

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

# “These Pages Remain Open for the Future to Write”: Mariama Bâ’s Forgotten Writings in *L’Ouest Africain*

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Since the tragic early death of Mariama Bâ in 1981, the critical consensus has been that she burst unheralded onto the scene with *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*). But it turns out that Bâ published quite a bit before her first novel. In the 1970s, Bâ contributed four more previously unknown pieces to the same periodical that published “Memories of Lagos,” her poetic report from FESTAC ’77. Her other forgotten writings include a public letter on feminism, an essay on negritude, a tribute to a former headmistress, and the first excerpt of *So Long a Letter* before it was a book. Most strikingly, all these writings are intertextual to varying degrees with her first novel. In her newsprint writings of the 1970s, then, one can see Bâ not only honing her creative practice but also drafting in public sections of what will become *So Long a Letter*.

This essay introduces readers and teachers of Bâ to the unknown archive of her pre-*Letter* writings. It begins with an overview of *L’Ouest Africain* (*The West African*), the periodical that published these texts. Brief readings of each of Bâ’s essays are followed by explorations of how their recovery contributes to the reappraisal of Bâ underway in this issue. After laying out the significance of these writings, this essay concludes with a reflection on the phenomenology of archival “discoveries” and the temporalities of literary history.

## Mariama Bâ and *L’Ouest Africain*

*L’Ouest Africain* was launched in Dakar in September 1972 by a group of Senegalese intellectuals under the editorship of Bâ’s

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then-husband, Obèye Diop, a journalist and politician who had served as Senegal's first minister of information under Mamadou Dia. *L'Ouest Africain* began as a broadsheet before eventually becoming a glossy magazine—an unfortunately timed transition since it coincided with the economic crisis of the late 1970s. After a period of irregular distribution and a brief switch back to being a newspaper, *L'Ouest Africain* seems to have ceased publishing around the turn of the decade.

*L'Ouest Africain* covered economics, politics, culture, and sports in Senegal and beyond. Its editorial line was broadly socialist. The paper also had an internationalist stance that set it apart from many of its Senegalese peers. In the inaugural issue, the editors proclaimed that their periodical had a “vocation ouest-africaine et continentale” (“West African and continental vocation”) and that they hoped it would serve as a “trait d'union” (“hyphen”) that would link “nos ensembles sous régionaux ou régionaux” (“our subregional or regional groups”) with the “communauté internationale” (“international community”) (“Editorial”).<sup>1</sup> The paper's expansive vision may have been partly due to the makeup of its staff. Alongside writing by Senegalese contributors, a significant number of articles were penned by exiled Haitians who had settled in Dakar, including Jean F. Brierre, Jacqueline Scott-Lemoine, and Roger Dorsinville. The periodical circulated in Senegal and internationally, as shown by letters from readers in Niger, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Mauritania, and France. In practice, *L'Ouest Africain* often focused on Senegal. But readers would also write in to urge its editors to live up to the promise of their title (“Nos lecteurs” [1975]; “Courrier” [1976]).

*L'Ouest Africain* was a forum in which the nation was not always the baseline framework for discussions of politics or culture. Its pages include early reactions to the cinema of Djibril Diop Mambéty and the fictions of Yambo Ouologuem, translations of Léopold Sédar Senghor into Wolof by Cheikh Aliou Ndao, portraits of diasporic artists such as Phyllis Wheatley and Katherine Dunham, primers on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger

and Roland Barthes, and commentaries on the Soweto uprising and the death in detention of the Senegalese dissident Omar Blondin Diop. Annette Mbaye d'Erneville, Bâ's close friend, edited a regular column on women's issues.

Bâ began writing for *L'Ouest Africain* in 1976. She published five pieces, sometimes signing her contributions with her married name of Mariama Diop. Her writings include an open letter, a speech, an essay, a poem, and an excerpt of what would become her first novel.<sup>2</sup> As a contributor to *L'Ouest Africain*, then, Bâ was already writing for a national and international audience when she submitted her first book manuscript to a publisher. And she would have had every reason to expect that her novel would end up reaching a more limited readership than she already had. The fact that *Letter* went on to unprecedented acclaim is noteworthy, but it should not obscure the fact that all the texts examined here circulated widely, if ephemerally.

