How Mariama Bâ Became World Literature: Translation and the Legibility of Feminist Critique

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JUST A FEW YEARS AFTER IT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED, IN 1979, Mariama Bâ's novel *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*) existed in more than half a dozen translations, including English, German, Japanese, and Norwegian. Although Bâ did not live to see the full extent of her first novel's success, *Letter* would go on to become one of the most widely translated African novels of the twentieth century, also appearing on countless syllabi.[1] Along the way, prize committees, translators, editors, and critics all shaped how the Senegalese author's work became recognizable to a global audience.

In this essay I retrace the path *Letter* took to become world literature. I begin by showing how Bâ's success came to be bound up with two interpretations of her novel: as a broadside against the institution of polygamy in Senegal and as a celebration of literary culture's self-fashioning powers.[2] I reject both these standard accounts, arguing instead that the widespread investment in framing the novel in these ways reveals the terms through which postcolonial literatures become legible to a world-literary public. I show how an obsession with reading *Letter* as a denunciation of polygamy has eclipsed the novel's critique of a modern effort to reform the legal framework of marriage in Senegal. I also examine how the acclaim for *Letter* as a story about the emancipatory powers of writing and book culture overshadows the text's more ambivalent relation to the reading public it conjures.

I then go on to reconsider Bâ's feminism—a term that Bâ herself did not always claim. I contend that the feminism of *Letter* takes the form of a struggle over what alternative forms of social value may still be possible. Bâ leaves this question open—as if asking without being certain of an answer had a value in and of itself.

I conclude by comparing the original French text of *Letter* with two of its translations: the English edition that helped catalyze its

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success as world literature and a more recent translation into Wolof—the most widely spoken language in Senegal—by the contemporary Senegalese writer Maam Yunus Dieng and her collaborator Arame Fal.[3] Dieng has also adapted aspects of Bâ's text into her own novel, *Aawo bi* ("The First Wife"). By reading *Letter* back through Dieng's engagements with it, we can appreciate Bâ as a writer very different from the version we have come to know.

Bâ probably never expected the level of acclaim her work has received. Indeed, *Letter* is saturated by an uncertainty about how it will circulate in the world. As one of the first francophone African novels written by a woman, *Letter* is consumed by the question of its audience—whether it will be read, by whom, and in what ways.[4] This uncertainty emerges most clearly when the text is read back through its translations, as though there is something about translation that dislodges and illuminates the novel's presuppositions about its own conditions of circulation and intelligibility.

The distortions of translation are a familiar motif in discussions of world literature, but this essay offers a different approach. Instead of weighing what is lost or gained, or insisting on a kernel of untranslatability, I argue that the reception of Bâ raises fundamental methodological questions: How do literary texts take for granted certain interpretive conditions of the world in which they will be received? And how does this feature of a text's "worldedness" (to adapt Eric Hayot's term) become reshaped, loosened, or otherwise altered in the circulation of texts that we call world literature? Working in the interstices between world literature and vernacular poetics, I reposition Bâ's novel as a text that foregrounds the contingency of its own literary address and transforms this into an animating contradiction.

Mariama Bâ in Frankfurt

One can rarely pinpoint a single moment when writers and their works become world literature. But for Bâ that transformation clearly began at the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair, where she accepted the inaugural Noma Prize for Publishing in Africa. Although Pascale Casanova's world republic of letters orbits around centers of literary capital like Paris, London, and New York, there is a contrarian's case to be made for prosaic Frankfurt as a hub of world literature, since by some accounts close to eighty percent of all the translations that appeared in the early 1980s were negotiated there ("Matchet's Diary").

Frankfurt's role as a center of the translation market played a significant part in the flurry of interest that arose around Bâ's debut novel. The Noma Award choreographed Bâ's entrance onto the world-literary stage: a series of receptions and a carefully edited press packet led to the publication, in 1981–82, of her novel's first eight translations—into English, German, Japanese, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, and Finnish. This first wave of interest in Bâ's work also set in motion the rapid adoption of her novel by literature syllabi internationally and helped cement *Letter*'s reputation as a classic of modern African literature.

The Noma Award presentation in Frankfurt also gave Bâ a venue for a speech. She spoke on the political dimension of African literature. Her speech has since acquired a life of its own, persisting past the author's untimely death, in 1981, as a touchstone for critical readings of her work. The speech balances a portrait of the African writer as a social critic with a sense of unease about the limitations such a writer may face when working in a "borrowed language," as she refers to French:

> The [African] writer must echo the aspirations of all social classes, especially the most disadvantaged ones. He must denounce the ills and pains that afflict our society and hold back its full blossoming; he must strike out at the archaic practices, customs, and mores that have nothing to do with our precious cul-

> tural heritage. This is his sacred mission, to be accomplished against all odds, with faith and tenacity. . . . [T]he language the writer uses is understood and spoken only by a tiny minority of the population. The writer thus runs the heavy risk of failing in his political mission, because his message has a limited reach and is heard outside the people whom he addresses. (qtd. in Azodo, *Emerging Perspectives* 403, 407; my trans.)

Given Bâ's cautious tone, it is curious that only one aspect of this speech tends to be remembered: the suggestion that the writer's job description includes "strik[ing] out at archaic practices." Bâ's worry that the African writer might be at a linguistic distance from the audience is largely forgotten. In 1989 a small excerpt of this speech was included in a short, anonymous preface to the second edition of *So Long a Letter*, which appeared in Heinemann's prestigious African Writers Series.[5] It reads, "Bâ promoted the crucial role of the writer in a developing country. She believed that the 'sacred mission' of the writer was to strike out 'at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage.' *So Long a Letter* succeeds admirably in its mission." Something strange has occurred here. The preface subtly transforms Bâ's speech into a frame story that explains the objective of her novel, but her concern with how she would be heard has faded away. For an anglophone audience, then, the mission of the novel has been identified as an attack on archaic practices, traditions, and customs—even before the reader reaches page one.[6]

