. Or else, they place themselves at a sufficient distance to analyze the facts removed from their immediate dimension and their social urgency. Writers are those that witness their time and era in a more critical and analytical way than journalists, for example. Their role is also to highlight the beautiful potential or virtues of their continent so that the entire world has a more just vision of who we are. For that matter, the best writers among us, through their talent, creativity, and art, are true ambassadors of our cultures and values. Thanks to the cultural mixings that allow for exchanges and voyages, literature from Africa and about Africans is fruitful elsewhere. The world of ideas only has borders for those who are narrow-minded!

MKE: You pay homage to the great political and literary figure Léopold Sédar Senghor in your poem “Mame Sédar.”⁹ You write: “Rest in peace, Mame Sédar / Because Senghor is dead / But rhyme remains queen.”¹⁰ In your opinion, how has Senegalese literature changed since Senghor’s time?

NDD: Senghor marked the country with his political but even moreso his cultural footprint. His influence as a poet and man of culture permitted our country to shine in all four corners

of the earth. Inside our borders, a true cultural policy was carried out. Since his retreat from public affairs and death, Senghor remains in our country's heritage and in the hearts of all Senegalese, but it is true that culture has been brutally marginalized. Great writers linked to this cultural movement emerged in the 60s and 70s such as Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Cheikh Aliou Ndao, Birago Diop, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, Ousmane Sembène, Boubacar Boris Diop. However, since then one can argue that inspiration has given way. Even if a few writers emerge in the new generation, we are far from the golden age that constituted the Senghorian years.

MKE: In her article "La fonction politique des littératures africaines écrites," published in 1981, Mariama Bâ says that the African woman writer has a particularly critical mission and that her literary presence must be seen and recognized in order for Africa to develop and grow: "She must, more than her masculine co-authors, paint a picture of the condition of the African woman."¹¹ In your opinion, must the African woman writer have a particular mission? What is your mission as a Senegalese woman writer?

NDD: Personally, I do not write with a mission in mind or a particular objective. That said, my concerns as a writer are never far from the concerns of the society, of my countrymen and women, and of the women who still today suffer every sort of social weight. I realize that we have a real combat to undertake because we are leaders of opinion and our ideas are driven by our books, read and debated. As a woman, I realize also that I am more sensitive to the condition of my sisters, knowing that many of them cannot express themselves, denounce oppression and injustice, or even defend themselves or make their opinion heard. So, whether one wants it or not, this mission imposes itself on us, as women but also spokespeople.

MKE: I have recently read your short story collections *Le Retour d'un si long exil* (2000) and *Cirque de Missira* (2010). What were your goals in writing these stories? What image of Senegalese or African women did you want to show to your readers?

NDD: Through my short stories, I try to describe situations lived by women, but not only women. I am against all forms of inequality, especially when it is linked to gender. We, woman and men, are all people with the same base value. The only difference is in the capacity for some to distinguish themselves by their own merit and value. My short stories recount the paths, sometimes difficult, of ordinary people who are heroes of resistance and struggle.

Resistance and Cultural Changes

These ordinary "heroes of resistance and struggle" are represented in *Le Retour d'un si long exil* (2000), Diouf's first published collection of short stories that explore the idea of change. The compilation aptly opens with an epigraph by Omar Khayyam, an eleventh-century Persian poet and mathematician: "Life passes, rapid caravan! Stop your race and try to be happy."¹² Diouf alerts her reader to the rapidity as well as the fragility of life as a sort of *carpe diem* cautionary message. The first text, "Le Retour d'un si long exil," sets the tone for the stories that follow, as it recounts the experience of a young woman who returns to her native village after spending time abroad to pursue her university studies. In the first paragraph, the narrator is happy to return home after several years "in exile," but she notices some unpleasant transformations that have occurred since her departure. Two central themes of movement and change are highlighted:

I returned from my too long exile. This land that I had not tread upon for five years appeared to me today hotter and more arid than in my memory. Its skin was cracked, its body lapidated, its complexion naturally dark had taken on brown and ocher colors, its gaping wounds were thirsty for rain. But I found it just as I loved it.¹³

The use of the noun “exile” and adverb “too” in the first line are critical, as they highlight not only the narrator’s desire to return home but also her sense of displacement while living abroad. Diouf equates the young narrator’s unnamed home country to an aging and wounded person who has been beaten down by its harsh climate. Despite the fact that her homeland is “cracked” and “lapidated,” the narrator’s love for it has not diminished. This wounded and thirsty place that begs for love is an apt metaphor for Africa as a whole. Despite the continent’s poverty, harsh climate, and past wounds inflicted as a result of colonization, it is a beautiful place that should instill pride in its inhabitants rather than shame or the desire to flee. The narrator has been gone for a considerable amount of time, but she insists that she would recognize her country no matter how many changes it has undergone: “I would have recognized them among a thousand, my land, my people, my body and my blood.”¹⁴

Although the symbolic baobab trees are still as beautiful and imposing as when she left, she quickly realizes that many things are no longer the same. This fertile “oasis in the desert” whose fish, flora, and fauna lived here “without being worried” was now in jeopardy of extinction.¹⁵ She understands these differences but faces them with “a heavy heart.”¹⁶ She is disappointed to no longer be able to see the water, as *toubabs*, or white Westerners, have invaded the village and built large multi-story buildings that block the view. The narrator must “adapt to the new configuration” as she fights feelings of displacement due to societal and cultural changes in her country. Although “*Le Retour d’un si long exil*” may seem autobiographical at first glance, Diouf claims that this is not entirely true. She explains her reaction to these cultural changes that she witnessed upon her return to Senegal after completing her studies in France.