Newsprint audiences were crucial to Bâ's development as a writer, but the pages of *L'Ouest Africain* were not always hospitable to women authors or to nuanced discussions of gender in social life. There are no records of reader reactions to Bâ's writings for the paper, but readers identifying as women do question the coverage of gender and demand more equitable representation (Diop). Men also wrote in to correct articles by women, or awkwardly praise them for achieving such eloquence (“Courrier” [1974]; “Courrier” [1977]; “Nos lecteurs” [1976]). When Bâ began writing for *L'Ouest Africain*, she would have been well aware that newspapers were potentially hostile terrain. There is no better illustration of this than the polemic that sparked her first foray into print.

### “A Woman Responds”

On 19 December 1975, the largest daily newspaper in Senegal ran an opinion piece by a male commentator criticizing the International Year of the Woman, which was just then ending. In prose dripping with condescension, Abdallah Faye not only dismissed the project as a waste of time. He went

so far as to lay the blame for his country's postindependence economic stagnation at the feet of Senegalese women, singling out their supposed profligacy and vanity.

One month later a public rebuttal ran in the same newspaper under the headline "Une femme répond à Abdallah Faye" ("A Woman Responds to Abdallah Faye"). The same open letter would be reprinted in *L'Ouest Africain* with the title "L'année internationale de la femme" ("The International Year of the Woman"). After an incisive and elegant dismantling of Faye's argument, the author of the letter concludes with a kind of soliloquy in which she surveys the achievements and challenges that campaigns for gender equality have faced in fifteen years of Senegalese independence. She writes:

Dans maints domaines et sans tiraillement, nous bénéficions de l'acquis non négligeable de concessions venues d'ailleurs et qui ont été chèrement arrachées: droit à l'instruction, droit au travail, droit de vote, privilèges appréciables couronné par la promulgation du code de la famille qui nous restitue notre dignité. . . . Mais les restrictions demeurent, mais les vieilles croyances renaissent, mais l'égoïsme émerge, mais le scepticisme pointe quand il s'agit du domaine politique. . . . Ce fait n'est d'ailleurs pas particulier au Sénégal, mais laissons notre regard uniquement plongé dans notre territoire. . . . Quinze ans d'indépendance! A quand la première femme ministre, la première femme ambassadrice, la première femme directrice de cabinet ministériel? Cependant le militantisme des femmes n'est plus à démontrer. Il a installé plus d'un homme au pouvoir, ce militantisme assis sur un engagement sincère dénué de calcul.

(Bâ, "L'année international")

In many fields, and without skirmishes, we have taken advantage of the notable achievements that have reached us from elsewhere and which have been dearly won: the right to education, the right to work, the right to vote, the significant privileges crowned by the proclamation of the Family Code that gives us back our dignity. . . . But the constraints remain, the old beliefs are revived; egoism emerges, skepticism rears its head in the political field. . . .

This situation is not particular to Senegal. But let us keep our gaze focused solely on our own territory. . . . Fifteen years of independence! When will there be the first female minister, the first female ambassador, the first female chief of staff? And yet women's militancy no longer needs to be demonstrated. It has installed more than one man in power, this activism based on a sincere commitment, devoid of calculation.

Readers of *So Long a Letter* will recognize these words, for they are nearly identical to a speech made by Bâ's narrator Ramatoulaye when she presses her old suitor Daouda Dieng on the political representation of women.<sup>3</sup> The author of this public letter was of course none other than Mariama Bâ, who would later transpose this quoted passage and the two paragraphs that followed almost word for word into her first novel.

For an author who is sometimes presented as having entered the world of print reluctantly, this confident 1976 intervention paints a different picture. Not only was Bâ publishing prior to becoming a novelist, she was doing so emphatically and self-reflexively. In our age of auto- and metafiction, one can readily imagine a contemporary writer absorbing into their work some online beef in which they had found themselves embroiled. But here is Bâ, in the mid-1970s, not only dismantling a misogynist in public but cleverly reworking her critique into a speech for her fictional narrator.