Bâ did not, in her speech, elaborate on which practices, traditions, and customs she had in mind, but many of her readers have not been so circumspect. From early on, Bâ's *Letter* was presented, marketed, and celebrated as a full-throated condemnation of the institution of polygamy. Indeed, it would be difficult to disentangle the impression that *Letter* is a book "about" polygamy from the terms in which it gained international acclaim. The press release announcing the Noma Award indicates just how intertwined these were:

> Mariama Bâ won the Noma Award for her remarkable and compelling first novel *Une si longue lettre*, published by Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines of Dakar in 1979, which deals with the theme of women's emancipation in Africa, specifically, though not exclusively, in the context of polygamy. It portrays the isolation of married women who reject polygamy in a society where it is taken for granted, and the plight of articulate women living in a social milieu dominated by attitudes and values that tend to deny women a proper social personality. In making the award, the Committee that has been entrusted with the selection of the annual prize winner, was impressed by the social significance of a work written from the point of view of a Muslim woman in a society in transition. (Zell)

This commendation distills many elements of what has come to be a widespread framing of the novel: as the story of a self-making female subject who painfully emancipates herself from tradition and religion through the power of a practice of writing. Although this commendation appears to capture a broadly held view of *Letter*, what is intriguing about the Noma Award announcement is that its description of Ba's novel is the product of editing: the phrases that compose it are drawn from three anonymous readers' reports that were prepared for the Noma committee as part of its process of selecting the prizewinner.

In those reports the readers voiced varying assessments and even harsh criticism of Bâ's novel, but Hans Zell, editor of the *African Book Publishing Record*, which administered the award, appears to have stitched together phrases from each reader to assemble the commendation, eliding incongruities to generate a single, consistent appraisal.[7] While the press release gives the impression that it is merely reproducing the award committee's preexisting consensus on the novel, in fact it is

creating a consensus that never existed. There is nothing particularly scandalous about this, since committees of all kinds produce edited joint statements all the time. But this work of synthesis is notable for the way in which it takes divergent readings of Bâ's novel and manages to arrive at the terms through which her work will be acclaimed as world literature. Bâ's reception seems to generate a centripetal force that conflates the novel and the authorial persona. While this shift may have begun in Frankfurt, it cannot be attributed to any one individual or institution.

Specters of Tradition and Custom

The Noma Award's framing of *So Long a Letter* seems to have much to recommend it. The plot of the novel appears at first to supply all the evidence necessary to support a claim that this is a book about how the development of Senegalese women's "proper social personality" is hindered by polygamy. Ramatoulaye and her friend Aïssatou, the novel's central figures, are shocked when they discover that their husbands have secretly taken second wives. Aïssatou chooses to divorce her husband, while Ramatoulaye remains married to hers, even though he subsequently abandons her and their children. The novel opens in media res, many years after the initial betrayal, with the death of Ramatoulaye's husband. She composes the "novel" in seclusion while she mourns him, as a long, sprawling missive addressed to Aïssatou.[8] In a passage that seems to support reading the novel as a book "about" polygamy, Ramatoulaye reflects on the education she and her childhood friend Aïssatou received at a colonial all-girls school.

> *Nous sortir de l'enlisement des traditions, superstitions et mœurs*; nous faire apprécier de multiples civilisations sans reniement de la nôtre; élever notre vision du monde, cultiver notre personnalité, renforcer nos qualités, mater nos défauts; faire fructifier en nous les valeurs de la morale universelle; voilà la tâche que s'était assignée l'admirable directrice. (28)
>
> *To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom*, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress. (16)[9]

The school described here is modeled on the École des Jeunes Filles de Rufisque, an elite institution that drew students from all over French West Africa. Bâ was a graduate, and her biographer (and daughter) Mame Coumba Ndiaye has suggested that this heroic headmistress was based on Bâ's *directrice* at Rufisque.[10] By gathering students from across the empire, schools like this one inadvertently created space for new forms of solidarity among elites, generating the conditions for intellectual resistance to colonialism. But schools like Rufisque were also among the apparatuses in French West Africa that most explicitly articulated imperialism's humanist alibi—which is in part what this passage evokes. The girls' studies are presented as a new kind of self-fashioning that can rescue women from the "bog" (*l'enlisement*—the state of being stuck or stalled, as in quicksand) of tradition, superstition, and custom.

Letter is often understood as a condemnation of the ways political independence in Senegal did little to address gender-based inequality. This is clearly its aim on one level, but in responding to this failure some of Bâ's readers have been quick to see this passage on colonial education as proposing an answer.[11] In a discussion of models of female empowerment in Bâ's novels, Rebecca Wilcox writes approvingly of the "admirable feminist tendencies" of the education the two main characters receive, which prepares them to resist the "pressures of tradition" (134). I agree with Wilcox that a certain feminism does seem to derive from Ra-

matoulaye's education. But the question could also be: What are the stakes of reading *Letter* only in terms of this particular feminism? Furthermore, what is authorized if we identify the goal of feminism as producing stable subjects who can "resist" tradition? Do we not risk trying to accomplish, in criticism, what colonial education purportedly set out to do?

Some readers of Bâ go far in this direction. For instance, in a comparison of Bâ's *Letter* with Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Kathryn Fleming writes nearly interchangeably of "the controlling forces of Islam," "the powerful machinations of tradition," "the insidious lure of polygamy," "the looming specter of Islam," and, finally, "the looming specter of polygamy" (208, 209, 209, 208, 212). With this collection of figures, Fleming perhaps means to embody "tradition, superstition and custom," but how does this trio then become the lure and the specter of polygamy and Islam? I ask this because polygamy is indeed something of a specter in *Letter*, but not in the way Fleming intends.