MKE: The narrator of the first short story in *Le Retour d’un si long exil* describes her return home after her “too long an exile.” Is this story autobiographical?

NDD: Not exactly. It is true that I lived several years outside of Senegal and upon my return, I was struck by what my compatriots called ‘progress.’ I found that because of the desire to imitate the West, we were losing our soul and were no longer ourselves. One’s home country is often dreamed about and idealized when one is far away and choked by nostalgia. In a sense, it is Ariadne’s thread that allows one to become more attached to something when one no longer has a point of reference.¹⁷ We often forget that time passes and societies evolve. Yes for progress, but we must pay attention to not lose our specificities and values.

Destroying the Myth of Omnipotence

Through her work, Diouf champions progress and positive change in order to create a stronger society. One such example can be found in the story “*Dérive en eaux troubles*,” featured in *Le Retour d’un si long exil*. Diouf breaks the stereotype of the omnipotent male who is not allowed to show signs of perceived weakness or emotions through the character of Souleymane. He struggles to come to terms with the impending birth of his first child

and his role as a father. However, for his wife Awa, motherhood is not simply the ability to conceive but rather a lifelong responsibility: "Maternity, for her...was a responsibility, a true role for which she had attempted to prepare herself."¹⁸ While she courageously embraces this new role, her husband is not as excited or confident. As Awa is in the hospital with uneven contractions, he becomes anxious about how he will handle caring for a newborn. Unable to concentrate at work, he decides to leave early and go to the cinema followed by a bar. He asks himself the following question: "But what do other parents of newborns do? Do they all have this same immense joy mixed with a profound anxiety...?"¹⁹ In the meantime, Awa faces complications and a severe hemorrhage. After looking at her chart, the doctor notices that her husband is a universal donor. Thus, Souleymane's absence not only hurts Awa emotionally but also physically. Fortunately, she survives the ordeal and gives birth to a healthy baby girl via cesarean section. She is greatly disappointed and saddened by her husband's actions, but now she must focus on her child: "She fought for her daughter. Her daughter needed her. She glanced around the room but Souleymane still was not there."²⁰ When he finally does arrive at the hospital with red lipstick stains on his collar in a "state of advanced inebriation," he grabs his newborn baby girl, slumps against the wall, and begins to cry.²¹ Awa battles for her own life, showing her strength and dedication to her daughter. Souleymane, on the other hand, lacks courage and fears that he cannot the responsibilities of fatherhood. He is a character who questions his paternal role and openly displays his vulnerability.

MKE: I have the impression that the male characters in your short stories are often represented as weak. I am thinking, for example, of Souleymane in "Dérive aux eaux troubles" who misses the birth of his child because he goes to a bar and arrives drunk at the hospital; or Badou in "Bonne nuit, petite fleur" who misses the flight for his honeymoon and as a result, his wife leaves without him. Could you speak a bit about this portrayal?

NDD: In my writing, I speak in general about human weakness, sometimes about the lack of courage or on the contrary, the extraordinary courage of certain people. My goal is not to caricaturize one or the other of the sexes, but perhaps I attempt to reestablish an equilibrium in the perception that we have of men in Africa: all powerful, without emotion, required to excel in society, in particular in front of their family and loved ones, and to create admiration. Yet, these are people made of skin and blood, who anguish over things, their faults, their temporary weaknesses, sometimes their lack of courage, even their defects. To describe what is behind the scenes contributes to debunking the myth of the "superman" and finally render them as humans. It is without a doubt a way for me to invite men to accept their fallibility without it being an apology for weakness. This helps also with the deconstruction of the myth of omnipotence that has contributed to creating a chauvinistic society.

Critique of Polygamy

One way in which Diouf criticizes chauvinism is through her depiction of polygamy and the disastrous results it can have on the women it affects. In *La Parole aux négresses (Speak Out, Black Sisters)*, considered by some critics as the seminal book on African feminism, author Awa Thiam intermingles her own reflections with personal testimonies of African women. She writes:

Black women have been silent for too long. Are they now beginning to find their voices? Are they claiming the right to speak for themselves? Is it not high time that they discovered their own voices, that—even if they are unused to speaking for themselves—they now take the floor, if only to say that they exist, they are human beings—something that is not always immediately obvious—and that, as such they have a right to liberty, respect, and dignity?²²

Nafissatou Dia Diouf's views on women's rights to liberty, respect, and dignity echo those of Thiam. She advocates for women to make their own decisions, express themselves freely, and pose questions rather than accept societal roles dictated to them.