For readers and teachers of Bâ, this intertextuality is cause for reflection. It has long seemed that Bâ's use of the epistolary in her first novel is a formal strategy with obvious feminist implications: take a mode of private communication and transform it into a medium of public critique. And yet here she is doing quite the opposite: taking a text that began life as a public polemic and then transforming it into a scene of private debate. A more nuanced appraisal of the status of the letter in Bâ's work beckons.

Epistolary genres are still sometimes misrecognized as inherently private forms, despite the copious body of scholarship that nuances this view. After the recovery of Bâ's newspaper writings, it is no longer clear that the private letter was ever the

primary formal model for *So Long a Letter*. As Stephanie Newell has shown, epistolarity was a major form of public expression in West Africa by the time Bâ was writing, notably in the genre of the public letter that appeared in a newspaper (10). Public letters in African newspapers allowed authors to access a variety of experimental modes of expression: they could mix personal utterances with public opinions, bring intimacy and emotion into otherwise dry print genres, and try out multiple temporalities and audiences (Newell 35, 10, 41).

Bâ's essay on the representation of women belongs to this tradition of the public letter. As a form, the public letter allowed Bâ to speak to the paradoxes of her own position, evoke the experiences of other women of her generation and class, and experiment with the forms of address she would later extend in her fiction. In this sense, it seems more accurate to position this open letter not as a precursor to her later novel, but rather to think of the two texts as being part of a continuum of projects in which the epistolary figured centrally.

Intriguingly, Bâ's eventual incorporation of this text into her novel did leave a trace. Ramatoulaye's speech in *Letter* generates an exasperated reply from her interlocutor, Daouda Dieng, who asks, "À qui t'adresses-tu, Ramatoulaye?" ("Whom are you addressing, Ramatoulaye?"; *Une si longue lettre* 90; *So Long a Letter* 61). This question is difficult to answer, not just in this scene but for the book as a whole (Warner 1247). Daouda's dismissive remark suggests that mixing the registers of public and private communication must be understood as excessive or self-indulgent. But when read across the open letter and the novel, this seems instead to be a moment where a certain productive tension is registered between incommensurable forms of address. Bâ would insist time and again in her writings that the private and the public dimensions of the political cannot be disentangled. And yet both she and her protagonist Ramatoulaye find themselves in the position of having to translate between the two for their male interlocutors. In their shared speech, the dissonance that is generated by abrupt shifts in tone, register, and even genre is itself the

point, and a place from which Bâ's mode of feminist critique would take shape.

### "Césaire and Senghor: Two Routes, the Same Horizon"

Bâ's second contribution to *L'Ouest Africain*, also from 1976, is an essay on negritude. On first read, "Césaire et Senghor: Deux itinéraires, un même horizon" seems to be a faithful portrait of both Aimé Césaire and Senghor. But appearances can deceive. Bâ declares that she is rereading the two negritude founders. She phrases this in the indicative ("Je relis Césaire, je relis Senghor" [39]), a tense that is more expansive than the English present since it can also evoke a sense of the continuous (*I reread* or *I am rereading*). This raises the question of why, in the mid-1970s, it felt necessary for Bâ not just to return to negritude but to present this practice as ongoing and unfinished.

Bâ published her essay on negritude when Senegal was still a one-party state under Senghor, as negritude played a significant buttressing role in the ideology of the regime. As his letters to the editor show, Senghor was himself a reader of *L'Ouest Africain* and his relationship to the Senegalese press at the time was tempestuous. Bâ was thus writing about negritude for an audience that included the president himself. No wonder her intervention is oblique. Her rereading of negritude takes clearest shape in the conclusion:

Bien que différentes dans leur concept premier, la négritude senghorienne et la négritude césairienne se retrouvent. L'internationalisme de Césaire rejoint la quête de Senghor pour une civilisation de l'Universel. Senghor qui paraît le moins intransigeant a conduit cependant le Sénégal à l'indépendance; la Martinique, au sein des îles, est demeuré département français. Chance historique de Senghor? Sort douloureux de Césaire? Ces pages restent ouvertes que l'avenir écrira.