Polygamy is a motivating engine of the plot; it touches every character's life, and yet actual examples of polygamy are always staged just outside the narrative frame. As Obioma Nnaemeka points out, "It is puzzling that a book . . . in which the word '*la polygamie*/polygamy' *never* appears and polygamy (the institution) *never* functions . . . has been debated and analyzed *ad nauseam* in literary criticism . . . as a book *about the institution of polygamy*" (163). Nnaemeka suggests that one reason the book has been read this way is the English translation. Bâ's English translator, Modupé Bodé-Thomas, renders the phrase *le problème polygamique* as "the problem of polygamy." (100) As Nnaemeka wryly observes, this is like translating *le problème politique* ("the political problem") as "the problem of politics" (168).[12]

One can avoid singling out Bodé-Thomas through a quick survey of the other seven translations that appeared in 1981–82. From German and Japanese to Italian and Norwegian, all of them follow roughly the same pattern that Nnaemeka identifies, transforming an adjective into an institution.[13] A curious consensus thus appears in the text's translation into world literature, as if what Ramatoulaye ought to have said was "the problem of polygamy." In the Wolof version by Dieng and Fal, however, this phrase becomes "mbirum jabar yu bari" ("the matter of many wives"), because there is not a word for polygamy as an institution that could be distinguished from the institution of marriage itself.

Other readers of Bâ go beyond the "specter of polygamy" and take the novel as an injunction to denounce what polygamy is understood to be like in Senegal. In an otherwise insightful comparison of Bâ's *Letter* with Ousmane Sembène's *Xala*, Keith Walker grounds his analysis with a definition: "African Muslim polygamous societies are, by definition, relationships of permanent Koran-sanctioned social inequality in which the power of the husband reinforces the domination, subordination, and submission of women. This power is rationalized by the elders and their Koranic explications of what 'ought, should, and better' be and of what is 'right, good, and bad'" (136). This definition locates the origin of social inequality in a scene of "bad reading"—specifically, in the elders' cunning reliance on the sanction of a sacred text. Defined this way, polygamy becomes something static and purely exterior to particular women and men who might practice it. But if this is what African Muslim polygamous societies are, by definition, like, should we not expect to find an abundance of elders citing the Quran in *Letter*? In fact, nowhere in the novel is the Quran invoked to justify polygamy, nor even are any of the hadith to which Bâ's characters could well have referred. What is cited to explain polygamy? Fate, God's will, filial duty, the materialism of the poor—but perhaps the most frequent explanations are secular, even biological, accounts of human nature.[14]

Nevertheless, I believe that Walker's definition demonstrates something fundamental about Bâ's reception, offering a version of polygamy in the novel as it *should have been* depicted. In a sense, this account corrects the novel's picture of polygamy by adding a supplemental definition in which a scene of overly literal reading comes to explain social inequality.

Walker's scene of "bad reading" eerily mirrors another well-known passage in the novel. In this scene, Ramatoulaye lauds her friend Aïssatou's decision to leave her husband after he secretly takes a second wife. In response to this duplicity, Aïssatou divorces him, continues her education, and eventually becomes a translator in New York. Famously, the novel ascends here into a paean to book culture:

> Tu t'assignas un but difficile; et plus que ma présence, mes encouragements, les livres te sauvèrent. Devenus ton refuge, ils te soutinrent. Puissance des livres, invention merveilleuse de l'astucieuse intelligence humaine. Signes divers, associés en sons; sons différents qui moulent le mot. Agencement de mots d'où jaillissent l'Idée, la Pensée, l'Histoire, la Science, la Vie. Instrument unique de relation et de culture, moyen inégalé de donner et de recevoir. Les livres soudent des générations au même labeur continu qui fait progresser. Ils te permirent de te hisser. Ce que la société te refusait, ils te l'accordèrent. (50–51)

> You set yourself a difficult task; and more than just my presence and my encouragements, books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you. The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Juxtaposition of words from which springs the idea, Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knot generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. They enabled you to better yourself. What society refused you, they granted. (32)

This account of reading and sociality seems like the polar opposite of Walker's "African Muslim polygamous societies." In those, everyone is beholden to a holy text that reinforces the subordination of women. In this account of a society organized around a reading public, books are a force outside society, privileged instruments of culture that join together generations in a "progressive labor."

Ramatoulaye's praise of books can easily be taken to be the novel's articulation of its own ideal reading public.[15] Other scenes that might demonstrate the limitations of this model are sometimes considered largely in relation to this idealized vision. This has been especially true of a key moment in the narrative, when Ramatoulaye tries to decide whether she should leave her husband. After learning of his betrayal, Ramatoulaye agonizes over what to do, but she does not divorce him. Just when we are prepared to see Ramatoulaye assert her independence, she appears to do nothing of the kind.

This scene frustrates many of Bâ's readers. It is a particularly opaque moment in a text in which the narrator's thoughts, feelings, and opinions are usually at center stage. While there is no critical consensus on how to read this scene, two approaches to understanding it stand out. First, critics debate whether this scene means that Ramatoulaye "accepts polygamy" or not.[16] Second, they try to resolve this scene's troubling opacity by "fleshing out" Ramatoulaye psychologically. Attempts to make sense of this moment by psychologizing her differ greatly, but Islam and polygamy are frequently cited as reasons for her inaction.[17] I am interested less in the psychological portraits critics have provided than in why this moment in the text provokes this kind of response. Offering a psychological account of Ramatoulaye's (in)action restores a clear sense of the protagonist's individuality at the moment when it seems most in peril. Perhaps it is this moment's openness to interpretation that tempts critics to com-

plete what Bâ left, as it were, unfinished. It is as if some readers seem able to understand Ramatoulaye's choice only as a deviation from what she should have chosen, as a sign of incomplete self-liberation.

This moment, I would suggest, does not need to be explained away. Perhaps the dissonance is the point. Indeed, when Ramatoulaye is debating whether to stay or go, she enlists the image of a book. "Leave!" she writes, "Draw a clean line through the past. Turn over a page on which not everything was bright, certainly, but at least all was clear" (61). At the moment when, in the eyes of many of her readers, Ramatoulaye should have acted as if her life were a novel, she tries but fails to conceive of herself as a text—the kind of text that lets you just turn the page.

