

SIT Graduate Institute/SIT Study Abroad

SIT Digital Collections

Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection

SIT Study Abroad

Spring 2019

"I Have Plenty of Things to Say:" The Language Choice of Senegalese Women Writers

Alexander Cullison

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection



Part of the [African Languages and Societies Commons](#), [African Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), [Linguistic Anthropology Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

“I Have Plenty of Things to Say:”

The Language Choice of Senegalese Women Writers

Cullison, Alexander

Academic Directors: Brodnicka, Monika and Thiam, Cheik

Project Advisor: Wane, Ibrahima and Bumatay, Michelle

Beloit College

Anthropology and Modern Languages and Literatures

Africa, Senegal, Dakar

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Senegal: Rethinking Global Security, SIT

Study Abroad, Spring 2019

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Literature Review: Language Choice and African Literature.....	5
Language Policy Post-Colonization.....	5
Language and Literature.....	8
The Politics of Publishing.....	11
Senegalese Women Writers: Continuations and Disruptions.....	13
Methods.....	14
The Early Era: 1976 to early 1980s.....	17
The Middle Era: The 1980s to the Present.....	21
The Coming Era: The Present and Onwards.....	23
Conclusion.....	32
Works Cited.....	33
Appendix.....	36

Acknowledgements

I first want to thank the Diop family who has so warmly welcomed me into their home and supported me throughout this semester with countless laughs and games. You, along with the other folks I have met here, have made this experience what it is for me. I also want to thank my mom and Megan. Mom, you have made me into the person I am today; Megan, you are the reason that I continue living and growing.

I also want to thank my advisors, Professor Ibrahima Wane of the University of Cheikh Anta Diop and Professor Michelle Bumatay of Beloit College. Professor Wane, thank you for your help with finding and contacting informants as well as teaching me more about Dakar. Professor Bumatay, thank you for your constant support of this project over the past several months and for everything you have done for me over the past year. I wish you all the best in your new position at Florida State University. Thank you also to my informants; without you, this project would have been severely lacking.

Lastly, thank you to the staff and professors SIT Senegal: Rethinking Global Security for supporting and funding this project. Without you all, this project would not have existed at all.

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to better understand the forces and motivations that influence Senegalese women writers' choice to write in the languages they choose. Senegalese women writers began publishing written works in 1976, but the majority of works published by women from Senegal have been in French. While France's colonization of Senegal has a major role in this, other factors, like the language policy of Senegal, play an important role in decision. Other external forces, like the narratives around what languages one should write in and politics of getting published, also influence this decision. Through the content analysis of *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Baobab fou*, two books by Senegalese women authors, as well as by interviews with Senegalese women writers and publishing house staff in Senegal, this research evaluates the influence of external factors on the language choice of Senegalese women writers. By examining this influence, this research hopes to demonstrate the ways that women maneuver the structural and societal pressures in order to say what they want to say.

Disciplines: French and Francophone Language and Literature, African Languages and Societies, Women's Studies, Modern Languages, Modern Literature, Linguistic Anthropology, Social and Cultural Anthropology

Introduction

In seemingly monolingual societies, it can appear easy to choose what language to interact with other people in. That reduction erases the factors that make up language: it is vernacular, intonation, phrasing, and many other elements. How one uses these elements is dependent on who the speaker and audience are, the assumptions of the speaker and the audience, and the context the speaker is in. Thus, even in a “monolingual” society, language choice is never easy. In multilingual societies, this decision is further complicated. While there are strategies in both situations to identify how one should speak to another, the choice is still mediated by various forces outside the individual.

The same is true in the world of writing and publishing. External forces like publishing houses and systems of power, like race, as well as personal motivations, make the choice more complex. This is especially true for Senegalese women writers. As Clinton Robinson mentions in his report on adult literacy programs, Senegal is home to up to forty-seven African languages, and French - the former colonial language - still plays a major role in government, education, and business, and it likely will continue to do so into the near future (84-85). For Senegalese women, this choice is further complicated by their own linguistic backgrounds, the publishing system in Senegal, and their own gender. Through the analysis of two books written by early Senegalese women writers, as well as interviews with Senegalese women writers and publishing staff, it becomes easier to understand how this choice for Senegalese women writers is one that is influenced by many different external forces and internal motivations.

Literature Review: Language Choice and African Literature

As outlined in the introduction, language choice is a complex topic, especially when it comes to written literature. To contextualize how Senegalese women relate to this topic, the following section discusses the various structures and forces that influence language choice. The first section deals with the idea of governmental language policies. These policies affect the status of and access to languages. This is particularly true in Senegal, so this section will also discuss the general language policy of the country and implications on language choice. The second section deals with the relationship between literature and the language it is produced in. This section relates to larger labels that the works of Senegalese women might be grouped with, like African and Francophone literature. These labels are linked directly to the identity of the writer and the language that they are using, so interrogating them is an important part of what this project hopes to achieve. The final section deals with the topic of publishing and the issues that authors, especially Francophone authors from Africa, tend to face in this process. From this point, one can more readily talk about the specific context of Senegalese women writers and their language choice.

Language Policy Post-Colonization

During the colonial era, European colonizers, often with the aid of groups like missionaries, led a campaign against indigenous cultures. In an attempt to invalidate and dominate the minds of the people that they had already conquered physically, these colonizers worked to diminish and invalidate the cultures, lifeways, and lives of people that they colonized. In her paper about the use of African languages in post-colonial literature, Karin Barber adds that indigenous languages, too, were dismissed and replaced with the language of the colonizers (4). These languages, in turn, became symbols of status and achievement to some colonized people even though these languages

had been pushed upon them as a result of colonial domination. The post-independence era, however, offered hope for African languages to take up a new status in newly formed African nations. As these nations began creating national symbols, flags, anthems, and mottos, they had the chance to choose what language they would use. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reports in his work *Decolonizing the Mind*, however, many early politicians, writers, and others pointed to the languages of the former colonizers as a way to unite against them in the future (7).

