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# Performing the Immigrant: The Works of Calixthe Beyala and Fatou Diome

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A passage from Calixthe Beyala's essay *Lettre d'une Afro-française à ses compatriotes* (2000) raises the question of the task of contemporary Francophone writers within multi-dimensional representations of themselves and their work. On the anniversary of the abolition of slavery, another black woman recognizes Beyala on the street, exclaiming "J'aime ce que vous faites. Mais malheureusement je ne vous ai pas encore lue." The author's only reply is "Chouette!" (58). Beyala's public activist persona here seems to overtake her role as simple author. Her resigned reply leaves the reader wondering about the consequences of a whole reading of authorial performances and their related acts. This passage specifically questions the role of a gendered, racialized author. The encounter of these two women of African descent, on a highly significant day regarding global race relations, and within a text that specifically explores hybridity and transnationalism (*Afro-française*) in written form (*une lettre*) is a fitting starting point to examine the self-representational practices of contemporary francophone women writers.

Models of gender performativity proposed by Judith Butler and others can be applied to other identity constructions such as ethnicity, and in particular, "authentic" African identity. Lydie Moudileno's *Parades postcoloniales*, focusing on late twentieth- and twenty-first-century Congolese writers, or Nicki Hitchcott's *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, implement performativity theory as a tool for examining the works, both fictional and in the public sphere, of postcolonial authors. Moudileno outlines her method for examining these practices of constructing identity, stating:

En effet, souligner les artifices déployés par le sujet pour *produire de l'identité* implique toujours de déjouer la fixité d'un hypothétique référent 'identité', et de privilégier au contraire les répétitions circulaires et tangentielles par lesquelles l'identité tente indéfiniment, dans les jeux de représentation, à la fois de dire et d'éluder l'histoire d'une présence. (10, original italics)

These identities are *products* of an act or a performance, a referent conjured by signs the individual subject has constructed to be read and interpreted within a certain community, relying on the repetition and reiteration of models, as Butler suggests. Thus they are not an expression of some supposed presence, as Moudileno states, that would pre-exist the expression of the identity itself. Performativity problematizes the assumption that identity exists out of time; identities are constantly rearticulated in a present moment, existing in a temporal dimension. The “jeux de représentation” to which Moudileno refers also inscribe this phenomenon within the domain of the theatrical. I propose that this performance is not limited to the constructed page/stage contained within the fictional text. Instead, Beyala and Diome use this space to explore the constructions not only of the woman migrant’s identity but also that of the author. Through writer characters within their fiction, these authors engage in a dialogue with their own performance of the role of postcolonial author in the public sphere.

My study of the fictional works of Calixthe Beyala and Fatou Diome explores how they construct identities of the transnational individual using manipulations of personal appearance, documents and identification papers, and individual performances of the “authentic” African immigrant. I pay special attention to author characters within each text and to the relation of these authorial performances to the writers themselves.

### CALIXTHE BEYALA: PERFORMING THE ACTIVIST WRITER

A recognized if controversial writer, Calixthe Beyala made her literary début in 1987 with the novel *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*. Since then, she has published close to twenty works of fiction and essays, though in recent years she has been less present on the literary stage. A native of Cameroon living in France for over thirty years, she addresses both in her writing and in her activism the status of immigrants and minorities in France, development in Africa and the intersection of these issues with gender. Presenting herself as an autodidact, she has no ties to academia, but is one of the few African francophone writers to make a living from her writing (Hitchcott, *Performances* 1).

Beyala’s novel *Assèze l’Africaine* (1994) is a coming of age story told in the title character’s voice. Assèze searches for an authentic identity in France as she travels from her childhood in rural Cameroon to her adolescence in the city Douala and then to Paris as an adult. Sorraya serves as Assèze’s mirror image, a strategy that Beyala uses in several novels.<sup>1</sup> The two first meet as young girls when Assèze comes to live with Sorraya and

her father in the city; they meet by chance again in Paris as adults, both much changed.