In the story "A Tire-d'aile," found in *Le Retour d'un si long exil*, Malick loses interest in his wife when she has difficulty conceiving. After he deserts their "love nest," the narrator feels so alone and guilty that she is "ready to make any concession for him to sleep next to me again. No, I was not proud of myself. All of my convictions that I thought were unshakeable—particularly by a man—were smashed today like that, like the snap of a dish towel."²³ The pressure she feels to conceive and the guilt after not being able to are common literary motifs in African women's writing. According to Odile Cazenave, "marriage is not seen as an end in itself anymore than it is considered for love or the notion of sharing that it may entail. Children and the official recognition that it gives women are what justify marriage."²⁴

The narrator could not have predicted how inviting a young university student to live with them would change her life. Aïssa, the daughter of Malick's friend, is moving to the capital from the countryside to study history and is fourteen years younger than the narrator. With Aïssa to help with domestic tasks, the narrator now has more time to "make herself beautiful" for her husband's arrival home at the end of the day. However, he has simply lost interest despite all her efforts. After the narrator returns from the hospital where she has had an operation to help her conceive, Malick announces that he will be sleeping in Aïssa's room, as he took her for his second wife in a private ceremony a day ago. The narrator instinctively grabs Aïssa by her hair and drags her outside in a state of agitation: "I was like a crazy woman...I heard him screaming...that I was not normal, that I didn't deserve respect, that in the end he did well, etc. I didn't even listen to him."²⁵ Instead of quietly accepting her husband's decision to marry a second wife, the narrator reacts viscerally and openly displays her emotions. After crying endlessly, the narrator admits that she cannot understand how she could be so naïve. "Most of all, I cannot come to terms with such a degree of treason by a man to whom one gives one's youth and love unconditionally...I feel disillusioned. Malick fled like that, cowardly, he ran swiftly."²⁶ The narrator in "À Tire-d'aile" reclaims her voice in order to speak out against the "treason" of which she feels her husband is guilty.

MKE: Many Senegalese women writers such as Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, Ken Bugul, and Fatou Diome treat the controversial subject of polygamy in their work. It is a recurring trope in *Le Retour d'un si long exil* and *Cirque de Missira* as well. What is your opinion about polygamy in Senegal? Does it represent the same values and objectives as in the past?

NDD: In our societies, one often frames polygamy in religion in order to make those who suffer the most accept it: women. Thus, these are moralizing and guilt-creating discourses, even sometimes menacing. A woman should not mention her feelings and should hold

them back for the good of her children. It is more of a tradition than a divine commandment: a societal tradition where men make the decisions and women do not have a voice. However, while on the surface they show dignity, most women who are in polygamous households (not all, I recognize) suffer from sharing their husband, tensions, and unavoidable rivalries. Our former generation of female authors courageously spoke up, particularly to describe the disarray it caused these women. We should dare to go further and to refuse. I, for one, make no apologies in assuming this.

Reconceptualizing Marriage, Maternity, and Femininity

Diouf routinely features female characters that courageously work to create their own unique identities. In her story "Sagar," also from *Le Retour d'un si long exil*, the eponymous heroine refuses to be confined to a polygamous marriage. After two years of marriage to Alioune, the protagonist's belly is empty, "like a sea without fish, a tree without fruit, an infertile land. She was useless."²⁷ In Wolof society, a woman must bear her first child within nine to ten months of marriage. "Maternity for a woman was the center of life."²⁸ Due to Sagar's "difference," or inability to conceive, her husband Alioune decided to take a second, third, and finally a fourth wife.²⁹ Despite Sagar's perceived infertility, at the age of forty-four she experiences what she describes as a miracle and becomes pregnant. When Alioune does not fulfill his repeated promises to leave his younger wives, she divorces him and raises her son without his support. Sagar is thankful for the close relationship she shares with her son and does not carry any regrets despite the sadness she felt in her marriage. "She began to live at the moment where this embryo became attached to the hollow of her belly. This embryo that was today a father and that made her become reborn when she no longer believed in life."³⁰ Sagar represents the courageous women who refuse to accept a life dictated to them by their husband or society. Even though Sagar's name signifies "rag" and she is viewed as an "object" rather than a wife or woman in the eyes of her husband, she refuses to accept this definition. She becomes a ray of light for her son and claims that she "had a life full of waiting, but then full of happiness."³¹ In her book *Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence*, Irène Assiba d'Almeida posits that contemporary African women writers have begun to challenge stereotypes and accurately represent their roles as women and mothers: "This quest for self-knowledge has led African women to begin representing themselves in fiction, and to gradually call into question the male view of themselves as mythical and symbolic figures...women have emphasized the necessity of abandoning the idealization of women."³² Sagar does not represent the mythical figure of the African woman, but rather a mother who rejects polygamy and subsequently raises her son independently. Diouf helps to create a new image of the contemporary Senegalese woman who chooses her own destiny without relying on the moral, familial, or financial support of her husband.

