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ARTICLE

# Senegalese New(s) Media: Transpositions and Transformations of the *Fait Divers* in Aminata Maïga Ka*

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## Abstract

Considered a staple of the French press since at least the nineteenth century, the *fait divers*—a catch-all category for short, often sensational news items such as murders, petty crimes, and suicides—has been taken up and transformed in West African cultural production. This essay focuses on the transformations and transpositions of the *fait divers* tradition in the work of Senegalese writer Aminata Maïga Ka (1940–2005), arguing that her short stories and novels inflect earlier treatments of the journalistic genre while staging a broader critique of the liberalization of the media in Senegal during the 1970s and 1980s. Ka's works offer a window onto the entangled histories of postcolonial literary production and the emergent popular press in Senegal. Specifically, she updates and expands Ousmane Sembène's rescripting of the French *fait divers* in his short story "La Noire de ..." (1961/1962) and the landmark film from 1966 by the same title.

**Keywords:** Senegalese literature; *fait divers*; print culture; news media

> *Le suicide d'une bonne—fut-elle Noire—ne peut figurer à la une. Ce n'est pas matière à sensation.*
>
> (The suicide of a maid—were she a Black woman—cannot be front-page news. It's not sensational material.)
>
> —Ousmane Sembène, "La Noire de ..." (1962)

## Africanizing the *fait divers*

During the last days of June 1958, the Senegalese writer and soon-to-be film-maker Ousmane Sembène (1923–2007) came across a short news item in the

* This essay includes multiple references to suicide.

French press: a *fait divers*[1] in the *Nice-Matin*, the daily newspaper covering the Côte d'Azur and surrounding region, including Marseilles, where Sembène was living at the time.[2] The article consisted of a few sentences about the apparent suicide of a young Senegalese housemaid, Diouana Gomis, who died in the bathroom of her employers' home in Antibes two days earlier. Though spare, this slim account of a maid's death contained the germ of what would become landmark works of African literature and cinema. They directly inspired Sembène's short story, "La Noire de ...," first published in the journal *Présence Africaine* in 1961 before being reprinted in the collection *Voltaïque* (1962), and, in 1966, the director's first feature-length film by the same title.[3] In Sembène's imaginative retelling and "antiracist rescripting"[4] of the real suicide of Diouana Gomis, a human tragedy barely legible in the colonial press is blown up to scale.

By rescripting a *fait divers* for text and screen, Sembène offers an "African take" on a long European literary tradition of transforming the grisly deaths recounted in *fait divers* into realist fictions.[5] The move connects him to works such as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Jean Genet's ripped-from-the-headlines play *Les Bonnes* ("The Maids," 1947).[6] However, the gesture of using literature to reclaim and reframe the obscure(d) death of a young African woman from the colonial press is reminiscent of another literary heritage, consisting of works as disparate as Thomas Day and John Bicknell's eighteenth-century abolitionist poetic epistle *The Dying Negro* (1773) and Toni Morrisons's novel *Beloved* (1987), both based on news reports about individuals who resisted captivity through violent deaths.[7] Such texts "transform the meager written traces of Black death legible in the white press into haunting and humanizing antislavery narratives."[8] Sembène's "La Noire de ..." is, to my knowledge, the first West African text of its kind.[9]

[1] The *fait divers* has no real equivalent in the Anglophone press. Under this rubric, one finds myriad short, often decontextualized news stories, usually of a sensational nature: intrigues, petty crimes, murders, suicides, and thefts. These frequently drew on racist stereotypes. On the *fait divers* and race, racism and antiracist "rescriptings" in the literature, see Madeleine Dobie and Olivia Harrison, "Rescripting the *Fait Divers*: Counternarratives of Race and Migration in Literature and Journalism from the 1970s to the Present," *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* 28 (2024): 1–19.