The structure of the novel is divided into two parts, first Assèze and Sorraya's childhood and adolescence set in Africa, then their adulthood in Europe. When we meet Sorraya, she is the privileged daughter of a government worker who manipulates a corrupt system so that his own family lives a comfortable, luxurious lifestyle. She attends a good school, snacks on sweets imported from France, and generally is a consumer of European cultures. Assèze, the poor country girl who has come to live with them in the city, represents everything that disgusts Sorraya about their country's rural traditions. Sorraya, who reads classic French literature and practices ballet at home while listening to recordings of Mozart, all performative signs that allude to a certain level of sophistication, sees Assèze as poor, gauche, and ignorant (111). Not only does Sorraya identify with the feminist philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir, she uses it to judge Assèze upon the latter's arrival. When Assèze does not recognize the name, Sorraya affirms, "Aucune femme [. . .] ne peut prétendre devenir une femme si elle n'a pas lu Simone" (78). In her own construction of identity, Sorraya makes a double reference to the construction of sexual or gendered identity put forth by de Beauvoir. First, the name Simone is already a sign of a certain kind of femininity for Sorraya, and pronouncing this name has an identifying value, though one not understood by Assèze. Sorraya's imitation of the now-famous citation from *Le Deuxième sexe* summarizing a theory of the construction of feminine identity points the reader towards a performative understanding of Sorraya's character. Assèze's ignorance of European feminist theories lessens her ability to "do" woman, and therefore to *be* woman, according to Sorraya. Sorraya looks down upon Assèze as the Other who cannot understand the signs she has deployed. Sorraya attempts the role of the stereotypical European woman through her readings, her musical performances, and her articulation of feminism. To Assèze, this performance of Sorraya amounts to a search for an artificial authenticity.

When Assèze and Sorraya meet again in Paris, Sorraya has changed. She is still on a quest to find authenticity, but this time an African one. Assèze sees this legitimacy as fabricated as the European one Sorraya had tried to reproduce in adolescence. Assèze hears Sorraya speak in the African language of their region for the first time (320), and later, Sorraya prepares a large dinner to celebrate the success of the play in which she is appearing. "Toute habillée africaine," Sorraya participates in the preparation of a wide range of traditional African dishes. When Assèze suggests that perhaps they

also serve something more familiar to her French guests, Sorraya categorically refuses, and explains her position on her cultural identity in this way:

Il s n'auront qu'à rentrer chez eux [. . .] Toute ma vie, j'ai vécu le cul entre deux chaises. J'ai essayé de singer le Blanc. C'est pas de la faute ! En Afrique, on nous faisait croire que nous étions des arriérés et moi, j'y ai cru. Je voulais me franciser, désincruster toute trace de noir en moi. Parce que le noir c'est la saleté. Le noir c'est la misère. Le noir c'est la malédiction. Je m'en voulais d'être africaine. Je voulais ressembler à Dupond, à Durand. C'était ridicule (331).<sup>2</sup>

Here, Sorraya verbalizes her frustration with earlier attempts to incarnate what she views as a white identity. She attempted a process of “Frenchification,” she resented the color of her skin, and wanted to resemble French women through their habits. In this model, identity is based on solely exterior signs and voluntary acts rather than an internal essence. However, Assèze is rather skeptical about the power of voluntary acts to define an individual: “Je vois pas ce que ça changerait à ton africanité si tu mettait un peu de nourriture française à table!” (331). For Assèze, the performance depends on the company: one should make guests comfortable and therefore accommodate at least a few of the Other’s customs as an act of hospitality. This outward act of adapting to the guest would not challenge the host’s authenticity. According to Assèze, the visible performance does not alter the internal identity of the subject. Furthermore, Assèze’s logic implies that she did not or does not believe the younger Sorraya’s efforts to adopt the language of de Beauvoir or study classical ballet did much to define her as a child in Douala. Their opposing views on identity bring to the forefront the contradictory nature of Sorraya’s performance of authenticity. What does it mean to be an authentic African – or European, or woman, or man – if those categories do not exist until they are called into being by the subject, that is to say, performed?

During dinner, “[Sorraya] trone en chef-d’oeuvre africain” while serving the *nfoufou* with *sauce ngombo* to her guests who are clearly uncomfortable and even embarrassed by the dishes that they do not even recognize (332). She refuses to allow them to eat with forks and knives; they must all eat with their hands since “Nous sommes en Afrique, ici” (332). The recreated authentic meal makes a spectacle of her “African-ness,” while forcing her Franco-French guests to act out behaviors they find uncomfortable. The dinner party thrown in Sorraya’s honor on the success of her most recent

play becomes in turn a theatrical representation of Sorraya's life: the actress continues to behave in character. Her home becomes a stage set, creating a reality that differs from that of the world outside. The participants are obligated to play along by respecting certain parameters of the game or play: since they are "en Afrique," they must eat with their hands.