(Bâ, "Césaire et Senghor" 40)

Although their conceptual beginnings differ, Senghorian negritude and Césairian negritude converge. Césaire's internationalism joins Senghor's quest for a civilization of the Universal. Senghor,

who appears the least intransigent, nevertheless has led Senegal to independence; Martinique, in the heart of the islands, has remained a French Department. Historic luck for Senghor? A painful fate for Césaire? These pages remain open for the future to write.

After dangling the possibility of a synthesis through a shared commitment to internationalism, Bâ ends her reflection on a more ambiguous note by invoking the divergent paths the two men eventually walked in politics: national sovereignty versus departmentalization.

In her final image, she imagines the relationship between negritude and decolonization as a text that is still being written. Far from glorifying Senghor at the expense of Césaire, this seems instead to say, "we'll just have to see how all this works itself out." This future-focused reading anticipates Gary Wilder's more recent reappraisal of Senghor and Césaire as being attuned to the "proleptic character of politics" (14). Bâ would appear to harmonize with Wilder when he suggests that Senghor and Césaire were especially sensitive to "the politics of time and the temporality of politics" (14). But Bâ's final image has other resonances that speak to the centrality of gender in the temporality of her political imagination.

The vision of an open page waiting for the lines that only the future can write is itself a visual rhyme for a similar image that Bâ would deploy later at a key moment in *So Long a Letter*. When Ramatoulaye is imagining what her life would have been like had she left her husband and started over, she writes, "Partir! Tirer un trait net sur le passé. Tourner une page où tout n'était pas luisant sans doute, mais net" ("Leave! Draw a clean line through the past. Turn over a page on which not everything was bright, certainly, but at least all was clear"; *Une si longue lettre* 61; *So Long a Letter* 40). In the late 1970s, Bâ kept returning to the image of a blank page as a figure for futurity, potentiality, and contingency.

In her essay on negritude, she uses the image to evoke the different paths taken by Senegal and Martinique in decolonization. And in her novel,

she has Ramatoulaye use a similar image to imagine what her life might have been had she not remained married to the wrong man. This repetition suggests a provocative analogy between choices made in marriage and choices made in politics, a dense layering of the personal and the political that interrogates the silences around gender in anticolonial political thought—including that of negritude. Lingering over an imagined political future that never came to be is powerful, Bâ seems to suggest, but in Senghor's Senegal there were also risks to remaining infatuated with a postponed future long past its expiration date. It could feel rather like being stuck with someone who turned out to be quite different from the promise of their younger self.

This image of the page that remains open for the future to write helps unlock something fundamental for understanding Bâ's thinking on aesthetics and politics. For Bâ, the primary function of writing and politics was to be perpetually unfinished. There will always be another page that needs to be written. There will always be a need to find space in the margins to inscribe other visions.

### "A Muslim Funeral"

Bâ's final contribution to *L'Ouest Africain* was also the first appearance of *So Long a Letter* in print. In 1978, the year before her novel was published in Dakar by Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, *L'Ouest Africain* ran a short excerpt under the title "Funérailles Musulmanes." This publication underlines the reality that the paper's readers were Bâ's first audience and the one most likely to purchase her book. This was a hopeful moment, and yet it is hard not to be struck by how fragile it all was. *L'Ouest Africain* was back to publishing on newsprint, so when Bâ took her first step toward a sparkling career that would be cruelly cut short less than three years later, it was in a periodical that was itself barely holding on.

The 1978 excerpt comprises portions of the first three chapters of *Letter*, in which Ramatoulaye describes her husband's fatal heart

attack and sketches the funeral that follows. There are significant differences and elisions. The newspaper excerpt is not structured as a letter and there is no mention of Aïssatou, the novel's addressee. Instead, the piece begins in medias res and reads as a description of a funeral among a certain social class in Dakar. Notably, the excerpt skips the beginning and end of chapter one, which invoke the friendship between the two women and explain Ramatoulaye's determination to keep a journal during her widow's seclusion.<sup>4</sup> The newspaper excerpt begins with these phrases from page two of the novel: "Modou est mort. Comment te raconter?" ("Modou is dead. How can I explain it to you?"; Bâ, "Funérailles Musulmanes" 9; see *Une si longue lettre* 8 and *So Long a Letter* 1).