MKE: It seems that an important and recurring theme in your short stories is conjugal relationships and marital problems. Could you speak about the role of marriage in Senegal?

NDD: Marriage has an extremely social role, even more in Senegal where religion carries considerable weight in the life of an individual. When one marries, one does not marry a man or a woman but a family with an initial decision and decisions throughout the marriage that exceed the narrow setting of the couple. At this level, one could consider that the family, the oldest members and parents in particular, play an intrusive role, especially in the

eyes of foreigners. However, traditionally it is a system that worked well, indeed it even functioned as a regulator. Things change in modern and urban societies under the influence of international media that present us with other management methods for families and couples. Therefore, that which was accepted, perhaps tolerated (polygamy, levirate marriage, “giving” one’s child to a family member who doesn’t have a child, etc.), can seem today inconceivable or at least not compatible with our current way of life.³³ Furthermore, the fact that women never participated in decisions that concerned her did not mean that she was consenting. Today, women have been uninhibited, liberated, and even if they pay a steep price, they do not hesitate to refuse and denounce.

MKE: The famous poem “Femme noire” by Senghor is sometimes criticized for reinforcing the stereotypical image of the woman as a mythical symbol of “Mother Africa.”³⁴ Mariama Bâ argues: “The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough.”³⁵ Do you agree with this statement? Maternity is an important theme in your fiction. In your opinion, what is the role of the mother in Senegalese society?

NDD: In Africa, beyond the very important biological role (for the survival of the human race), women play a social role linked to their status as women, a role that holds real power, as long as it does not confine them uniquely to this role. I am not the type to reject this somewhat cliché side of the African woman, a mother who reigns over her family and offspring. On the contrary, she ensures the equilibrium and development of her family members. In fact, many African societies are matrilineal, which grants significant power in terms of the transmission of ancestry, patrimony, heritage, etc. For me, it is about preserving all of this and conquering new territories, particularly in the public domain. It is important that women are citizens in their own right, that they can publicly defend their ideas and fight their own battles without complexes or obstacles—not necessarily or exclusively feminist but for the betterment of their society. We should refuse to be confined to familial and private spheres but rather conquer spaces of public expression and contribution without denying that which creates our specificity of being women (femininity, maternity, protection of family interests).

MKE: What is the current reality of Senegalese women and the role of Senegalese women in contemporary society?

NDD: Senegalese women, African in general, have power but it is traditionally confined to familial and social circles. Concerning the economic sphere, they were either in the productive sector (agriculture, for example) or in small business. Things have changed enormously in the past thirty years. More and more go to school, pursue their education, and obtain good degrees. They naturally claim their place in society through their roles in business, administration, and in the political sphere as well. For this, they must fight two times harder for a result that is not even guaranteed. Unfortunately, we still live in a chauvinistic society with men who are still not ready, because of their education, to make space for us. I have to admit that President Abdoulaye Wade very much believed in and encouraged women.³⁶ It is thanks to him that the system of parity for all elective and semi-elective functions (National Assembly) was integrated. It was under his presidency that Senegal saw its first female Prime Minister and more women in important governmental roles. The change in mentalities will be made at the institutional level and in the familial sphere notably with an indispensable change in the education of our girls and boys!

Changing Mentalities

Diouf firmly believes in the power of education and that young Senegalese children should be proud of their country and gain the essential tools to make it better. It is this image that she attempts to portray in her writing: "It is necessary to show an Africa that moves, that has faith in the future, that invests in its children while wanting to give them all the tools to live and integrate into a globalized society without any shame whatsoever."³⁷ Diouf criticizes the tendency to do things only for the sake of appearances and shows how certain traditions have the potential to generate feelings of shame.

In "Mémoires d'un chauffeur de taxi," the final story in *Le Retour d'un si long exil*, a Dakarois taxi driver named Modou Cissé warns the reader that in order to understand Senegal and its culture, you must know the following: "One must understand something: in Senegal, everything is a matter of dignity. A question of *sutura*. One cannot get enough to eat but it is essential to keep up appearances."³⁸ In this story, Diouf critically examines the role of young *talibés* who are sent to live with a *serigne* in Dakar to learn the teachings of Islam.³⁹ Instead of being nurtured by their teachers, the *talibés* are often required to beg in the streets to support themselves. Moudou notices a young boy walking with bare feet along the cold asphalt one night well past midnight. When Moudou asks him what he is doing out alone so late, the boy responds that he had not collected the sum of money that his *serigne* demanded in order to return to the Koranic school. He was told that if he didn't earn this money, he would have to sleep on the pavement outside. "In the middle of the homeless, the drugged, and the crazy, he was the only innocent one trying to survive in the jungle of the night, abandoned to all the fears and all the dangers."⁴⁰ After the taxi driver feeds the boy, he discovers that the boy left his village of Linguère for Dakar because he was the oldest child and his father wanted him to become a scholar of Islam. Moudou convinces the boy to be driven home, and his parents barely recognize their son upon arrival. They are ecstatic that he has returned but surprised by his appearance and mistreatment. Diouf paints a clear picture of the exploitation of *talibés* who are sent to Dakar under the auspices of learning the teachings and practices of Islam.⁴¹

MKE: Could you elaborate on this "change of mentalities" that should be made?