As Nicki Hitchcott observes in *Calixthe Beyala: Performances of Migration*, Beyala rejects African essentialism in scenes like this one. Hitchcott notes an intertextual dialogue with the *négritude* of Léopold Sédar Senghor (42); however she in effect refuses the validity of the idea of a black soul:

[A]t the same time as she acknowledges its historical importance, Beyala undermines the ideological basis of Negritude, reducing the concept of an African "essence" to that of an "invented authenticity" that fixes Africa and its peoples in a mythological past and refuses to address the ways in which identities are reconfigured in response to changing contexts and situations. (Hitchcott 7)

Writing well after the generation of Negritude artists, Beyala must define herself as an author in relationship to this tradition. *Assèze l'Africaine* criticizes an essentialist view, favoring instead a performative perspective to understand the identity of the migrant in Paris.

Assèze is conscious of the arbitrary and factitious nature of individual identity in France. It is perhaps her experiences in the clandestine community that make her so critical of Sorraya's attempts at an African authenticity. Assèze is undocumented when she arrives in France. Faced with what could be considered a lack of identity (her invisibility in the public record), she knows that her performances in part create the other's perception of her. Through her friendship with the *Débrouillardes*, three young women who are squatters in an apartment building along with Assèze, explores how performance can make up for her absent documented identity. In one of her roles, she convinces them of her clairvoyance by inventing what she "reads" in the hand of Princesse, a *Débrouillardes*. Assèze describes her own *mise-en-scène* of the reading in this way:

Je m'assis bien confortablement face à la Princesse. Je me délassai. J'inspirai. Je respirai. Je pris des yeux de visionnaire. J'étais très concentrée sur son cas. En réalité, j'étais très fatiguée [. . .] Je regardais un peu mon lit. La Princesse était tout ouïe et se laissait manipuler. Je lui parlai des petits sillons dans ses mains, la ligne du coeur nette, comme tracée au couteau, présageait une bonne réussite familiale [. . .]. (271)

Assèze knows the exterior signs of clairvoyance deployed by those who claim to have it. She is also aware her first client's will to be manipulated: Princesse, in a desperate moment, wants to believe that Assèze will have a mysterious knowledge of her future. Assèze's play is dependent on a complicit object towards whom the identifying signs are directed; not only is Princesse able to recognize the signs Assèze projects and interpret them correctly, she so strongly desires these signs to be authentic expressions of her friend's true nature as a palm reader she easily becomes a cooperative spectator. These theatrics are a great success, and Assèze's reputation as a clairvoyant begins to spread in their apartment building.

This bit of theater is so effective that Assèze creates a new role for herself to play in the community. This role comes with a set of documents and papers to support it. Madame Lola, who runs the building, negotiates a business for the young palm reader, and prepares business cards for her, giving more authority to her supposed visions and predictions.<sup>3</sup> These business cards are the closest thing she has to an identity card: a document indicating her name, profession, her fixed address, and a telephone number where she can be reached (276–77). All the same, the reader knows it is a false document justifying a faked profession. The only identities available to Assèze in her adopted country are completely fictitious. Here, Beyala's text questions the legitimacy of identity documentation in general, as well as that of the authorities who issue them.

Assèze, as the narrator, is the author figure in this novel. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Assèze, at the encouragement of her husband, is writing her life's story as therapy. Her writing is intensely personal, not only for its sad and upsetting memories but also in its intended audience. Assèze as author is not a public figure; therefore, this novel inscribes itself into a longer tradition of women's writing – a mask of personal writing (journals, memoirs, letters) produced by an authorial figure who erases herself as a “real” author. This more private author figure is in contrast to the others I look at below.

*Les Honneurs perdus* appeared two years after the publication of *Assèze l'Africaine* in 1996. This critically acclaimed novel (it received the *Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française*) also brought the author into the spotlight for accusations of plagiarism. The novel follows a similar structure to *Assèze* in that it is a first-person narrative following Saïda from her childhood in a slum outside of Douala, Cameroon in the first part, to her adult life working clandestinely as a housekeeper and nanny in the immigrant neighborhood of Belleville in Paris in the latter portion of the text. As with

the pair Assèze/Sorraya in the previous novel, Beyala presents a double image of the African immigrant woman in Saïda, and her main employer Ngaremba. Saïda is naïve, very religious, and traditional woman— in many ways a perfect foil to modern, secular Ngaremba.