In many African countries, the languages of the colonizers remained the official language. English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish are the languages of government, education, and business in many to this day (Swigart 91), though many countries also recognize certain African languages as “national” languages. Even in this setup, if the official language is a European language it will almost always be the one with the most prestige even if it is not the most widely spoken (wa Thiong'o 20). This is particularly important if one views language as an important part of one's identity and personhood.

In her study ““Your Language should be the One to Identify you,”” Dr. Dora Francisca Edu-Buandoh explains that ethnolinguistic groups were the primary way that students at Ghana's University of Cape Coast identified themselves (95). While she does imply that communities and families must play a role in maintaining these identities, she also points to language policy, specifically in education, as an important space for this work (Edu-Buandoh 94-95). She references this specifically because of the language policy implemented after independence. While this system does allow students to learn in local languages in primary school, English is the language of education after primary school, and many newspaper and governmental reports are found only in English (94). This primary school education helps to reinforce language skills in local languages;

however, literacy in English is what is celebrated, not literacy in other languages. The Ghanaian government is doing harm, both to individual students and to larger language groups as a whole because its language policy elevates English literacy above all others. Thus, students are less likely to learn how to read and write in their own first languages which limits the languages they can read and write in. This is just one example of how language policy affects language choice.

Language policies ultimately legislate one's relationship to language. By recognizing official and national languages over others, the state diminishes the status of the latter group. Individuals can resist this by continuing to use their languages, but this does not necessarily change how language is used in the official realm. If only the official or national languages are used in education and government, for example, then the choice to use languages outside of these two groups might be difficult. Education is particularly important in this regard because it is often through education that children learn to read and write. If a language policy dictates that children can only be educated in one language, then it may be difficult to develop skills like reading and writing in other languages outside of that official language. This model is similar to the case in Senegal.

Senegal recognizes six national languages by name in its constitution. According to Clinton Robinson, though, twenty-one of the up to forty-seven languages found in the country are officially recognized by the constitution and may be used in the education system (84). However, it is French - the former colonial language - that enjoys the most widespread use in schools (Swigart 91). Wolof, one of the six recognized languages, is the most widely spoken in Senegal and functions as a *lingua franca* for the country; however, its presence in schools is still limited (Swigart 96). French's widespread use in schools means that most students, especially those who

grew up before independence and during the Senghor era, know how to read and write in French instead of other languages. Schools function as the primary space for Senegalese children to learn to read and write; thus, Senegalese children are only learning to read and write in French. This limits their ability to read and write literature in Wolof, Puulaar, and any of the other languages found in Senegal. Thus, Senegalese writers are being pushed into writing in certain languages, and this is important to consider when one discusses how literature is related to the languages it is written in.

Language and Literature

The language that a piece of literature is in is an important part of the piece itself. Before continuing, it should be clarified that when the word literature is being used in this paper, it refers to written literature. Oral literature is incredibly important to recognize as an art form on the same level as written literature; however, it falls outside the bounds of this project because the forces that influence it are different than those which affect written works. All of the languages in Senegal were based around orality before colonial contact. Today, twenty-one languages in the country have codified writing systems (Robinson 84). However, these writing systems are rarely taught by schools because the language policies of Senegal still stress the importance of French literacy. Thus, it can be difficult for authors to learn how to write in languages outside of French. For some, like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, a well-known Kenyan author and scholar, choosing to write in French disqualifies an African author from writing "African literature."

This perspective is extreme; choosing to write in a former colonial language should not invalidate the "Africanness" of an African author. Wa Thiong'o's position comes from a very specific context and background. He grew up under British colonial rule and attended a colonial

school; thus, the use of colonial languages represents a reproduction of the colonial system (wa Thiong'o 11, 26). He praises the peasantry for its role in preserving African languages while criticizing those in power who used European languages, especially those who advocated for their use after independence (wa Thiong'o 20-21). In short, he offers an excellent critique of privileged classes for their role in the suppression of African languages. This does not mean that his argument is free from problems.

While he does admit some time may be needed to switch to the use of African languages, he ultimately believes that "African literature can only be written African languages; that is, the languages of the African peasantry and working class" (wa Thiong'o 27). While the author's point that writing in African languages is a subversive act is well-observed (wa Thiong'o 30), it does not give him the authority to invalidate the work of thousands of other authors. His assertion is reductionist and fails to recognize the various motivations and conditions that make it difficult to choose to write in an African language. He seems blind to his own privilege in this situation as an established scholar, author, and man, among his other identities. Thus, while his work in *Gĩkũyũ* may be "part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African people" (wa Thiong'o 28), that does not mean that everyone else has to support this struggle in the same way. His own style of resistance does not give him the authority to invalidate the resistance of others.

If works written by African authors in European languages are not African enough, then they also are not European enough for the metropole. In Dr. Alison Rice's article "Countering canons, confronting francophonie: worldwide women's literature in French," Rice discusses the ways that works written by women in French are understood and presented by publishing companies. While some of the women that Rice interviews in the article have been recognized for

their work and published by major publishers, Rice describes how their distance from Paris, the French metropole, pushes them into the category of “Francophone” literature rather than “French” literature (444). And as she points out, this distance, both physical and mental, between French and Francophone is an intentional move to preserve the canon of French literature (444). When “worthy” work is found, it can be made into French literature, but otherwise, the two groups stay separate. This recreates a colonial distance between the French colonizer and those that they colonized. This is true even when one moves from one’s home to Paris, as all of the women that Rice worked with did (445): their work simply becomes “immigrant literature” in addition to its other titles (446). However, the categories of French and Francophone, as well as the other labels that publishers attach to works are affected by more than just distance from Paris, the center and metropole.

Rice discusses how Gallimard, a large French publishing company, would publish the works of non-French Europeans in its *blanche collection* - or white collection - while it would publish the work of all women of color in its *continents noirs* - or dark continents - collection (446). These racist collection names reinforce the colonial distance mentioned above, a center-periphery model in which Europe is the center (446-447). Thus, even though all of the women writers Rice interviewed experienced a degree of alienation, it is women of color - the so-called periphery - that are the ones that publishing companies are blocking from being French enough (447). This narrative around language’s role in literature is just as important as the one presented in *Decolonizing the Mind*.