NDD: A society does not define itself uniquely by rules and laws that must be respected. The real revolution will be the work that we do ourselves. I dream of an egalitarian society where it is guaranteed that everyone will thrive, men as well as women, each according to the personal investment that he or she makes. We still suffer too much from pseudo-religious obstacles or those linked to traditions. The world is evolving. We no longer live like we did 200 years ago; we no longer have the same way of life. We have accepted to open ourselves up to the world. We should agree to hold up a mirror and take a look at ourselves without indulgence, although of course without renouncing who we are intrinsically: our values, our culture, and our historical heritage. An unequal society is a fragile society.

Senegal in the Midst of Transformation

In her recent books *Sociobiz* (2010) and *Sociobiz 2* (2013), Diouf features chronicles focused on themes related to contemporary Senegalese culture and society that juxtapose profound philosophical analysis with humor and illustrations by Samba Ndar Cissé. In the first work,

Sociobiz, Diouf highlights the economic and business practices in her country, depicting an “Africa simultaneously proud of its performances and conscious of its handicaps.”⁴² *Sociobiz 2* follows the same format evoked in the first book but focuses on societal and cultural practices in contemporary Senegal. In his preface, Cheikh Tidiane Mbaye, former President and CEO of Sonatel, describes his perception of the book’s message.⁴³ “In my opinion, if a message can be taken from these thirty chronicles, beyond the caricatures and exaggerations, it is the invitation the author makes to this ‘New Type of Senegalese’ for a profound transformation: in one’s life, one’s environment, one’s work, one’s relationships with others, and in particular with one’s link to the productive sector, with the ‘hand that feeds us’.”⁴⁴ Diouf articulates Africa’s potential to be a player in the world’s economy and encourages her fellow citizens to invent their “own model of development” through civic action.⁴⁵

MKE: Cheikh Tidiane Mbaye poses some essential questions in his preface to *Sociobiz 2*. He asks: “Has the ‘homo senegalensis’ examined in the first volume fundamentally evolved? What lessons from history has he retained in order to improve his way of life, performance of his enterprise, evolution of his society, and his children’s future? Have the recent political events of the country awoken the civic responsibility that was dormant in each Senegalese and succeeded in uniting the society in a unique spirit of patriotism?”⁴⁶ What were your objectives in writing *Sociobiz 2*, and do you feel that Senegalese society is united after the recent political events?⁴⁷

NDD: We saw the Senegalese mobilize, come together, and block against arbitrariness. It is said that there is strength in numbers, and the last elections showed that. However, with danger in the past, we feel this solidarity relapse and the fight fragment, at the very least weaken. *Sociobiz 2* was written in the context of strong political and social tensions, at a moment when the ‘homo senegalensis’ awoke to its citizen consciousness thanks to a spontaneous but beneficial movement. These are the great moments of a nation that I was lucky to witness and most of all to retell and attempt to analyze by stepping back. The question is: what did we do with this momentum? Did it fundamentally change our capacity to take destiny into our own hands? I fear that the answer is no, and this makes me sad. Should we only mobilize ourselves when faced with imminent danger or should we be vigilant citizens at all times and in all places in order to construct our society together?

MKE: What circumstances provoked the birth of the *Y’en a marre* movement and what is your opinion of it?

NDD: Those that I evoked earlier. The feelings of irreparable danger, fragility, lack of frame of reference for our youth, and the bleak future paved the way for the *Y’en a marre* movement. Moreover, the name of the movement is very eloquent. It is a cry of desperation. It is not simply “I want” but on the contrary “I no longer want.” It does not imply construction but rejection. The challenge now is to transform this rejection, this rage, this beneficial energy into something positive, proactive, a project for our society to construct and then to maintain.

MKE: In your fiction as well as your recent essays *Sociobiz* and *Sociobiz 2*, you criticize certain aspects of Senegalese society while simultaneously showing the beauty of your country. What is your image of contemporary Senegal and how do your texts reflect it?

NDD: We live in a Senegal that is in the midst of transformation.⁴⁸ I love my country and I chose to live here despite the fact that I had career possibilities elsewhere. For me, it was

important to play a role in building this country, to being close to my family, to seeing my children grow up and that all together we would work to construct our social project. It is true that sometimes my analyses are rather severe, but they are not unfair. The last thing we need is indulgence. It is because we love our country, for its virtues, for its values, for its resistance and the optimism of its people, that we should not let things that are not going well continue or keep quiet about them.

MKE: And what is not going well at this point in time? In your opinion, which problems are the most urgent to resolve?