Saïda's "virginity card" is the outward representation of her identity that she holds the most dear, also shows in a humorous way some of Saïda's naïveté. The local pharmacist offers it to her immediately before leaving her neighborhood outside of Douala, insisting that "Les femmes vierges sont rares en Europe, et ce qui est rare est cher. Prends-en le plus grand soin" (181). A gendered immigration code turns Saïda into a commodity that increases in value once it has crossed a border; she becomes a rare imported good. The virginity card could be seen in parallel to Assèze's business card establishing her identity as psychic. Though Saïda's identity is more explicitly sexual, both roles are gendered female, portraying images of the untouchable or inexplicable exotic female.

Ngaremba's identity is established through contradictory performances, recalling those of Sorraya in the previous text. When we first meet Ngaremba, Saïda's narration of the event emphasizes the Western aspects of her behavior. She lives with a man to whom she is not married, sharing household expenses. In her employer's closet, Saïda observes only Western clothing ("des taffetas et des vêtements d'Europe, rien que de l'Europe" 211). Ngaremba supports herself and her daughter as a professional writer, which shows how she performs an identity of "the western feminist" living in a modern consumer culture.

But as the novel continues, the reader sees a progression in Ngaremba's desire to do what an "authentic" African woman should do. In an argument between two clients, a man and a woman, over who arrived first at her doorstep, she sides with the man: "Ce n'est pas parce que nous sommes loin de nos pays que nous devons oublier nos si belles coutumes [. . .] Sur ce, je déclare que les hommes doivent être servis avant les femmes, aussi, venez, cher ami" (213). To celebrate an especially good day of business, she dresses not in the Western clothes earlier observed in her closet, but rather in "un boubou bleu brodé d'or, enrubannée de fuschia, baguée et collifiée excessivement. [. . .] Sa petite tête enturbannée s'inclinait un peu sur le côté. [. . .] C'était la grande femelle africaine dans la splendeur de sa gloire, dans la toute-puissance de sa domination" (254). She displays an over-the-top, "excessive" interpretation of African style clothing in bright colors and heavy jewelry; Ngaremba is almost a caricature. Her New Year's party is another example of her setting a stage with many African elements for her



guests. She asks Saïda to prepare some traditional dishes from Cameroon. Two white women who are attending the party exclaim, “C’est vraiment l’Afrique ici” (277), recalling the indignant declaration of Sorraya at her own dinner party in *Assèze l’Africaine*. Ngaremba’s performances emphasize the changeable nature of her transnational identity. She is pulled at different times by different cultural signifiers originating across two continents.

These scenes rely on the fluidity of Ngaremba’s identity and the presence of an audience to interpret these signs, just as Assèze relies on a willing audience for her clairvoyant performance. As Richard Schechner states, “No theater performance functions detached from its audience” (10). We see Ngaremba through the eyes of the naïve first-person narrator, Saïda, and though this is surely not the only explanation for the contradictions in Ngaremba’s identity, it may make these incomplete glimpses of Ngaremba more understandable. Through much of the novel, Saïda remains the outsider, rooted in her traditional, religious ways, grappling with her employer’s behaviors – whether they shock her as something foreign, European, and modern, or surprise her when they recall African traditions.

Another role Ngaremba plays is that of writer and activist. She supports herself and her daughter by working as an *écrivain public* serving the immigrant community of Belleville. She is paid by those who cannot read or write to compose official documents (resumés, working papers), but also the occasional love letter for her clients to send back home, of which she keeps a file of her best, most romantic examples for use as templates. Her letters invent a fiction of the immigrant experience in France. For example, she turns a client who works as a bouncer in a nightclub in the Paris suburbs into an executive of an oil company in a missive to his mother (216–17). She sees herself truly as a *public* writer: her writing is “engaged” because it is done in the service of her community, though it may not be the kind of *littérature engagée* most think of. Ngaremba is the author figure in this text and serves as a reference to a long tradition of writing professions and literacy in the colonial world. As Christopher Miller notes, “[. . .] literacy is not a neutral ‘technology of reason’ but, rather, a vehicle loaded with ideology. In the case of colonial Africa at least, this is certainly true. The first writers were not novelists and poets but secretaries, scribes, and interpreters employed by the colonizers” (163–64). This perspective encourages the reader to rethink Ngaremba’s activism. Is she still in the service of the colonizer, or rather the neocolonial power represented by French bureaucracy and administration? The letter she writes back home for the bouncer reinforces the fiction of immigration and the immense financial

success that he is supposed to have found in France. But the fiction is not limited to letters such as this one; official documents are also fictitious because they are constructed. Identity papers fit the neo/colonizers idea of a person's identity: nationality, gender, and job qualifications. As a public writer, Ngaremba participates in this system and even helps to produce its structures.