As Ramatoulaye weighs what she will do, she continues to try out other ways of seeing, besides the reading of books. Just after discarding the possibility of turning the page, Ramatoulaye recalls her mother's warning: that the gap between her husband's teeth was a sign of his appetite for pleasure. Ramatoulaye had ignored this admonition because it was superstitious. And yet in this moment she cannot help but recall how right her mother was. In a study of social marginality in Bâ's novels, Igolima Amachree points to this reaction as evidence that Ramatoulaye's story is ultimately the tragedy of not being modern enough. Amachree bemoans the way Ramatoulaye "rejects the custom of polygyny and wants to be lifted out of it and yet she accepts the superstition of reading a person's character by the shape of the teeth. . . . Thus we see her enmeshed in those same 'traditions, superstitions and customs' while thinking that she has been lifted from the 'bog' of them" (81). Amachree appears to be correcting Ramatoulaye here for not resembling more closely the ideal subject that her education was supposed to produce. What does it tell us about the terms through which we, as critics, apprehend world literature that it is at the moment when the image of selfhood as a book is found to be problematic that a world-literary public has often intervened to adjust the picture, to restore an emancipatory account of reading and subjectivity?[18]

Amachree's suggestion that the novel stages a conflict between modernity and tradition is also a common interpretive frame for *Letter*.[19] In a foundational study of choice and ambivalence in Bâ's fiction, Irène Assiba d'Almeida also invokes this binary. "What Ramatoulaye really wants," d'Almeida writes,

> is to be a modern woman, conscious of her rights as an individual and determined to fight for these rights. However, being a modern woman is at once seductive and threatening. Seductive because it opens up to the possibility for freedom and change, threatening because potentially, it has the power to destabilize the ground on which she stands. And so, Ramatoulaye is always torn between modernity and tradition. (165)

Elsewhere, d'Almeida offers a nuanced appraisal of the ambiguities of Ramatoulaye's choices, but here she risks framing tradition as something static. D'Almeida describes it as the ground on which Ramatoulaye stands. But the applicability of "tradition and custom" to the institution of marriage in Senegal has a complicated legal history, an aspect of the novel that critics have mostly overlooked.[20]

Letter stages a complex dialogue with the struggles over women's civil rights in Senegal that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. Specifically, *Letter* is deeply interwoven with a set of legal reforms introduced in 1973 known collectively as the Family Code. The code marked a significant shift in the Senegalese legal system. Before its introduction, legal issues related to marriage, divorce, and inheritance were ostensibly governed by religious or customary law in certain regions. This was a legacy of colonial jurisprudence. During the colonial era of French West Africa, there were essentially two legal systems—one for French

citizens (to whom French law applied) and another for colonial subjects (who were in theory under the authority of religious or customary courts).[21] Most pertinent for Bâ's novel, what came to be enforced as religious and customary law was partially the product of an effort to standardize and make permanent a diverse set of practices. Before instituting the customary tribunals that would govern subjects, the colonial administration deployed anthropologists to study and formalize local customs, which were then given the force of law.[22] Tradition and custom, then, did not refer to unchanging, indigenous practices but rather to new, negotiated legal formations, to which individuals and institutions responded strategically. So the idea—common in readings of Bâ—that a simple modernity-tradition binary exists here needs to be set aside, especially when it comes to questions of family law and family form. Far from being a "bog" in which women had been stuck since time immemorial, tradition and custom were hybrid socio-legal spaces in transformation.

In the early 1960s, after Senegal gained independence, a committee was convened to resolve this complicated legal history by reforming and unifying family law. After more than ten years of debate, the committee produced the Family Code, which changed inheritance laws and made repudiation illegal, signed consent mandatory, and dowries optional. Most relevant for *Letter*, the code made it mandatory for husbands to declare their intent (and for their wives to agree) to be either polygamous or monogamous at the time of marriage—polygamy being the default option (Scales-Trent 131). The code generated significant debate about marriage in Senegal throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the period during which Bâ's novel was written and published.[23] The code comes up in passing in the novel, but it is also present in another, more structural sense.[24] The betrayals that the two central female characters suffer in the novel—in which their husbands take second wives without their knowledge—would have, in theory, been illegal under the Family Code. In this sense, the family dramas that the novel stages closely resemble the family forms the law sought to regulate.

Literature and the law are intertwined in the reception of the novel as well. When the committee that produced the Family Code tried to reform polygamy, the solution they reached was to stipulate a choice for or against it. One objection to this solution has been that, in its effort to offer a choice in the matter of polygamy, the committee imagined both men and women as abstract subjects who could either say yes or no. But in practice such a choice might be more of a negotiation that would take place in a matrix of competing commitments, affiliations, dispositions, and constraints.[25] A legal persona who could simply say "yes" or "no" to polygamy is not what we find in Bâ's narrator, Ramatoulaye. Yet it is what we often find in *Letter*'s reception as world literature, which frequently recasts Ramatoulaye as she should have been—namely, as someone who simply says no to polygamy. What can we make of the curious convergence between the reformist impulses of the novel's reception and the project of legal reform? Of the way the terms of legal intelligibility seem to parallel those of literary legibility? Perhaps neither world literature nor modern, positive law can do without categories such as tradition, religion, and custom, which serve as screens onto which narratives of the development of secular, modern individuality are projected.