Though they deal with different contexts, both of the narratives put forward the idea of authenticity in literature that revolves around language and factors. One is not African enough if

one does not write in an African language, but one is not French enough because of their ethnic, national, or racial background. When Senegalese women writers choose to write in certain languages over others, their works immediately gain certain labels and, with them, certain assumptions. Francophone literature, Rice writes, comes with an association of “the Other,” for instance (448). African literature, on the other hand, is wrapped up in the idea of “tradition” (Barber 16). It is completely reasonable that authors would like to be disconnected from these narratives, and yet they continue to shape the language choice of writers. Rice’s article focuses on the narratives around French and Francophone literature and how these terms are applied to different women. Throughout the piece, though, she discusses one more important factor which reinforces these narratives around language: publishing houses.

The Politics of Publishing

The publishing process is perhaps one of the most important factors to consider when talking about language choice in written literature. Specific publishing houses are businesses that choose to publish works based on a number of factors. These often depend on the market which they sell to; thus language plays an important part in which books are published and which are not. In his dissertation on language use by Senegalese authors, Tobias Warner uses the example of Cheikh Aliou Ndao and his book *Buur Tilleen* to showcase this point. Cheikh Aliou Ndao wrote this book in Wolof, the most widespread language in Senegal, in 1967, just seven years after Senegalese independence (Warner 37). However, the fact that he wrote the book in Wolof proved to be a major issue because he spent a decade trying to get it published in that language (Warner 37). While he was waiting to publish it, though, he also adapted the book into French; the French version of the book was published in 1972 by *Présence Africaine* (Warner 37). This is particularly

important because it reveals something important about publishing houses at this time in history, particularly *Présence Africaine*. The publishing house, which was founded by a Senegalese man in France in 1947, is famed for its support of African scholarship and literature (Warner 53); however, this support was limited by the languages that authors chose to use. Cheikh Aliou Ndao tried for ten years to publish his book in Wolof, and yet in half that time, he was able to adapt and publish a French version of the same story. As his adaptation demonstrates, Ndao was perfectly capable of writing *Buur Tilleen* in French from the start; however, the publishing sector invalidated his choice to write in Wolof and pushed him to rewrite it. If there is not an infrastructure to support publishing in a certain language, like Wolof in Ndao's case, it can be difficult for an author to justify writing in that language. Thus, it can be easier for writers to choose to write in languages with such an infrastructure, especially former colonial languages like English and French. The ability to write in these languages does not guarantee success for those born outside of Europe and the US, though.

In 2007, a group of writers wrote a manifesto calling for the establishment of a world literature in French. The manifesto, published in *Le Monde*, one of France's largest newspapers, responded to two realities of French-language literature at the time: the placement of non-Western French-language literature in the category of "Francophone" literature and the fact that non-Western authors had won "five of the seven French literary awards" in the fall of 2006 (Simon 113). As discussed earlier, this distinction between "French" and "Francophone" is highly problematic because it emulates the center-periphery model of the colonial era (Rice 444). The two have a hierarchical relationship which diminishes the value and worth of "Francophone" works. The manifesto, entitled "Pour une littérature-monde en français" - or "Toward a 'World Literature' in French" in English - directly refutes this idea.

Playing off of the idea of the “world literature” present in English literature, these writers demanded recognition as equals, not as former colonial subjects (Bumatay 1; Simon 115). Thus, the manifesto functions as a call to action to change how literature in the French-speaking world is conceived of and in doing so, it calls out the remnants of the colonial past present in the system of publishing in France. In the French-speaking world, non-Western authors have historically had difficulty publishing in France; when they were published, it would be in less mainstream publication houses (Bumatay 2), like *Présence Africaine*, or in specific collections similar to Gallimard’s *continents noirs* (Rice 446). As Dr. Michelle Bumatay’s review of a book on Sub-Saharan authors who published in France states, though, even these successes usually depended on the support of an intermediary (1). And in the end, the books that were published were regarded as “Francophone” rather “French” as thus lesser in value. The manifesto, by challenging the status of French-speaking literature, seeks to undermine the politics of publishing that have relegated certain works and authors to a lower status than others. While these politics are informed by language, origin, and race, they are also affected by other identities including gender. With all of this as a background, it is now time to discuss how these politics, along with narratives and policies about language, apply to the experience of Senegalese women writers.

Senegalese Women Writers: Continuations and Disruptions

The specific context of Senegal offers an interesting continuation of the models outlined above. Senegal, as a former French colony, is still connected with France and its language. The narrative around the French language in France directly influence French in Senegal as well as the other languages present there. However, the experience of Senegalese women writers also offers interesting critiques and perspectives on these topics and in some instances challenge them. To

explore these perspectives, the following section is divided up into three eras: the early era from 1976 to the early 1980s, the middle era from the mid-1980s to the present, and the coming era which starts in the present but continues into the future. Each of these eras presents interesting circumstances which influence the works produced; however, they also flow and build on one another. Before diving into these three eras, though, it is important to understand the methods used in this project.

Methods

To better understand the various forces and motivations which affect Senegalese women writers, this research uses a multimethod approach. The first method was content analysis which the researcher used to analyze Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* and Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou*, two of the earliest novels published by Senegalese women writers. By analyzing these works, the researcher was able to code the books for various themes present in the works. Identifying the general themes present in both works helped the researcher to better understand the kinds of themes and stories that Senegalese women wanted to tell in their works. The second research method - interviews - further supported these findings.