Ngaremba's role as a writer places her in situations of conflicting performances. She reveals to Saïda toward the end of the novel that she made a promise to her dying sister that not a single woman or child more would die from lack of medicine in their home country (379). The impasse of this impossible promise eventually leads to her suicide. Ngaremba's situation can be seen as a commentary by Beyala about her own impossible situation as a writer-activist. The novel points to these conflicts, since it was both critically acclaimed and very publicly accused of being plagiarized from Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*, among other texts.<sup>4</sup> In the face of these accusations, Beyala defends herself in a paradoxical way: not denying that she lifted passages of others' work but rather invoking what she sees as the "authenticity" of African literature's reliance on intertextuality. Her performance here leans on an essentialist claim. As Nicki Hitchcott observes, "On the one hand, Beyala's responses reflect the protean way in which she performs her public self in France; on the other, the campaign against Beyala [...] demonstrates a refusal to accept 'authenticity' on anyone else's terms" ("Prizes" 107). The criticism and controversy that surround *Les Honneurs perdus* identify the novel as either the best novel of the year, or as an illegal imitation; its author is either a literary star, or a plagiarist — depending on the moment. Just as Ngaremba is caught in conflicting roles she must play, Beyala herself is classified in conflicting literary categories of what it means to be an African woman writer in the French literary landscape today.

#### FATOU DIOME: PERFORMING IN A GLOBALIZED ECONOMY

Fatou Diome, originally from Senegal, has lived in and written from Strasbourg since the 1990s. Her first published book was a collection of short stories *La Préférence nationale* (2001). I focus on her first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), and how Diome represents constructions of migrant identities, as well as her own authorial identity, in part through its intertextual dialogue with *La Préférence nationale*.

*Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* is told from the point of view of Salie, a young Senegalese woman living in France, through telephone conversations and visits to her younger brother Madické, who lives in their home village of

Niodior, on an island off the coast of Senegal. Salie resembles the nameless narrator in *La Préférence nationale* and Diome herself. She is a writer/student/nanny and lives in present-day Strasbourg. Other parallels to the author's life, such as the importance of Salie's grandmother who raised her, in addition to references to a previous relationship with a French man, are clear to the reader familiar with Diome's biography.

Salie speaks against the misleading images of the migrant experience by the residents of her home village, particularly Madické and his school friends. Villagers who have tried their luck in France and then returned to Niodior fit into one of two dichotomies governing performance: the athlete vs. the entrepreneur or the failure vs. the success. Senegalese youth leave for France to make a fortune either through recruitment into a professional European soccer team, or to become self-made-men in commerce; they return either wildly successful to bestow gifts of wealth on their family or are shunned when they return in economic failure. Madické clearly favors the model of the star athlete. While the local businessman, known as *l'homme de Barbès* (in fact, the owner of the first television in the village on which Madické catches his first glimpses of European stadiums), is "l'emblème de l'émigration réussie" in the village, the boys really dream of the success of superstar African soccer players on European teams as seen on television (33).

European soccer reflects the power of neocolonialism in the globalized world. Explaining the preferences of the boys for French teams despite the visibility of other European clubs, Salie says, "Après la colonisation historiquement reconnue, règne maintenant une sorte de colonisation mentale: les jeunes joueurs vénéraient et vénèrent encore la France. À leurs yeux, tout ce qui est enviable vient de France" (53). The spectacle of the game, and the celebrity that goes with it, completely engrains itself in the consciousness of these young boys, and specifically is controlled by the former colonial power. This new mental colonization takes the form of seductive televised images of the fame and fortune of professional athletes, and sends the message that success cannot be found in the home country, but rather only in the former colonial powers. The boys hold on to spectacular stories such as these, even in the face of true stories, like the schoolteacher Ndétare's tale of Moussa, a local boy who was exploited by a French soccer team, and eventually was forced to return to Niodior where he later committed suicide.