Criteria of Value

If we can see *Letter*'s feminism as more than an attack on tradition and custom, a host of other approaches and problematics come into view. Among these are two questions that hang over the entire work. In one of her apostrophes, Ramatoulaye seems to be addressing some indeterminate, larger audience:

"Quand la société éduquée arrivera-t-elle à se déterminer non en fonction du sexe, mais des critères de valeur?" ("When will educated society reach the point at which it determines itself not by virtue of sex but rather by criteria of value?"). In response to this demand, her exasperated interlocutor blurts out, "A qui t'adresses-tu, Ramatoulaye?" ("Whom are you addressing, Ramatoulaye?" [90; my trans.]). Neither question is easy to answer. Ramatoulaye's demand for a new form of social value encapsulates the mode of feminist contestation for which the novel is rightly famous. And yet it is not clear from the immediate context quite what she has in mind. An answer to the second query—"Whom are you addressing?"—also appears elusive, since the implied audience here and elsewhere is incredibly elastic. At times, Ramatoulaye seems to be writing to herself as much as to Aïssatou, while at other times she seems to address a much larger public.[26] Far from being an aporia, this unresolvability of both value and address grounds Bâ's distinctive mode of critique.[27]

One of the most persistent, and anguished, questions in *Letter* is what other kinds of value might be possible. What could be an adequate, alternative source of value with which to transform society in the context of rapid urbanization, the extension of the market into countless new areas of social life, the persistence of caste privilege, patriarchy, and colonial structures of social inequality? The source of value the novel seems to advocate most often is an interior, individual space that houses faculties of sentiment, reason, and agency. What goes on in this space of interiority is usually presented as what others should value in a person rather than caste, wealth, gender, and so on. Ramatoulaye sums this up neatly as she chastises her brother-in-law for offering to take her as a second wife after her husband's death: "Tu oublies que j'ai un cœur, une raison, que je ne suis pas un objet que l'on se passe de main à main." ("You forget that I have a heart and reason, that I am not an object to be passed from one hand to another" [85; my trans.]).

The dramatic progression of *Letter* is principally driven by the many ways in which Ramatoulaye's individuality is under constant threat from other criteria of value. These include the demands of a "morale ancienne" and its "féroces lois antiques" ("traditional morality" and its "ferocious antiquated laws" [48; my trans.]) and the "force" and "loi" of "instincts" and "désir" ("force" and "law" of "instincts" and "desire" [52; my trans.]). Ramatoulaye seems on occasion to be subject to both of these in complicated ways, and some of the moments that are taken to define her progress toward becoming a free, independent individual appear curiously superimposed onto these other forms of valuation.[28]

There is, however, another form of value in the novel that is neither moral nor instinctual—namely, exchange value. Regardless (or perhaps because) of how often Ramatoulaye asserts that the individual's interiority is what should count, she worries that it may become something that is merely countable. At her husband's funeral, as the gifts of condolence pour in, Ramatoulaye bemoans the fact that expressions of sympathy are now all made in banknotes, a "[t]roublante extériorisation du sentiment intérieur inévaluable, évalué en francs!" ("[t]roubling exteriorization of invaluable interior sentiment, counted in francs!" [14; my trans.]).[29] *Letter*'s fundamental crisis turns around the ways in which Ramatoulaye's life might be measured—but also risks being mismeasured. The language of quantification suffuses the prose at the most intimate moments. Ramatoulaye worries that, in marriage, "[j]'ai *donné sans compter*, donné plus que je n'ai reçu" ("I *gave without counting*, gave more than I received" [82; my trans. and emphasis). She tells herself, "[C]'est *la somme* de toutes les secondes perdues ou cueillies qui fait les vies ratées ou réussies" ("It's *the sum* of all the lost or seized seconds that makes for successful or failed lives" [63;

my trans. and emphasis]). Even her most reflective and outraged moments are often inflected with measurement: "Je me *mesurais* aux ombres." ("I *measured* myself against the shadows"); "Je *mesurais*, aux regards étonnés, la minceur de la liberté accordée à la femme" ("I *measured*, in front of stunned eyes, how thin was the liberty accorded to women" [78, 76; my trans. and emphasis]).

How could one account for a life? The need to do so spurs Bâ's *Letter*, and yet the novel seems riven by the impossibility and the inevitability of re-counting in a given set of terms. While the individual's agency, reason, and sentiment often appear to be what Ramatoulaye means by "criteria of value," the novel complicates this progressive teleology and ultimately leaves the question of value open—as if *Letter* cannot do without the individual's interiority (to ground its critique of actually existing social values) but also cannot make do with it either. The generative force of this paradox drives *Letter* to pose the possibility of a new form of value while refraining from identifying it with any preexisting category. I suggest that we might find this gesture to be valuable in itself, as a mode of critique.

The demand for a new form of social value is also intimately bound up with the elasticity of *Letter*'s address. For the novel to demand another valuation without determining it in advance, it must refuse to limit its address to any already achieved form or genre. This is what accounts for its famous generic indeterminacy: the novel resembles a letter, a diary, and a bildungsroman without quite assimilating itself to any of these.

The instability of the novel's mode of address echoes Bâ's own anxieties of audience. Her worry in Frankfurt over how and where her work would be read could, of course, be understood to refer only to the material conditions in which her address was situated—the fact that she could not take for granted widespread French literacy in Senegal or a local economy that could sustain a book-publishing market. But Bâ's concern with address is at least as much about how she can be heard. The capacity to be heard depends on what modes of address one is authorized to make, whether one can compel others to listen if they would prefer not to, whom one can speak for, what can be spoken about—not to mention the stylistics, sensibilities, and expectations of a given audience.[30] In *Letter* the struggle to give shape to a new form of social value is a struggle over how one might be heard—and in what terms.

Imagined Assemblies

Part of *Letter*'s appeal to readers and teachers of literature is the convergence it proposes between letter writing and self-writing. That Ramatoulaye fashions her self through writing has tended to confirm our idealizations of what kind of sociality print culture makes possible. At issue in *Letter*'s reception as world literature, then, is a reflexive self-recognition on the part of the international audience. In the redemptive vision that the text appears to offer of books and writing as gateways to agency and autonomy, we recognize our own deeply felt and often implicit convictions.

To draw out the limits of this form of recognition, I want to look again at the novel's celebrated passage on the power of books. But this time I will complicate matters by comparing the English translation linked with the text's status as world literature with the Wolof version by Dieng and Fal. Here is the passage in Bâ's original French and then in the English and Wolof translations. The fourth passage is my English translation of the Wolof version.