Over the course of the project, the researcher conducted five formal semi-structured interviews. The researcher tailored the basic set of questions based on the responses provided by the interviewees. The researcher did not record any of the interviews, but the interviewees allowed the researcher to take notes and direct quotes. Three of these interviews were with Senegalese women writers who were first published in either the 1980s or the 1990s. Each of them spoke at least French and Wolof, though each of them had only written published works in French. They were also all still active authors, though two of them still held jobs apart from their work as an

author. They all wrote various types of works, including novels, children's books, poetry, and short stories. Their interviews focused on their writing and their experiences as writers; typically, they lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes and took place in French (a list of these questions can be found in the Appendix). The goal of these interviews was to gain a more holistic understanding of who publishing houses were publishing. They also helped to support the content analysis described above and helped to create a more nuanced view on the topic.

The two remaining interviewees were men who worked for different publishing entities located in Dakar. Both interviewees spoke French, but one of the interviews was in English. This interview was with someone from outside of Senegal, while the other interviewee was from Senegal. Their interviews focused on their role in the publishing house, the publishing process, and the function of publishing houses in that process. The interviews in this group also lasted between fifteen and thirty minutes (a list of these questions can be found in the Appendix). These interviews provided context for the publishing atmosphere in Senegal. Publishing houses as a whole exert structural influence on individual authors and so understanding their function in Senegal as well as the narratives that they use was an important part of this project.

Overall, this project had very few ethical issues. It did not deal with sensitive topics or populations, and the questions were not leading. The researcher gained consent from his interviewees, and he made it clear to interviewees that they could choose to not answer question or end the interviews if they wanted. They were also well-informed about the goals of the project and the final products that would be produced. Additionally, all of the interviews happened in spaces where the interviewees were in control, like their homes or offices. Lastly, their identities were kept

confidential through the use of pseudonyms, which the researcher invited them to choose. However, only of them provided a pseudonym; the others were chosen by the researcher.

This model of work has several limitations. First, the sample size of both interviews and literature is quite small. Five interviews and two books do not give a clear or completely accurate view on the topic. The identities of the interviewees further complicate this problem. All three of the women writers were long-time writers who wrote and published in French. They were also of similar economic backgrounds and over fifty years old. Thus, the views of the authors in this study are not representative of the women writing in Senegal today. Younger writers, those who have published in languages other than French, and those who do not have published works are not present in this sample. Additionally, each of these women primarily writes novels and short stories, further limiting the study.

The publishing house staff interviews are likewise limited in quantity. Additionally, the two publishing entities that the interviewees work for present limitations. The first one, CODESRIA (the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa), is actually an organization that funds and supports research throughout Africa; for them, publishing is a means to an end of completing their mission and what they publish are academic articles and books rather than prose and works of fiction. The other company, L'Harmattan Senegal, is the largest publishing house in Senegal and is a subsidiary of L'Harmattan, an international French publishing company. Even the two chosen books, *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Baobab Fou*, reflect a limited sample size. Each of these issues connects to the time limitations of this project. The research presented in this study took place over a four week period which limited the quantity and individuals who could have an interview as well as the books that the researcher could analyze. Despite these limitations, the

information presented here begins to delve into the topic of the language choice of Senegalese women writers.

The Early Era: 1976 to early 1980s

The early era of Senegalese women writers begins in 1976 with the publishing of Aminata Sow Fall's first book, *The Revenant*. This book is important for a number of reasons. First, it is the first book written by a Senegalese woman to be published; however, it is also the first published book written by an African woman to be published in French (Miller qtd. in Rice 442). Thus, this book is important because it establishes African women writers in the French-speaking world. It is also important because it sets the tone for the rest of the era, which extends into the early 1980s. For instance, the publisher of this book, Nouvelles éditions africaines du Sénégal, was based in Senegal rather than in Europe, the Americas, or elsewhere in Africa. This publishing company, which was established by President Senghor in the 1970s, would go on to publish a number of other women's works, including *Une Si Longue Lettre* and *Le Baobab fou*, the two books which will be discussed in this section. It is also important to remember the greater context of this moment.

By 1976, it had been sixteen years since Senegal became an independent nation. In that time, President Senghor has created an infrastructure that supports a Senegalese culture that is Francophone while deliberately silencing expression in other languages (Warner 12-13, 38). This context helps to inform some of the general trends of the era. It is largely Francophone because the official language policy supports the use of French. Additionally, Senegalese citizens, with the creation of Nouvelles éditions africaines now had easier access to the publishing process. These works are only in French, though. Lastly, the narratives of Africanness as developed by wa Thiong'o

are still building. Given this context, it is no surprise that all of the published books written by Senegalese women in this era are in French.

Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* followed just three years Aminata Sow Fall's book. As mentioned before, it was published by Nouvelle éditions africaines and is a novel written in French. The novel follows Ramatoulaye, the main character, through her process of grieving the death of her husband (Bâ). This grieving process, however, leads her to reconsider her own past and her relationship with her husband, as well as the circumstances that led her husband to marry a second woman (Bâ). Many read it solely as a critique of polygamous marriages in Islam and tradition in general (Warner 61, 63). This reading reduces the book's focus on family and the experience of being a woman. Polygamy plays a role in this, but it is not the whole point.

In analyzing this book, the researcher coded the *Une Si Longue Lettre* based on a number of themes that existed throughout the book, and they help to inform the text as a whole. The themes were: the women as wives, women as mothers, women as individuals, women amongst each other, expectations of women, and resistance exhibited by women. These themes often overlap with each other because women, especially in the novel, rarely occupy one role at a time. The researcher's focus on women in the text is based on Mariama Bâ's own background as an active feminist (Celarent 1392). As Celarent recounts in her own review of the text, "*So Long a Letter* grew directly out of Bâ's feminist commitments" (1392). It makes sense to read the book as a feminist critique, though as Tobias Warner points out in his dissertation on Senegalese authors, this point is again reductive and dangerous (62). Thus, Warner argues, the book has to be regarded in the context it was created in, and here, both the personal and historical contexts are important.