The entrepreneur, or self-made-man, is the other model of migrant success. Madické and his friends do not see the difference between the

apparent financial success of *l'homme de Barbès* and the growing literary notoriety of Salie herself. *L'homme de Barbès* represents the model of immigration with a planned return. Over several years, his repeated trips between Paris and Niodior help him earn not only his nickname for the area in the 18<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* he frequents, but financial success as shown by the new house he builds for his family filled with modern consumer goods. Dominic Thomas's reading of *l'homme de Barbès* sheds light on the complexity of his role in the Niodior community. Thomas points out the significance of this man's moniker, a term that within the hexagon is read as a negative reference to an immigrant neighborhood not unlike Beyala's Belleville. "Barbès" becomes a double signifier that simultaneously evokes the African migrant experience and the social status awarded to those who have come back "from Paris." While *l'homme de Barbès* shares his stories of luxurious living in the French capital, perpetuating the myth of immigration, Salie and her readers are aware of certain problems in this version of the story – it is likely that he struggled in poverty and difficult living situations like many of his countrymen upon their arrival in France. As Thomas observes:

As such, *l'homme de Barbès* emerges as an emblem of opportunity and therefore of power, but in reality, contextualized within global capitalism, he stands paradoxically as an instrument of continued oppression: his master narrative both relegates him to a position of perpetual subjugation *and* triggers successive migrations that perpetuate a myth that ultimately serves the capitalist interests of European markets that control the economy and further marginalize Africa. (250)

The storytelling by *l'homme de Barbès* is another performance of the immigrant experience. Glossing over the difficult details of his Parisian lifestyle allows him to play the role of the unequivocally successful entrepreneur in front of the willing audience in Niodior.

Where does the role of the author fit within these dichotomies of migrant experience (athlete vs. entrepreneur)? Salie very clearly challenges the accepted understanding of the possibilities of emigration. To Madické, an author is another way of gaining celebrity and becoming rich, therefore most closely related to his understanding of the celebrity athlete. He relies on third-hand information about the literary success of his sister, which he insists must lead to financial success. In a telephone conversation with Salie, he says accusingly,

Un gars du village revenu de France dit que tu réussis très bien là-bas, que t'y as publié un bouquin. Il jure qu'il t'a même vue à la télé. Des gens disent ici qu'un journal de chez nous a aussi écrit des choses à propos de ton livre. Alors, avec tout le fric que tu gagnes maintenant, si tu n'étais pas égoïste, tu m'aurais payé le billet [d'avion], tu m'aurais fait venir chez toi. (159)

Madické imagines that his sister must be earning a lot of money and cannot understand the complexities of life for a young, female, and black intellectual in France. The intertextual reference reminds the reader familiar with Diome's fiction that academic and literary achievement does not automatically equate to a comfortable salary. The book Madické references could easily be *La Préférence nationale*, and Salie a pseudonym for Fatou Diome. *La Préférence nationale* is sharply critical of racism and classism in French society; the text continually addresses the narrator's dilemma as she is forced to take work far below her education level but more in line with cultural assumptions about her race and gender, such as housekeeper or nanny. But Madické misses the message of the text itself – criticism of France and of the institutions and myths surrounding immigration – and only reads her outward performances of successful author. His benchmark for success—appearance on television—comes from watching athletes in the media. Salie's appearance on these same international venues must go hand in hand with financial success. The more theatrical aspects of her role as author, putting herself and her work on stage, work against the message of the text for which she is receiving positive reviews: namely, that despite education and talent, it is nearly impossible to succeed as an immigrant in France.

The “gars du village,” reporting back after having seen Salie on television in France, is caught in the fiction of immigration perpetuated by televised media. Like *l'homme de Barbès*, he also lives his life in a cycle of departures and returns between Senegal and France. Though completely ignorant of the contents of her book, when he sees Salie on a literary program in France nothing prevents him from “bâtir une épopée qu'il s'empresse de raconter dès son retour au village. [. . .] Et puis, donner des nouvelles d'un autre émigré à sa famille restée au pays, ça vaut toujours reconnaissance et admiration” (163). Salie's compatriot first constructs his own fiction of what her life must be like. He then completes the cycle by repeating his story back home, without knowing if his version of the facts is true. He simultaneously falls victim to and perpetuates the same storytelling that Diome/Salie tries to write against. Diome's novel is meta-commentary

on her own work and her role as author, and the shortcomings of these to influence the younger generation.

Madické equates Salie's author role with that of the immigrant athlete because of her media presence, suggesting that an author is also in some ways an entrepreneur. The texts one produces are the products one sells. Salie's appearances in national media outlets as an immigrant author in France and Senegal are promotional, meant to increase sales and make her literary career profitable. Being an author challenges the beliefs about immigration as Salie's role is something not quite understood by her compatriots. She occupies an ambiguous third position in between the roles of athlete and entrepreneur.