> Puissance des livres, invention merveilleuse de l'astucieuse intelligence humaine. Signes divers, associés en sons; sons différents qui moulent le mot. *Agencement de mots d'où jaillissent l'Idée, la Pensée, l'Histoire, la Science, la Vie. Instrument unique de relation et de culture, moyen inégalé de donner et de recevoir.* Les livres soudent des générations au même

> labeur continu qui fait progresser.
> (50–51; my emphasis)

> The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. *Juxtaposition of words from which springs the idea, Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving.* Books knot generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress.
> (32; my emphasis)

> Dooley téere, doy na waar; kéemaan la ci kéemaan yi xelum doom-aadama sàkk: ay rëdd nga boole muy baat; *nga booley baat, xel nàcc, indi xalaat, nettali taarix, génne xam-xam, wone àddina. Téere mooy jumtukaay yu yéeme, ci jàllale caada ak weccentey xalaat.* Ñooy boole ñu bokkul jamono, tënk leen ci benn gëstu, ba ñu génne ci lu jariñ mbindeef yi.
> (Bâ, *Bataaxal bu gudde nii* 62; my emphasis)

> The power of books is quite extraordinary. They are a marvel among all the mysteries of the spirit of the children of Adam. Lines that you combine until they are words. *You join together words and intelligence flows forth, bringing thought, narrating history, leaving knowledge in its wake, revealing the world. Books are astonishing tools for the transmission of culture and the mutual exchange of ideas.* Books bring together those who are not of the same generation, tying them into the same inquiry, whose goal is that which is useful to all creatures. (my emphasis)

In the French original, books are presented as powerful assemblages (*agencements*) of words that serve as the glue of social relation in an idealized public sphere. Books are credited with summoning up Thought, History, Science, even Life, whose capitalization gives them a kind of allegorical status.[31]

What must be translated is not only the semantic content but also the way in which this passage makes assumptions about what books do and how they exist for a public. The English and Wolof versions differ markedly in how they approach this. In the English, books continue to be a "juxtaposition" of words from which flow Thought, History, Science, and Life. But in the Wolof, Dieng and Fal abandon capitalization and approximate these grandiose concepts with phrases shorn of allegorical status. They also shift key sentences from third to second person: instead of deriving from books themselves, the qualities of knowledge, intelligence, and so on result from the actions of an impersonal "you" who joins together words ("nga booley baat").

A more striking departure appears in the way the translators handle the pronouncement that books are an "instrument unique de relation et de culture." *Unique* in French can mean "only," but it can also mean "exceptional" or "special." Opting for the former sense, Bodé-Thomas's English translation makes books the "sole instrument of interrelationships and culture," thereby amplifying the status claimed for them in the original. In Wolof, books are still called an "astonishing" ("yéeme") technology, but they are no longer "unparalleled" as tools for spreading culture and knowledge and for facilitating communication.[32]

The translators encounter a moment in which the novel imagines what it means to address an audience in print—something that is not the same in Wolof, English, and French. As the passage warps across languages, the publics and contexts of use that these translations can envision for themselves come into focus. The English and Wolof versions both remain close to the meaning of the original, and yet they re-create the way in which this passage imagines its own field of circulation. The English intensifies a belief in the special powers of print culture, whereas the Wolof dampens this aspect of the original. Dieng and Fal transpose this praise of books' unique power into a literary context that is, at present, not very amenable to such idealization. Although there is an abundance of written discourse in Wolof across media and scripts, to romanticize the printed book

as *the* privileged medium of knowledge and culture is to dismiss other modes of relation; more concretely, it is to ignore the many challenges faced by book publishing in vernacular languages in Senegal.[33]

The divergence between the translations records the difference between what a printed literary address can take for granted in English and in Wolof.[34] The English version, closely associated with the text's success as world literature, augments the heroic account; Dieng and Fal recalibrate it for a different anticipated audience, for whom the power of books cannot be presumed in quite the same way.

The drift between these two versions brings to mind Benjamin's famous claim that in a translation content adheres only loosely to language, like the "ample folds of a royal robe." We experience language and meaning as tightly bound up together in the original—like "a fruit and its skin," in Benjamin's image—because of what is nonlinguistic about how we "mean" anything at all (75). Our capacity to be meaningful and to be heard is conditioned by what we can presume about the terms in which our utterance might become intelligible to another. The subtle differences that emerge among the translations suggest that this dimension of language—what we presume we can presume upon—has a tendency to become ill-fitting (or, following Benjamin, more capacious) in translation.

A text's public is a function not of books, nor even of readers, but rather of being presumable and reflexive—of being able to presume that readers exist and that they will identify themselves as its addressees.[35] Through small but significant shifts, Dieng and Fal's Wolof translation introduces what the original French and the English version seem not to include—a sense that the projected reading public imagined in this passage is, indeed, a projection and not an inherent, almost magical feature of books themselves.[36]

But perhaps my comparison risks flattening out the complexities of the original passage. While one could indeed read this praise of books as a moment in which the novel sketches its own field of circulation, we ought to recall that Ramatoulaye's text is not included in the public sphere that the passage envisions. The letters that form the novel do not describe themselves as literature, nor has Ramatoulaye sent them by the end of the book. Instead, *Letter* concludes with her promise to deliver the manuscript to Aïssatou by hand the next day. While Ramatoulaye's paean to books clearly celebrates the transformative social power of a reading public, we ought to recall that within its own narrative frame this is a text that has not (yet) circulated.

Bâ's *Letter* presents itself as something intended for but not yet offered to a public. With this paradox in mind, we can appreciate the Wolof translation's drift in meaning not as an intervention on the translators' part but rather as an echo of a mode of address that saturates the original work. Working through Dieng and Fal's translation, then, we see the internal complexity of *Letter*'s address. The novel seems to oscillate between an idealization of a reading public and a deep concern that the terms in which one might address such a public and be heard are all predetermined. If we read Bâ only in English, we risk missing this aspect of her poetics entirely. Reading *Letter* back through its Wolof translation corrects this tendency, but not by recovering a more relevant, "local" interpretation or context. Instead, doing so lets us see how each version of the novel projects a public for itself, posing anew the question of its own audience.