In the historical context, Warner discusses how revisions to and the establishment of the Family Code helped to shape the literary world that Bâ wrote about (66). If understood in this context, one can view *Une Si Longue Lettre* as an argument in favor of these changes. If these changes were in place, the major conflict between Ramatoulaye and her husband Modou would have played out in a different way (Warner 66). This Family Code also gave more agency to women which coincides with the themes identified by the researcher and Bâ's own identity as a active feminist. This more nuanced interpretation of the book, then, helps readers to gain a better understanding of the novel as something beyond a critique of polygamy, a system that Mariama Bâ was never a participant in. This is just one example of the work of a Senegalese woman at the time, however.

Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*, for example, tells a completely different story. Again, it is a book written in French and published by Nouvelles éditions africaines in 1982 (Bugul). However, whereas *Une Si Longue Lettre* is a novel written as a letter, *Le Baobab fou* is an autobiography told through a novel. It follows Bugul through her experiences abroad in Belgium where she has earned a scholarship to study. Her experiences in Belgium are traumatic, and the book becomes a record of her time there. While *Le Baobab fou* was written soon after *Une Si Longue Lettre* in the same country, context, and under the same publisher, the two books are drastically different. While both deal with the position of women to some extent, *Le Baobab fou* deals more extensively with the experience of being a migrant, the isolation that comes with that, and the relationships she has with the West as a whole. Thus, even though the two authors are coming out of a similar structural and societal context, the personal contexts of these individuals inform the works that they produced.

Mariama Bâ, for example, was the daughter of a colonial administrator; furthermore, she grew up in one of the four communes of Senegal which granted her French citizenship (Celarent 1391). This meant that she had access to some of the best education at the time in Senegal even though her father had to convince her grandparents to let her pursue a Western education (Celarent 1391). She eventually passed through the *École Normale* and became a school teacher, and then a school inspector (Celarent 1391). From a class standpoint, Bâ certainly benefited from her upbringing and background. Additionally, her three marriages and multiple children (Celarent 1392) likely informed the end of *Une Si Longue Lettre* in which Ramatoulaye describes her role as a mother now that her husband is dead. Bugul's context is quite different.

Bâ's personal background is a major influence in her work, but for Bugul, it is her work. Bugul grew up as one of many children of a marabout, and, at a young age, her mother left her alone in her birth village with the rest of the family (Bugul). This is clear in her work, as much of Bugul's narrative focuses on the idea of belonging and isolation, even within her own family. Though she, too, attended French schools, she was still in school when Senegal became an independent state. This independent state, unlike the previous colonial one, gave more openings for people who previously had difficulty reaching the highest levels of education to do so (Rice 441). Additionally, Bugul's education led her to win an award to study abroad in Belgium. It is her experiences as a student in Belgium that directly inform her book, *Le Baobab fou*.

Personal contexts are also important for other authors of this era. Mbaye, an author now in her early 70s, expressed that her writing is a part of her quest for freedom and truth as well as her career. She stated it is essential to her comfort. This reflects a personal relationship with her writing; that does not mean that she limits herself in what she writes. Though she currently enjoys writing

autobiographical fiction, she has written plays, poetry, and other works, as well. She also did not limit herself to particular themes because she is touched by everything; therefore, no topic was off-limits.

Like the other authors of her era, she writes in French. When asked what language she writes in, however, she would respond that she writes in her own: she simply uses the French alphabet. She clarified this by saying that French worked as a tool for her to put her thoughts into the world. It was the language she was comfortable working in even if she used other languages in her life. However, she also asked which French was being referred to. She believes language is “a carrier of culture,” like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (13); she described languages as having “cultural images” in them. However, she also believes that one can use a language with one’s own culture to create a new form of this language. This echoes the work of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who argued for “a new English” that was “altered to suit new African surroundings” (qtd. in wa Thiong’o 8). This view of language, and writing in a so-called colonial language is not new. It helps to complicate the choice to write in French in this era. Her answer makes it clear: personal factors, not just external cultural and structural ones, have influenced Senegalese women writers from the start.

The Middle Era: The 1980s to the Present

The middle era of Senegalese women writers is lengthy, and, because of this, there is a large variety of books and authors found in this period. One of the important distinguishing features of this era is that it is firmly after the end of Senghor’s presidency. This is important, as the language policy of his presidency was pro-French, despite the six national languages gaining official status under his presidency. During this era, the government generally withdrew its

influence from the greater cultural sphere (Warner 84). This influence under Senghor was mostly aimed at promoting French, so some have argued that this gave authors the space to write in languages other than French. However, Warner reports that this meant a complete withdraw, so there was limited support for languages other than French. The language policy changed to one of non-involvement which one can argue is still the case today. Clinton Robinson reports that the government allows NGOs to control most adult literacy programs in Senegal, especially for indigenous languages (85). Thus, the language policy has changed, but it was in a way that was not completely supportive of non-French literature.

That does not mean that all of the literature produced during this time was in French, however. In fact, it is quite the contrary. *Aawo bi*, the first novel published in Wolof, was released in 1992, twelve years after Senghor left power. This is a landmark novel and was published through IFAN (l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire), an institution connected to the Université de Cheikh Anta Diop, Senegal's largest state university under Arame Fal, a linguist. It was authored by Mame Younouss Dieng, a Senegalese woman. Fal and Dieng are also responsible for the Wolof translation of *Une Si Longue Lettre* (Warner 89). While other works written in Wolof in the romance orthography existed before this point, the fact that it is two Senegalese women who are responsible for this work is significant.

The narratives around language also began to change, as have the avenues to publishing for Senegalese women. In 1986, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's book *Decolonising the Mind* was released. This book was in full support of the use of African languages which was a significant at the time even if that narrative was presented in a way that invalidates the work of other authors of the time. The growing support for writing in indigenous languages played a role in the growth of works

published languages other than French in Senegal. More avenues for publishing also opened up for Senegalese women. Nouvelles éditions africaines, which became Nouvelles éditions africaines du Sénégal during this time, continued to publish, and IFAN, as mentioned earlier, began to publish novels like *Aawo bi*. Additionally, larger general publishing houses outside of Senegal began publishing Senegalese authors in force, especially women (Ducournau qtd. in Bumatay 2). Publishing companies appeared throughout Senegal, as well, though these are primarily concentrated in Dakar, like L'Harmattan Senegal.