NDD: I think that there is a crisis of values, a loss of reference points for the youth who no longer believe in the future, who no longer think they have a place or utility in society. They are growing up spontaneously, really without much support (with parents who have often resigned their roles). Consequently, they are in survival mode and potentially aggressive because they feel unappreciated. Some take refuge in artificial paradises or religious extremism. We must restore hope for our youth and give them high quality education, jobs, and a real place and use in our society. At the institutional level, one of the ills that poisons us is poor governance and its corollary in the vicious cycle: impunity. If impunity didn't exist, there wouldn't be poor governance.

Visions for the Future and Visionary Writing

MKE: I would like to continue with this idea of "mutation" that plays a key role in your texts. I noticed that you have an essay entitled "Mutations" in your new book *Sociobiz 2*. Which mutations are positive, which are negative, and what is your vision for the future of Senegal?

NDD: The chronicle "Mutations" in the text you cite makes reference to modernity and the manner in which it is lived by our societies. I pay special attention to that which involves technologies and the virtual world that now blurs the boundaries of information, knowledge, cultures, and people. At the same time, geographical boundaries have never been so rigid. The cultural question therefore becomes essential: what do we have to win and lose in opening up to the world? How can we enrich ourselves with new ideas and practices, expand our mental horizons all the while keeping and sharing our culture, our values, and in short our essence with the world? How can we ensure that these exchanges are balanced, based on give-give and not a culture (dominant Western) that imposes itself on us and drives us to deny who we are? You see that the question is complex and that the answer cannot be definitive. Our role as writers is more to pose questions, bring light to and raise awareness about issues rather than give answers. There is not a positive or negative transformation in itself. Everything is in the manner in which we integrate progress, as a necessity in the evolution of people and their societies, all the while being careful to stay true to ourselves and to take and give our best.

Conclusion

Through her writing, Nafissatou Dia Diouf does not perpetuate stereotypes but rather critically examines the ills her country faces and encourages her compatriots to co-construct a better society. In *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists*, Odile Cazenave argues that writers such as Calixthe Beyala and Véronique Tadjo "define a new

political novel in the feminine mode.” By questioning women’s roles and integrating both male and female narrative voices, these writers allow us to look toward the future. Her description of Beyala and Tadjou aptly applies to Nafissatou Dia Diouf’s writing and message as well.

This new writing is truly visionary, as it offers us an alternative vision, one of a better Africa. In their *prise de parole*, these women strive to establish a more active interaction between writer and readers in order to call on them directly and bring them into the quest for a new social and political balance. Both men and women are forced to conduct their own individual reassessments of their participation in the construction of the African continent.⁴⁹

Nafissatou Dia Diouf’s depiction of everyday people and situations in Senegal makes her work innovative and representative of the society in which she lives. Through her visionary writing, she “gives her best” and works to create a new type of Senegal of which she and her fellow citizens can be proud.

Notes

- 1 I am not aware of any scholarly journal articles that have been published on the author. On Diouf’s personal website, <http://www.nafidiadiouf.net/>, there is a section entitled “Dans la presse” (In the press) with links to articles from Senegalese newspapers and magazines such as *Amina*, *Sud Quotidien*, and *Le Matin*. Diouf is featured in James Gaash’s anthology *La Nouvelle sénégalaise: texte et contexte* (2000) that includes an interview with the author and the short story “Le Retour d’un si long exil.” Additionally, she is included in Kathleen Madigan’s reader *Neuf Nouvelles: Hommage aux Sénégalaises* published in 2008. This collection is intended for use in the advanced French literature and culture classroom and features both an interview with the author as well as her short story “Le Rêve d’Amina.”
- 2 Mikolo 2006, p. 57.
- 3 Bikindou 2007, p. 102.
- 4 Laye 2012, no pagination. “Dans mon premier essai à l’âge de 12 ans, j’ai décrit la scène d’un accouchement avec tellement d’exactitude que ma maman n’en revenait pas.”
- 5 Mikolo 2006, p. 57. “*Amina* is my first publication experience and I thank M. Michel de Breteuil to have given me this opportunity ten years ago! I was already writing short stories on diverse topics that touchend me, and this was like a helium balloon. To know that my short stories could attract a larger public audience was the first encouraging step of my career.” “*Amina* est ma première expérience de publication et je remercie M. Michel de Breteuil de m’avoir donné cette chance il y a dix ans! J’écrivais déjà des nouvelles sur divers sujets qui me touchaient et ce fut pour moi comme un ballon de sonde. Savoir que mes nouvelles pouvaient plaire à un large public a été le premier encouragement de ma carrière.”
- 6 Diouf 2013, interview with author.
- 7 The interview remarks presented in this article come from questions posed via e-mail between June and December 2013 and a personal interview with Diouf on June 22, 2013 in Dakar. The interviews were conducted in French, and all translations to English are