Long before she translated *Letter* with Fal, Dieng faced a crisis of audience herself, as one of the earliest novelists working in Wolof. When she composed her 1992 novel *Aawo bi* ("The First Wife"), Dieng could not take for granted widespread literacy in the recently standardized orthography.[37] Like Bâ, Dieng worried about how she would be read, but she was equally concerned with whether she would be read at all. Dieng responded to this

crisis in part by appropriating and transforming aspects of Bâ's *Letter*.[38]

Dieng echoes Bâ most clearly in the preface to *Aawo bi*, where she ruminates on the possibilities and contradictions of writing a novel for an uncertain public. Dieng begins by hailing her reader as a friend, whom she assures that, while the task of reading will be difficult at first, "there is nothing in this book that you don't already know." Dieng writes:

> Kon, xarit, nanu jëli démb *boolek* tey, yaatal sunu xam-xam, jottali ko sunuy moroom, nu waajal ëllëg. . . . [B]oo jàngee sama *Aawo bi* ba noppi, daldi may fey, te bu ko waaj. Bindal te bul tiit, bul taxaw; noonu la ñepp tàmbalee. . . . Aywa, jëlal sa xalima nu bind.
>
> (3–4; my emphasis)

> So, friend, let us go and get the past and *join it* with the present, broaden our knowledge, convey it to our peers, and prepare for tomorrow. . . . [W]hen you have read my *Aawo bi* through to the end, then you can repay me, without hesitation. Write without fear, without stopping. This is how everyone begins. . . . Come, take up your pen and let us write.
>
> (my trans. and emphasis)

This preface imagines an audience for whom the reading of literature will present some difficulties. But Dieng positions her novel as a gift to her reader, a gift that puts the reader in the author's debt. The repayment Dieng expects is extraordinary—she calls on the reader to become a writer in turn. Dieng envisions a reading public bringing the past and the future together, and the verb she chooses is *boole*, which means "to join together, to assemble." The word for "assembly of people," or "public," *mboolo mi*, derives from this verb.

For both Bâ and Dieng, then, books are indeed "astonishing tools" that permit a writer to assemble a public. And while both are attuned to the transformative possibilities of such assemblies, their work remains askance from any idealization of them. There are no guarantees of where, how, or whether a writer will be understood. These novels raise the prospect of being heard, of achieving closure with an intended public even as they suspend it in the realm of potentiality. The as-yet-undelivered letter is the figure of this potentiality of address for Bâ. For Dieng, it is the author's gift of writing, which the reader is invited to return. In different circumstances and in different ways, Bâ and Dieng address themselves to publics the shape of which is not given yet.

Notes

My thanks go to James Currey and Mary Jay for directing me to the archive of materials at Indiana University's Lilly Library related to Bâ's 1980 Noma Award. Thanks go as well to the library's staff, especially Alessandro Meregaglia, who provided invaluable assistance transcribing the readers' reports. I owe a special debt to Maam Yunus Dieng and Arame Fal for their generosity and hospitality in welcoming a curious visitor. Jeff Fort, David Gundry, Sven-Erik Rose, Eric Russell, and Juliana Schiesari helped me compare the first wave of Bâ translations. I am grateful to the audiences at panels sponsored by the American Comparative Literature Association and the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies for their feedback. Richard Terdiman's incisive reading of a later draft shaped the argument for the better.

1. The preface to the 2012 Waveland edition of *Letter* estimates that Bâ's work appears in sixteen languages.

2. A 1980 review in *World Literature Today* is emblematic of the first trend: Bâ's "principal subject matter [is] the problem of polygamy" (Abanime). Studies that take the novel to be about polygamy include Murtuza 176; Walker 136; Fleming 206; Mokwenye 88; Rueschmann 5; Chukwuma 35; and Fetzer 39. Although these critics offer divergent interpretations of the novel, a framing of *Letter* as being principally about polygamy cuts across their otherwise incommensurable approaches. Even Ojo-Ade's antifeminist reading casts the novel as an attack on polygamy (79).

Salvific interpretations of writing and print culture are a less pronounced but still common trend in Bâ criticism. Opara writes of "the clogs of repressive tradition" that are "decidedly surmounted by the weight of the dynamic woman's mighty pen" (165). See also Azodo, "Lettre" 3; Wilcox 124; Rueschmann 7; and Fetzer 39. But for more-ambivalent appraisals, see Miller; Irlam.

Although I engage with individual readings in this essay, my intention is neither to personalize the argument

nor to level a polemic against any single critic's analysis of the novel. Instead, I question two durable trends in *Letter*'s critical reception that were wrapped up with its success as world literature. However, because at least 150 articles, chapters, and monographs have been written on Bâ since *Letter* was first published (Andrade), the conversation ranges far beyond these two trends. For example, critics have examined topics such as choice and personal happiness (d'Almeida; Makward); space (Mortimer 71–116; Nnaemeka); feminism, friendship, and solidarity (Hitchcott, "Confidently Feminine"); gender and national identity (Julien); micropolitics and public critique (Andrade); and marginality and canonicity (Miller).

Bâ's posthumous second novel, *Un chant écarlate* (*Scarlet Song*), has received far less attention (and fewer translations), although it does "silk-screen" many aspects of *Letter* (Julien 216). Since I aim to trace how Bâ became world literature, my exclusive focus on *Letter* reflects the outsize role the first novel played. For excellent studies of both novels, see Nfah-Abbenyi 108–47; Hitchcott, "Confidently Feminine"; and Julien.

3. The Wolof translation went through at least two initial printings. In 2016 it was republished by Boubacar Boris Diop's Céytu Editions.

4. Miller also discusses this aspect of Bâ's writing.

5. The Heinemann edition is enmeshed with Bâ's status as world literature. It has achieved a life of its own, remaining a fixture on syllabi when the original briefly went out of print in the 1990s (Hitchcott, *Women Writers* 71). Even a 1994 translation into Swahili, *Barua ndefu kama hii*, was made directly from the English ("Barua Ndefu Kama Hii").