In this context, Senegalese women writers, regardless of the language they wrote in, wrote about a multitude of different topics. In *Aawo bi*, Mame Younouss Dieng wrote about a polygamous relationship and the development of a friendship between the main character and her co-wife (Warner 72). While some have framed this work as a reaction to *Une Si Longue Lettre*, and others as an adaptation of it (Warner 61), it is also its own work and is significant. Another author from this era, Fatou Diome, writes about the experience of migration in her works (Haskell 54). As a Senegalese woman who lives in France, the topic of her books are connected to her own experiences, which she herself has recognized (Haskell 53). Senegalese women writers in this stage continue to write about things that are connected to their personal contexts and experiences. Their language choice, too, is still connected to that context.

Mena is an author who started publishing works during this era. Though she started writing in the early 1980s and won a short story writing competition during that time. She writes short stories, novels, and children's books. This last category is particularly important to her because she has wanted to write children's stories about Africa and featuring African stories her whole life. She writes short stories and novels to discuss all of the topics she wants to discuss, though her work

focuses on the lives of married women. She started writing solely for pleasure, but as people began buying her books, she began to write to help others better understand Senegal and African cultures. However, she also writes to remind people that women “pay for men, also.” Thus, she writes stories that center women to remind readers of this fact, not to start a revolution but to defend women’s right to pursue happiness. This is rooted in her own experience and those of the people around her.

Alice, another writer from the era, writes about themes quite different from Mena. She writes novels almost exclusively, though several of the twenty-four works she has published have been poetry or children’s books. She enjoys writing novels because she likes long stories. The title of this paper - “I Have Plenty of Things to Say” - is a quote from Alice, and it was a common sentiment amongst all three of the interviewed women. Her work is widely varied in topic. She enjoys writing about taboos, ancestors, and mysticism in Africa. However, she also writes about human trafficking and government corruption which are prominent issues in Senegal today. While these are not always connected directly to her day-to-day life, these works are still informed by her experience of Senegal.

Despite the differences in what they write about, both of these women write in French. For Mena, French is a beautiful language; plus, she has a doctorate in French language and writing in French puts her at ease. Alice writes in French because it is the official language and a language of her childhood. While both women mentioned using Wolof more often in their day-to-day lives, they rarely wrote in Wolof. That did not mean that Wolof did not directly influence their writing, however. Both women mentioned their use of Wolof proverbs in their texts which they translated into French.

Both Alice and Mena suggested that part of why they wrote in French was because of who they perceived their audience to be. Mena stated that part of the reason she wrote was to inform others about Senegal and to fight against prejudices and assumptions people might have. This suggests she perceives her audience as an audience outside of Senegal, so part of why she writes in French might be to better address this audience. Alice was more direct in her interview: “others do not have the curiosity to learn Wolof, Peul, etc.” This pressure to write in French is not one that Mbaye mentioned in her interview, and it is unclear why that is. This may hint at another trait of this era of women writers. While some writers wrote about Senegal in indigenous languages during this time, others were writing to audiences both inside and outside of Senegal. While these women still had personal investments in the stories they wrote and the language they wrote them in, it seems that external forces still heavily influenced their decisions.

The Coming Era: The Present and Onwards

Unfortunately, due to time and sampling constraints, there are no interviews to represent this coming era of authors. While all of the women featured in the previous sections continue to write, their perspectives and experiences differ from those women who will begin writing and publishing in the coming years. These perspectives will be important for imagining a future for Senegalese women writers; before this, though, it is important to recognize the role and narratives of publishers in Senegal today as they are essential to this future.

Though Senegalese authors did not originally have easy access to publishing houses, Dakar is now home to a number of publishing houses and institutions with publishing sectors. One of the organizations in this latter category is CODESRIA. This organization is first and foremost a research support entity - its aim is to support Pan-African research, which means it is research on

Africa by Africans for Africans, according to Amadou, a member of the publishing staff there. It is not the kind of organization that would publish creative works like novels and short stories.

Despite this, the interview offers an important perspective for the present and future of Senegalese women writers. Amadou's position at CODESRIA is not a permanent one; however, he currently oversees the publication aspect of the organization. The publication wing is a part of the organization's goal to support Pan-African research; as Amadou explained, the organization focused on producing academic journals and book series that focus on the social sciences and humanities.

CODESRIA publishes in four languages: English and French primarily, but also in Portuguese and Arabic. This particular list is important, as the first three languages are those of three of the colonial powers; additionally, they still play an important role in many former colonies. When asked about this, Amadou recognized that one could state that by using these languages, CODESRIA was reproducing colonial structures of language. His response to this was to ask how people across the continent would communicate without these languages given the linguistic diversity of Africa. He then added that he believed that French, at the least, was an African language, not just a French one. Amadou argued, then, that using so-called colonial languages is not inherently colonial or anti-African and can help work across linguistic boundaries.

Amadou also admitted that one could write and publish in any language, including African languages like Wolof. What mattered, he stated, was the quality, relevance, and critical nature of the work. He emphasized that CODESRIA allowed many young scholars to publish their first pieces and that several well-known African scholars started out publishing with the organization's help. The work, not the writer, is the focus of CODESRIA's mission; thus, their journals are full of

articles written by students, professors, policymakers, and more. Their editing and publishing process also focuses on constructive criticism so as to develop better scholars; rather than rejecting articles that are not ready, CODESRIA works directly with authors to improve their work. The narratives about CODESRIA that Amadou presents depict the organization as incredibly inclusive and accommodating. These are, in turn, interesting to compare with the narratives around L'Harmattan Senegal.