Salie's profession places her in the public sphere in France and Senegal. Aside from her media presence, her attempts to discourage Madické from leaving home, exemplified in a scene with the village boys, show her public performance as activist-writer. Ndétare, a schoolteacher critical of the ideal of emigration, prompts Salie to speak, hoping that her first-person account of the difficulties of the transnational experience will convince the boys to rethink their dreams of departure: "Dis-leur, supplia l'instituteur, dis-leur, toi qui viens de là-bas! Peut-être t'écouteront-ils, ils me prennent pour un radoteur insensé" (174).

In her improvised speech, Salie calls attention to problems of identification and documentation in the reality of immigrant life in France. "En Europe, mes frères," she addresses the group of teenagers, "vous êtes d'abord noirs, accessoirement citoyens, définitivement étrangers, et ça, ce n'est pas écrit dans la Constitution, mais certains le lisent sur votre peau" (176). She underlines that despite possession of correct official forms of identity (passports, visas) these documents are not the ones that operate in daily interactions in the world. Diome exposes one of the contradictory situations resulting from France's republican ideals in government and society. In a country that is officially ethnically blind, an individual after naturalization is only "French" on identity cards, passports, and in government statistics.<sup>5</sup> Yet outside of these definitions on paper, the title of *étranger* never goes away in the public discourse, even when referring to second- or third-generation immigrants born in France. The color of a person's skin is read like a text, though it is a signifier that cannot be read in a written text, the French Constitution. Salie insists to the boys that their situation will be even more difficult as "Clandestins, sans diplôme ni qualification" (177). The future is at best a life of poverty and at worst a long wait for deportation and a charter flight back home.

The argument Salie presents against emigration is a distillation of Diome's position in the novel. Salie speaks as an activist author, as the references to her television appearances already imply. But in this scene the reader sees her public statements in detail. Salie does not write merely for creative expression; writing conveys her political and social positions. The intertextual reference to Senghor in this chapter reinforces the fusion of literary and political figures. One of Madické's companions refuses Salie's image of a France where poverty still exists among the marginalized, remarking, "En plus, en ce moment, le Premier ministre est socialiste, comme Senghor; c'est la gauche qui est au pouvoir, comme on dit, des gens qui aident les pauvres, quoi" (177). Just as Beyala positions herself against Senghor's *négritude* in her anti-essentialist representations of race and ethnicity, Diome also positions herself in relation to the most recognized author-politician from Senegal. Because of the overdetermined heritage which she receives from her fellow countryman, first president of Senegal and first black member of the *Académie française*, this signifier (Senghor) is a referent that both legitimizes her to write in its acknowledgment of her received literary heritage, and defines her own position. The over-simplified vision of socialist party politics portraying a myth of international solidarity, and of the figure and legacy of Senghor himself is clearly criticized by Salie/Diome's argument for a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of coming to France for economic success.

The two fictional narrator figures of *La Préférence nationale* and *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* fuse with the writer Diome. Aside from the autobiographical aspects of the two works that clearly overlap with Diome's real life, these fictional works allow her to comment on the public role of the writer. Taking her place as an activist writer takes on a different meaning for Diome than previously seen in Beyala's author figures. The author is a public figure in this novel, but one more closely intertwined with the work the reader holds in her hands. Diome acknowledges the impasse before her, like Beyala's Ngaremba, when the success of her writing is itself dependent upon undermining the myths of success and celebrity for Senegalese immigrants to France. Her television appearances both give her a platform from which to speak, and convince an audience at home that fame and fortune are waiting for them just beyond their country's borders.

## CONCLUSIONS: READING PROBLEMATIC AUTHORIAL PERFORMANCES

What do Beyala and Diome together have to offer towards a better understanding of the transnational author's performative identity? Ayo Coly compares the two women authors:

[. . .] hybridity is Beyala's response to the different demands that Africa and Europe place on her identity. The inconsistent protagonist of Fatou Diome, on the other hand, manifests a more reserved, if not suspicious, attitude toward hybridity as a viable discourse of home and identity. From Diome's description of the ideologically polarized places of identity of her protagonists, hybridity remains a utopian solution because neither place can accommodate a hybrid identity. Hybridity, from Diome's standpoint, is not as accessible a solution as the literary world of Beyala makes it to be. Salie consequently embraces nomadic homelessness at the end of the novel. (121-22)

I read Beyala's hybridity as contradictory performances of an identity that is—at different moments—African and European. This “utopian solution” participates in the fiction of immigration Diome writes against, in favor of a more realistic understanding of the immigration experience. Diome's “homelessness” speaks to a more complex, and even unsettling, resolution to the uprooted nature of the transnational life. Hybridity is one tool for reading how to navigate contradictory constructions of identity, but it implies a both-at-once resolution to these contradictions. Performativity does not necessarily resolve these conflicts. Rather, it provides a framework for understanding the changing appearances of identity based on one's stage or audience and allows for distinct articulations of identities to exist in their different moments of creation.