- by the author. Interview transcripts are in the author's possession.
- 8 Bikiindou 2007, p. 102. "des maux qui les préoccupent, des situations qui les touchent ou qui les font rire."
 - 9 "Mame Sédar" is included in Diouf's collection of poetry entitled *Primeur*. Léopold Sédar Senghor was a co-founder of the literary and intellectual Negritude movement. He is also celebrated author and politician who served as Senegal's first president from 1960-1980 and was the first African elected to the *Académie Française* in 1983.
 - 10 Diouf 2003, p. 39. "Mais repose en paix, Mame Sédar / Car Senghor est mort / Mais la rime reste reine!"
 - 11 Bâ 1981, p. 6. "Elle doit, plus que ses pairs masculins, dresser un tableau de la condition de femme africaine."
 - 12 Diouf 2000, p. 9. "La vie passe, rapide caravane! Arrête ta monture et cherche à être heureux."
 - 13 Ibid., p. 11. "Je revenais de mon trop long exil. Cette terre que je n'avais pas foulée depuis un lustre m'apparaissait aujourd'hui plus chaude et plus aride que dans mon souvenir. Sa peau était craquelée, sa chair lapidée, son teint naturellement sombre avait pris des couleurs brunes et ocres, ses plaies béantes étaient assoiffées de pluie. Mais je la retrouvais telle que je l'aimais."
 - 14 Ibid., p. 11. "Je les aurais reconnus entre mille, ma terre, mes gens, ma chair et mon sang."
 - 15 Ibid., p. 16. "cette oasis dans le désert"
 - 16 Ibid., p. 16. "le cœur gros"
 - 17 Ariadne is a Greek mythological figure. She was the daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë from Crete who gave Theseus the thread with which he found his way out of the Minotaur's labyrinth. Ariadne's thread refers to a method of problem solving where one exhausts all available routes of logic in order to determine a solution. It is often used interchangeably with the expression "trial and error."
 - 18 Ibid., p. 41. "La maternité, pour elle...c'était une responsabilité, un véritable rôle auquel elle avait tenté de se préparer."
 - 19 Ibid., p. 45. "Mais comment font les autres parents de nouveau-nés? Avaient-ils tous en eux cette immense joie mêlée à une angoisse profonde...?"
 - 20 Ibid., p. 48. "Elle luttait pour sa fille. Sa fille avait besoin d'elle. Elle jeta un coup d'œil circulaire dans la salle mais Souleymane n'était toujours pas là."
 - 21 Ibid., p. 49. "un état d'ébriété avancé"
 - 22 Thiam 1986, p. 15.
 - 23 Ibid., p. 86. "J'étais prête à faire n'importe quelle concession pour qu'il dorme à nouveau près de moi. Non, je n'étais pas fière de moi. Toutes mes convictions que je pensais inébranlables—surtout par un homme!—étaient aujourd'hui battues en brèche comme cela, comme d'un coup de torchon."
 - 24 Cazenave 2000, p. 108.
 - 25 Ibid., p. 93. "J'étais comme folle...Je l'entendais hurler...que je n'étais pas normale, que je ne méritais pas tant d'égards, que finalement, il avait bien fait, etc. Je ne l'écoutais même pas."
 - 26 Diouf 2000, p. 94. "Surtout, je n'arrive pas à réaliser à tel degré de trahison chez un homme à qui on a donné sa jeunesse et son amour sans condition...Je me sens désabusée."

- Malick avait fuit comme ça, lâchement, il s'était enfui à tire-d'aile."
- 27 Ibid., p. 111. "comme une mer sans poisson, un arbre sans fruit, une terre infertile. Elle était inutile."
- 28 Ibid., p. 114. "la maternité pour une femme était le centre de toute une vie." For more background on how African women writers since the 1980s have transformed traditional literary depictions of maternity and fertility, see Éloïse Brière's article "Le retour des mères dévorantes."
- 29 For a detailed study on polygamy as it relates to Wolof society, see Abdoulaye Bara Diop *La société wolof: tradition et changement*.
- 30 Ibid., p. 118. "Elle avait commencé à vivre à l'instant où cet embryon s'était nidé au creux de son ventre. Cet embryon qui était aujourd'hui père et qui l'avait fait revivre quand elle ne croyait plus à la vie."
- 31 Ibid., p. 118. "Elle avait une vie pleine d'attente puis remplie de bonheur."
- 32 Assiba d'Almeida 1994, p. 8.
- 33 Levirate marriage is an ancient Hebrew tradition that allows a man to marry his dead brother's widow in order to maintain his familial line. It is permitted under article 110 of the Senegalese Family Code created in 1972 and put into effect on January 1, 1973 that regulates marriage, divorce, succession, and custody. The Code can be accessed online through the Senegalese Ministry of Justice at the link provided in the bibliography.
- 34 For a detailed analysis of the Mother Africa trope in male-authored African literature, see Florence Stratton's *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. She writes: "The trope is...not just a periodic feature of the male literary tradition, it is one of its *defining* features." Stratton 1994, p. 50.
- 35 Bâ 1981, pp. 6-7. "Les chants nostalgiques dédiés à la mère africaine confondue dans les angoisses d'homme à la Mère Afrique ne nous suffisent plus."
- 36 For more background on Abdoulaye Wade's presidency, see the introduction to this issue as well as Momar-Coumba Diop's volume *Senegal (2000-2012): Les institutions et politiques publiques à l'épreuve d'une gouvernance libérale*. Wade was first elected President of Senegal in 2000 and won reelection for a second term in 2007.
- 37 Bikindou, 102. "Il faut montrer une Afrique qui bouge, qui a foi en l'avenir, qui mise sur ses enfants en voulant leur donner les atouts pour vivre et s'insérer dans un monde globalisé et ce, sans complexe, aucun."
- 38 Ibid., p. 141. "Il faut comprendre quelque chose: au Sénégal, tout est affaire de dignité. Question de *sutura*. On peut ne pas manger à sa faim mais il est toujours très important de garder les apparences." In a footnote, Diouf defines *sutura* as the preservation of honor.
- 39 The Arabic word *talibé* refers to a student of Islam who is taught by a *serigne*.
- 40 Diouf 2000, p. 147. "Au milieu des clochards, des drogués, et des fous, il était le seul innocent à essayer de survivre dans la jungle de la nuit, livré à toutes les frayeurs et à tous les dangers."
- 41 UNICEF estimates that there are 100,000 *talibés* in Senegal today, and there is no shortage of media coverage on their exploitation. Most of these young boys are under the age of thirteen and come from low-income families. For an analysis of the role of begging in the Islamic context, see Loretta Elizabeth Bass's *Child Labor in Sub-Saharan Africa*. She explains the vulnerability of the *talibé* children: "Talibes are vulnerable to