L'Harmattan Senegal is the largest publishing company in Senegal. Though it is connected to L'Harmattan, a French publisher, it is legally separate from that company according to Babacar, a Senegalese man who works in the publishing section of the company. The company is special within Senegal not just because of its size, connections, or the bookstore which is connected to its headquarters; rather, L'Harmattan Senegal is special because it is the only international publishing house in the country. It accepts all kinds of works, from poetry and novels to research work; in fact, it publishes some of CODESRIA's books. Similarly to CODESRIA, the major factor that determines whether or not a work is published at L'Harmattan Senegal is the quality of the manuscript. Additionally, the publication house offers editing in English, French, and Arabic, as well as in all six of Senegal's national languages. Babacar added that only four out of every ten manuscripts submitted are accepted for final publication. This is quite different than Amadou's depiction of how CODESRIA deals with manuscripts. This could be due to a difference in how the two used narratives as well as in the goals of the two organizations. CODESRIA specifically aims to support research, so working directly with scholars to improve over time is a major concern. Based on Babacar's description of L'Harmattan Senegal, it seems that they likely work with authors in the same way because they are a large-scale international business.

Babacar, like Amadou, insisted that the publishing process at L'Harmattan Senegal was inclusive of different kinds of writers. The business accepts and publishes works by authors from around the world from the US to Senegal and from Cote d'Ivoire to Italy. He also emphasized that men and women were published, as well as students and professors. Interestingly, he also mentioned that people could start submitting work as young as twelve years old. This is important to mention because L'Harmattan Senegal has published young authors, like Selly, who published a book of poetry at age eleven (*Éditions L'Harmattan Sénégal*). The narratives presented by Amadou and Babacar about their workplaces suggest a very encouraging future for women writers in Senegal. However, these narratives need to be considered in the context of what these two organizations actually produce.

Through the website for L'Harmattan Senegal, one can view an online catalog of books and a list of authors published by the company. By examining these lists, it becomes apparent that, despite the inclusive narratives around publishing, there are people who are less represented than others. Of the 1222 books that could be viewed on the catalog at the time of this research, only 134 of them, or roughly 11 percent, were written by women (*Éditions L'Harmattan Sénégal*). In the Harmattan Senegal Collection, there are 480 books; only 46, or 9.6 percent, of the books were written by women (*Éditions L'Harmattan Sénégal*). Finally, of the fifty-seven Senegalese authors listed on the L'Harmattan Senegal website, only eight of them, or 14 percent, were women (*Éditions L'Harmattan Sénégal*). These numbers directly contradict Babacar's depiction of an inclusive publishing process. This does not mean that L'Harmattan Senegal, or publishing companies with similar statistics, is purposefully engaging sexist publishing practices; however, it

should force this company to think about how their publishing processes and policies might be excluding women.

This is especially important given what is known about current trends in writing and literacy. According to Claire Ducournau in her book *La fabrique des classiques africains: Écrivains d'Afrique subsaharienne francophone*, the number of women writers throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, including Senegal (qtd. in Bumatay 3). This corresponds with an overall rise in literacy in Senegal, which, according to a government report, rose from 37 percent to 50 percent between 2005 and 2011 (qtd. in Robinson 84). As Clinton Robinson reports in his on adult literacy campaigns, women overall are more literate than men in Senegal; despite a 59 percent overall literacy rate, only 32 percent of women are illiterate (84). Nearly 50 percent of men, on the other hand, are thought to be illiterate (Robinson 84). This government data is based on literacy only in French, Arabic, and Wolof; however, Robinson states that women are more likely to be literate in languages outside of these three, though at lower levels (84). In light of these figures, which point to a significant population of literate women, some of whom are contributing to the rise of women writers in Sub-Saharan Africa, it seems ridiculous that less than 15 percent of the Senegalese authors published by L'Harmattan Senegal are women. In the future, publishers like L'Harmattan Senegal must be more aware of how their process disproportionately excludes women; otherwise, the coming generation of women writers may turn away from African publishers again which Ducournau also predicts in her book (qtd. in Bumatay 3). This would be an enormous loss to local publishers of all sizes and types.

Robinson's statements on women's literacy make the question of language choice murkier than it already was. As he reports, there are twenty-one languages in Senegal with written scripts,

and more women tend to be literate in languages outside of French, Wolof, and Arabic (84). This would imply that Senegalese women are suited to bring in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's conception of African literature. If that is the direction that Senegalese women writers decide to go in, that is their decision. However, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's insistence on "African languages" still calls for critique. Early on in his chapter about African literature, wa Thiong'o quotes several other authors who called for new African forms of the colonial languages (8-9). He dismisses these calls as an acceptance of the status of colonial language (wa Thiong'o 9); however, these African forms of language do exist and authors are writing in them. Dr. Moussa Issifou describes one such author, Kojo B. Laing, in his article "Beyond the Language Debate in Postcolonial Literature." Laing's books, specifically *Woman of the Aeroplanes*, are written in an English that would likely be unrecognizable to a reader outside of Ghana (Issifou 50). This is because the English used is a hybrid between English and various other Ghanaian languages like Akan (Issifou 47, 50). In this sense, Laing challenges the idea of the purity of languages, both European and African ones (Issifou 60). It is just as subversive as writing at the colonizer in their language or writing in one's indigenous language. Thus, Liang's work is a direct rejection of wa Thiong'o's conception of "African literature."

Karin Barber comes to a similar conclusion in her paper "African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism." She explains how postcolonial criticism, in its attempt to incorporate a more nuanced understanding of postcolonial literature, actually reproduces the erasure of indigenous ways of expression while also equating all colonial experiences to one another (Barber 6-7). It views colonial languages as these overarching entities that silenced the people that Europeans colonized (Barber 6); however, this view erases the agency, expressions, and

experiences of these same people. This model, Barber writes, “is one of absolute rupture, the replacement of one world by another” (9). But both Barber and wa Thiong’o would argue that this model is not accurate. The peasants that wa Thiong’o praises continued and continue to use indigenous language and modes of expression and these, Barber argues, have not remained “traditional” (12, 14). Rather, they have accepted and modified outside influences, like the British literature taught in school and popular American literature, like detective stories, and made them their own (Barber 16). This hybridity is similar to the linguistic hybridity of Kojouhar’s works and further complicates wa Thiong’o’s call for African literature in African languages. It opens up a spectrum of ways to write African literature that is beyond the reductive formula put forward by wa Thiong’o.