It is critical, then, that both of these writers present narratives addressing postcolonial identity as well as temporality. The second set of dichotomies for immigration in *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, the failure and the success, puts sharply into focus another key aspect of Diome's novel: the presentation of a very specific lens on migration focused from the “home.” In contrast to the two works by Beyala, Diome's text does not distinctively separate Africa/before from France/after in the structure of her writing. Rather, the reader experiences a constant back-and-forth both geographically between the two continents and temporally in her narrative. As Odile Cazenave and Patricia Céli er observe:



*Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* is original in that it is articulated around two axes, a geographical one (here/there) and a temporal one (past/present), and thus proposes a new narrative of immigration. Furthermore, the author offers her readers two concurrent visions of time and space, through a juxtaposition of her own perceptions and remembrances as well as the perceptions of her brother, who dreams of coming to Europe via the opportunity granted by sports. (123)

Diome frames the departure of emigration around the anticipated return, whereas Beyala's protagonists break with Africa—the narrative does not return to Cameroon. Assèze and Sorraya, Saïda and Ngaremba can only move in one direction and never cross boundaries backward, neither geographically nor temporally. In contrast, Diome's characters leave Niodior in order to return a conquering hero, bestowing the fruits of one's success on family and friends, like *l'homme de Barbès*. Madické's anger results from the fact that Salie, by refusing to purchase his ticket to France and preventing him from leaving home, also prevents his (presumed triumphant) return (159). This confusion of time and space recalls Achille Mbembé's description of the postcolony: “[L]a postcolonie renferme, à la vérité des durées multiples faites de discontinuités, de renversements, d’inerties, d’oscillations qui se superposent, s’enchevêtrent et s’enveloppent les unes les autres” (34). The narration here mimics the desire of Madické to leave but also to return, which in turn mimics the discontinuous and superimposed nature of time in Mbembé's postcolony.

Identity and temporality are not easily separated. The performance of one's identity exists only in the moment of its articulation. By staging such performances in their fictional works, and by staging a dialogue with their embodied performances in the public sphere as transnational francophone women writers, both Beyala and Diome put on display the moments of articulation of the apparatus they use. In this way, both women are asking the consumer public in the literary sphere to read the entire dialogue presented to them, not just the fictional text in the reader's hands but the paratext that accompanies it: indeed, all of the authors' works.

## Notes

1. *Les Honneurs perdus* (1996) and *Tu t'appellera Tanga* (1998) both focus on doubled female protagonists.

2. Sorraya adopts here the language and the attitude of anti-immigrant discourse: if conditions in France are not to their liking, then immigrants should simply leave and go back home. Sorraya reverses this by forcing the French guests in her home into the position of minority individuals who must accept the status quo or simply leave.

3. I read this character's name as a reference to one of Beyala's predecessors in spotlighting her neighborhood of Belleville, Emile Ajar's/Romain Gary's *La Vie devant soi* (1975). The character Madame Rosa also operates a different sort of *clandé* – a clandestine childcare service for prostitutes in the neighborhood. Madame Lola is another neighbor in the building who takes care of Madame Rosa and her charge Momo in a time of need.

4. In what became known as "l'Affaire Beyala," critic and writer Pierre Assouline published in February 1997 in the magazine *Lire* passages from *Les Honneurs perdus* side by side with the texts he accused Beyala of using from other writers. While she never stood trial for these accusations in the case of this novel, she previously had been found guilty of lifting several passages of *Le Petit prince de Belleville* (1992) from Howard Buten's *Quand j'avais cinq ans je m'ai tué* (1981), for which Beyala and her publisher were fined.

5. For a history of the development of the national identity card in France, see Piazza, Pierre. *Histoire de la carte nationale d'identité*. Paris: Odile Jacob. 2004. See also the website of the *Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques* (insee.fr), for latest census information. Ethnicity is not among the demographic data.

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