The central conceit of Bâ's first novel is, of course, that the text is one long letter, so this change is surprising. There are suggestions that an epistolary structure may already have been in place, since the as-yet-unnamed narrator of this excerpt addresses an unspecified interlocutor informally ("Comment te raconter?"). This has a curious effect, however, almost as if the very first addressee of Ramatoulaye's letter were not Aïssatou at all, but the reader of a newspaper.

The excerpt ends with the simple "à demain" ("until tomorrow") that would close the book's eventual third chapter (Bâ, "Funérailles Musulmanes" 10; see *Une si longue lettre* 18 and *So Long a Letter* 9). Such a promise has a rather different flavor for a newsprint audience. "Tomorrow" in a newspaper invokes an episodic future of serialization, rather than an upcoming exchange of private messages. Setting aside the question of who made these changes, the décalage between the two print versions of *Letter* highlights the generic fluidity in which Bâ's writing practice existed. Although *Letter* is often described as an epistolary novel, it looks quite different when viewed through the prism of Bâ's newsprint writings. The text's eventual form—the sequential "chapters" of an extended monologue without any replies—seem to evoke not the back-and-forth of written correspondence but the punctuated temporality of newsprint.

## Untimely Book History

There is a stubborn teleology to literary history whereby an archival "find" such as this one seems to compel the telling of a certain kind of story: the well-known author's early writings resurface only to become legible as the groundwork of their later literary texts. This makes a certain kind of sense, but the resurfacing of an archive such as this one can also be an opportunity to sidestep the temptations of linear chronology and causality.

In the years before she published her novel, Bâ found her first print audiences through *L'Ouest Africain*. In its pages she experimented with a variety of genres: polemics, poems, essays, speeches, and—eventually—fiction. Forms of intertextuality connect these earlier writings and her novels, suggesting that such experiments were foundational to her creative practice. In particular, an elastic sense of temporality and an inclination toward intimate publicness are tendencies that connect across the continuum of Bâ's writings, defying any attempt to assign a simple chronology to their appearance.

Rather than present this forgotten archive merely as Bâ's "early works," then, I contend that these texts are robust experiments in political and aesthetic imagination in their own right. Bâ's early and later writings are mutually illuminating because they were written in dialogue with each other. Insights, concerns, and formal experimentation flow freely between all her writings of the 1970s, instead of moving in only one direction.

Bringing this dynamic into clearer focus requires a different perspective—what one might call untimely book history. Instead of scouring archives for clues to the genesis of a masterpiece (the "avant-texte(s)" of genetic criticism), an untimely book history would entail a more open-ended approach to the many temporalities of the archives. Political and aesthetic creativity often depend on capacious forms of time-reckoning that do not operate in accordance with linear models. In the case of Bâ, unruly temporalities are deployed to explore the overlapping pasts and futures of Pan-Africanism, to question from a place of gender the unfolding of nationalist sovereignty as the only possible political future, and to gesture toward the

emancipatory potential of rereading the textual residues of negritude and anticolonial thought.

Instead of assuming that only a progressive model of time can give coherence to historically and materially grounded literary study, an untimely book history would attend to and harmonize with such wayward temporalities as they shift productively across texts and their co(n)texts. Bâ herself offers one model for this. What would it do to think of our practice as literary scholars as proceeding from a recognition that indeed all pages remain open for the future to write?

## NOTES

1. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. In addition to the three pieces discussed in this essay, a fourth contribution is a reprint of a speech Bâ gave in honor of her former headmistress (Bâ, "Le gouvernement senegalais"). Because the original text of this speech has already been republished in Ndiaye 181–85, I do not focus on it here.
3. Compare this passage with Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* 89–90 and *So Long a Letter* 60–61.
4. See Bâ, *Une si longue lettre* 7–18 and *So Long a Letter* 1–9.

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