This spectrum of ways to write was something that each of the authors interviewed for this study seemed to implicitly understand. While all three of them wrote in French, they recognized the validity of writing in other languages. During the interviews, all three of them mentioned Wolof specifically. Mena and Alice both write poetry in Wolof, though Mena said she would not publish it because it was too personal. Alice said that maybe one day should would write a novel in Wolof. And Mbaye said she could write in Wolof, but that she preferred to work in French. All three of these women consistently make choices about what and in what languages they produce work. They are influenced by language policies, history, narratives around language in literature, their own experiences, and the structures around them. Their choice to write in French may have been a result of how they think about language, or perhaps their privilege as established writers. However, these Senegalese women writers are exercising their own agency when they choose what language they write in.

The coming era will have its challenges, some of which are already present today and some of which cannot yet be imagined. Language choice will continue to be a complicated decision. The best that can be hoped for is that Senegalese women writers continue to be allowed to exercise their own agency. Agency, in this context, means that one can choose how, when, and where to express oneself. This means that one can choose to actively resist colonialism through writing in a former colonial language, an African language, or an Africanized version of a former colonial language. One can choose to not engage at all. It is clear that women have plenty to say and know how to say it; in this case, one must work to protect women's agency to speak as they see fit.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of two books written by early Senegalese women writers, as well as interviews with Senegalese women writers and publishing staff, it has become clear that despite the influence of structural and societal factors outside of them, Senegalese women writers exercise their own agency when they choose to write in one language over another. This agency may be limited, but, in the end, it is their choice. Women must be able to express themselves as they see fit. The staunchest supporters of language diversity in literature must endeavor to support women's agency to speak for themselves. That involves the active interrogation and dismantling of systems and policies that limit or discourage people, and women in particular, from writing how they want to. It can also involve challenging harmful narratives about language and the self. Sometimes, that involves being quiet and listening.

Works Cited

- Abdi, Ali A. "Oral Societies and Colonial Experiences: Sub-Saharan Africa and the de Facto Power of the Written Word." *International Education*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2007, pp. 42–59.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/reference.sit.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=28350326&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Bâ, Mariama. *Une Si Longue Lettre*. 1979. Schoenhof's Foreign Books. 2002.
- Barber, Karin. "African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism." *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 26, no. 4 (Winter), 1995, pp. 3-30. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820224>.
- Bugul, Ken. *The Abandoned Baobab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*. 1981.
 Translated by Marjolijn de Jager. University of Virginia Press. 2008.
- Bumatay, Michelle. Review of *La fabrique des classiques africains: Écrivains d'Afrique subsaharienne francophone (1960-2012)*, by Claire Ducournau. *H-France Review*, vol. 18, no. 94, 2018, pp. 1-4.
- Celarent, Barbara. "Une si longue letter by Mariama Bâ So Long a Letter by Mariama Bâ and Modupé Bodé-Thomas." *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 116, no. 4, 2011, pp. 1391-1396. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/659876>.
- Éditions L'Harmattan Sénégal - livres, ebooks (édition numérique). L'Harmattan Sénégal, <https://senegal.harmattan.fr/>. Accessed 29 April 2019.
- Edu-Buandoh, Dora Francisca. "'Your Language Should Be the One to Identify You': Maintaining an Ethnolinguistic Identity among Ghanaian University Students." *International Journal of Learning*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2007, pp. 85–96.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.reference.sit.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ehh&AN=28808925&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

Haskell, Rosemary. "Senegal in France, France in Senegal: Successful and Failed Transnational Identities in Fatou Diome's Novels." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 82, no. 4, 2007, pp. 53-74. Academic OneFile.

Issifou, Moussa. "Beyond the Language Debate in Postcolonial Literature: Linguistic Hybridity in Kojo B. Laing's *Woman of the Aeroplanes*." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 6, no. 5, 2013, pp. 46-62.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.reference.sit.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsgao&AN=edsgcl.356354171&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Rice, Alison. "Countering Canons, Confronting Francophonie: Worldwide Women's Literature in French." *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2-3, 2009, pp. 439-49. <https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs.12.2-3.439/3>.

Robinson, Clinton. "Languages in Adult Literacy: Policies and Practices in Education for All and Beyond." *Prospects*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2016, pp. 73-91. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-016-9375-4>.

Swigart, Leigh. "The Limits of Legitimacy: Language Ideology and Shift in Contemporary Senegal." *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 10, 2000, pp. 90-130. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2000.10.1.90>.

Simon, Daniel, Translator. "Toward a 'World Literature' in French." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2010, pp. 113-117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409290903412755>.

wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. *Decolonising the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature*. James Currey Ltd. 1986.

Warner, Tobias. *The Limits of the Literary: Senegalese Writers Between French, Wolof and World Literature*. 2012. University of California, Berkley, PhD dissertation.

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/355567z3>.

Appendix

Interview Questions for Senegalese Women Writers:

What kinds of works do you write? Why?

- Is there something particular about this form that makes you more interested in this form?
- When did you start writing? Why? Was there someone or something that influenced you to start?
- What kind of themes are you interested in writing about in your works?

How do you write?

- Do you start with a story or a plot?
- What language do you write in? Why not [x] language?
 - Is this the language you speak in most of the time?
 - What other languages do you speak?
 - Do the stories you tell happen in [x] when you first think of them?
 - In what situations is this not the case?

Why do you write? Do you enjoy writing?

Interview Questions for Publishing House Workers:

What is the role of this publishing house? Why is this publishing house different from others?

- What is your role at this publishing house?
 - What does that entail?
- What kind of works are published here?
 - What language are these works typically written in?

- Who can get published here?
 - What is that process like?
 - Who is in charge of that process?
 - What are they looking for?
 - Who typically gets published here?
 - Who tries to get published here?