6. The anonymous preface continued to be published in later editions of the novel, including, most recently, the 2012 Waveland Press edition, which contains a revised version of the original.

7. This conclusion is based on a comparison of Zell and "Readers' Assessments."

8. On Ramatoulaye's subversion of her widow's seclusion, or *mirasse*, see Cham.

9. Unless otherwise stated, English quotations from *So Long a Letter* are from the 1989 Heinemann edition of Modupé Bodé-Thomas's translation.

10. For a study of Bâ's generation of students at Rufisque, see Barthélémy.

11. Riesz explores "the emancipatory potential of the French school system" (29).

12. Nnaemeka continues, "Even on the two occasions that Ramatoulaye makes references to the institution, *la polygamie* is not used; she chooses instead to speak about the modalities of its operation" (167).

13. The Dutch translation diverges slightly from this pattern, rendering *le problème polygamique* as "de problemen van het polygame huwelijk" ("the problems of polygamous marriage" [*Een lange Brief* 90]). Yet while the adjective *polygamique* remains an adjective, *problème*, as in the other translations, becomes the problem(s) of an institution. I am grateful to Eric Russell for his help with the Dutch.

14. Hitchcott analyzes these "instincts."

15. Zabus writes, "Books have a salvific power. . . . [T]he book-object is an instrument of liberty for the Senegalese woman" (97; my trans.).

16. For Coulis, Ramatoulaye "is willing to accept . . . polygyny" (31). For Wilcox, "Ramatoulaye never really accepts polygyny" (134).

17. Fleming suggests Ramatoulaye acts in accordance with "traditional Islamic precepts" (215); Murtuza notes that it "is hard to imagine that her subjection to polygyny is not a factor" (197).

18. By "world-literary public" I mean the public that is constituted in the global and uneven circulation of texts and practices of reading that we collectively call world literature.

19. Hitchcott, however, reads friendship as a model of female solidarity that transcends the modernity-tradition binary (*Women Writers* 89).

20. Edson, an exception, notes the relevance of the legal reforms but not their entanglement with the plot.

21. On Senegalese engagements with the colonial legal system, see Diouf. On the *indigénat*, the legal regime that governed the "native" in French West Africa, see Mann. For a foundational analysis of multitiered colonial legal regimes across Africa, see Mamdani.

22. On the colonial construction of customary law and its focus on family form, see Wilder; Robinson; Burrill; Wooten; and Snyder.

23. Loimeier discusses this debate.

24. In her debate with Daouda, Ramatoulaye declares, "Et voilà que l'on a promulgué le Code de la famille, qui restitue, à la plus humble des femmes, sa dignité combien de fois bafouée" ("And now the Family Code has been passed, restoring to the most humble of women the dignity that has so often been trampled upon" [89; 63]). Bâ herself frequently invokes the code in interviews following the publication of *Letter* (Dia 14; Diallo and Sow; Diédhiou; Harell-Bond 210).

25. Sow makes this point, in slightly different terms. For a critique of the code, see Camara. For an ethnography of Muslim families in contemporary Senegal, see Buggenhagen.

26. On the use of apostrophe to address Aïssatou and Modou, see Andrade.

27. My use of *critique* here is informed by Judith Butler's reading of Foucault's "What Is Critique?" Butler describes critique as the "perspective on established and ordering ways of knowing which is not immediately assimilated into [the] ordering function" (215).

28. For instance, Ramatoulaye declines Daouda's offer of marriage through a letter hand-delivered by a *géwél*

(a griot in Wolof). Since *géwél* are a "casted" group, this gesture reinforces Ramatoulaye's status as a *géer* (a "non-casted" person). A *géwél* would traditionally mediate between a *géer* and public space (Diop). Thus, even the novel's iconic gesture of refusal is overlaid with a patron-client relationship based on caste status.

29. On this memorable line, see Andrade on *Letter* as a response to the political malaise of postindependence Senegal.

30. Asad makes a related point about the limits of free speech as a liberal virtue: "The enjoyment of free speech presupposes not merely the physical ability to speak but *to be heard*, a condition without which speaking to some effect is not possible" (184).

31. On these figures, see Miller 275.

32. In the first wave of translations, almost all translators read the French *unique* as meaning "only." The drift in Dieng and Fal's version appears to be an outlier.

33. Fal discusses these difficulties.

34. By *address* I mean the way a text presumes to speak to a particular audience. See Allan on address and world literature.

35. My use of *public* in this essay takes its cue from Michael Warner. For Warner, a public is a self-organized relationship among strangers, a social space that is constituted by the reflexive circulation of discourse (65–124).

36. On Bâ's "projective" relationship with her audience, see Miller 291; on the "virtuality" of her letter, see Irlam 78.

37. Dieng's novel appeared in the 1990s alongside several other Wolof prose manuscripts that used the now official orthography system standardized by Fal. This modern, Latin-based script is employed by most of the self-described literary writers who work in Wolof and has its roots in writing systems developed by Senegalese students in the 1940s and 50s. A much older system for writing Wolof, known as Wolofal, is based on a modified Arabic script and continues to be used to this day. On these histories of transcription, see Fal; Ngom.

38. When I asked Dieng about *Letter*, she positioned Bâ as an elder sister—*sama mag la*—before clarifying that she did not share Bâ's views on family form and that her own novel was partly intended to counter *Letter*'s narrower account (Interview). In Dieng's novel the appearance of the main character's co-wife marks the beginning of a lifelong friendship that sustains the protagonist in the face of awful treatment by her in-laws. While Dieng's and Bâ's novels are intertwined with polemics about feminism and family form, it would be reductive to say they are diametrically opposed. The novels' many affinities include their shared central conceit: that the narrative device is also a form of self-making. But instead of unfolding through letters composed by an individual, the protagonist's life story in Dieng's novel is related by a female griot during a hair-braiding session.

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