- exploitation for obvious reasons. They are children, separated from their immediate and extended families, who spend considerable time on the street begging for food and money. They are in the exclusive custody of one person, their teacher, for long periods of time. Talibes are generally no longer a part of the household strategy of their parents. The marabout is expected to provide the basic needs of the child—food, an Islamic education, and housing. Generally, an urban marabout provides one or just a few cooked meals per week for his talibes. Likewise, the quality of housing provided by marabouts varies widely, and there is no oversight.” Bass 2004, p. 26.
- 42 Diouf 2010, p. 6. This quotation is from the book's preface, written by Babacar Ndiaye, former President of the African Development Bank. “Une Afrique à la fois fière de ses performances et consciente de ses handicaps.”
- 43 Sonatel stands for *Société Nationale des Télécommunications du Sénégal* and is the country's premiere telecommunications provider. Under Mbaye's direction, Sonatel became one of the most competitive companies in Africa.
- 44 Diouf 2013, p. 8. “A mon sens, si un message doit être retenu de cette trentaine de chroniques, au-delà de la caricature et du trait forcé, c'est l'invite que l'auteur fait à ce 'Nouveau Type de Sénégalais' pour une mue en profondeur: dans sa vie, dans son cadre de vie et son cadre de travail, dans ses rapports à l'autre et en particulier dans son lien au secteur productif, à la 'main qui nous nourrit.'”
- 45 Ibid., p. 128. “notre propre modèle de développement.”
- 46 Ibid., p. 8. “L'homo senegalensis dont il a tant été question dans le premier volume a-t-il fondamentalement évolué? Quelles leçons de l'Histoire a-t-il retenues pour l'amélioration de son cadre de vie, la performance de son entreprise, l'évolution de sa société et l'avenir de ses enfants? La récente actualité politique du pays a-t-elle réveillé la fibre citoyenne qui sommeillait en chaque Sénégalais et a-t-elle réussi à unir la société dans un même élan patriotique?”
- 47 The recent political events to which Mbaye and Diouf refer are related to former Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade's attempt in 2011 to rewrite the Senegalese constitution and seize a third term in office. As a result, many young protestors took to the streets and voiced their opposition. It was at this time that the *Y'en a marre* (*We're Fed Up*) youth movement was formed by several Senegalese journalists and hip-hop artists. *Y'en a marre* leaders vociferously encouraged young people to cast their vote against Wade. According to Savané and Sarr, “*Y'en a marre* knew how to present a clear and simple message. Positioning itself at equidistance from political parties, it knew how to unite a community of young people who had been broken by the steamroller of unemployment. Young dynamic managers, journalists, the unemployed, workers, students, musicians, basically all societal categories were part of their cry for revolt.” Savané and Sarr 2012, p. 8. (“*Y'en a marre* a su dérouler un message clair et simple. Se positionnant à équidistance des partis politiques, il a su fédérer toute une jeunesse broyée par le rouleau compresseur du chômage. Jeunes cadres dynamiques, journalistes, chômeurs, ouvriers, étudiants, musiciens, bref toutes les catégories sociales se sont identifiées à leur coup de gueule.”)
- 48 I have used the phrase “in the midst of transformation” in the English translation. However, the expression employed by Diouf in French is “en pleine mutation” which has a more nuanced meaning. It reinforces the *process* of change or mutation.

49 Cazenave 2000, p. 242-243.

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