[2] Sembène had arrived in the south of France almost a decade earlier and worked for years as a docker before he began self-publishing. On the original *fait divers*, see Doyle Calhoun, "Looking for Diouana Gomis (1927–58): The Story Behind African Cinema's Most Iconic Suicide," *Research in African Literatures* 52, no. 2 (2021): 1–28. The *Nice-Matin* still has a *fait divers* section: https://www.nicematin.com/sujet/faits-divers.

[3] Ousmane Sembène, "La Noire de ...," *Présence Africaine* 36 (1961): 90–102; Ousmane Sembène, "La Noire de ...," in *Voltaïque* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1962); "*Black Girl/La Noire de ...*," directed by Ousmane Sembène (1966; Dakar: Films Domirev [Doomi Réew]/Actualités françaises; New York: Criterion Collection, 2017), DVD.

[4] Dobie and Harrison, "Rescripting the *fait divers*."

[5] See Calhoun, "Looking for Diouana Gomis," 7–8 and Doyle Calhoun, *The Suicide Archive: Reading Resistance in the Wake of French Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), 124.

[6] Calhoun, *The Suicide Archive*, 129.

[7] Calhoun, *The Suicide Archive*, 130.

[8] Calhoun, *The Suicide Archive*, 130.

[9] Cameroonian writer Mongo Beti's first short story, "Sans haine et sans amour" (1953), published under the pseudonym Eza Boto, may have been inspired by newspaper reports of the murder of Chief

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Here, I argue that Sembène's transposition and transformation of the *fait divers* have had a long, if underexamined, afterlife in contemporary Senegalese cultural production—inflecting novels, films, and even poetry. I focus specifically on the avatars of the *fait divers* in the work of the Saint-Louisian writer Aminata Maïga Ka (1940–2005), offering an overview of her little-studied oeuvre. A contemporary of Sembène, Ka's short stories and novels—particularly her *nouvelle dramatique* (dramatic short story) "Le Miroir de la vie" (The Mirror of Life) about the suicide of a Sereer housemaid—bear strong affinities to Sembène's treatment of the *fait divers.* Ka's works productively extend Sembène's imaginative rescripting to develop broader critiques of Senegalese society, and especially of the role of women in post-Independence Senegal. This particular aesthetic genealogy has not been much discussed.

In addition to drawing on the *fait divers* tradition *à la* Sembène, Ka's work exhibits a general proximity to and engagement with the Senegalese popular press on thematic and formal levels. In her texts, representations of the press abound. Composed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, her works provide a window onto the entangled histories of Senegalese literature and Senegalese new(s) media at a key moment in the history of West African print cultures and mass media. Her works reflect the transition from a period of intense censorship under Léopold Sédar Senghor (1960–1980) to the gradual liberalization and "diversification" of media under Abdou Diouf's presidency (1981–2000). Considered alongside Sembène, Ka sheds particular light on how literary texts nuance and mediate the "printing of death" in West Africa.[10] By taking up quasi-sensationalist representations of dead people in the press and aestheticizing journalistic discourses such as the *fait divers*, such works expand our understanding of the relationship of Senegalese literature to the press during the last decades of the twentieth century. But Ka's works also centrally represent audiovisual forms of news media, especially radio and television, as well as alternative, transmedial and translational, modes of engagement with the printed word. In this, Ka's fictions align with Ian Baucom's observation that "the 'device' of listening is central to the collective politics of the postcolonial."[11] Ka's oeuvre ultimately contributes to what I will call the *fait-diversification*[12] of Senegalese literature, which I suggest is a feature of this literature in the *longue durée.*

I begin by situating Ka's work within the history of the press in Senegal, from its colonial origins to its liberalization after Independence (1960), and against the backdrop of an increasingly diverse mediascape in which "literature" and "news" exist in a dynamic, intermedial continuum. I then turn to Ka's texts, which I show

Waruhui on October 7, 1952, in Kenya. See Willfried F. Feuser, "Myth, History and Literature in Africa," *Présence Africaine* 146 (1988), 153.

[10] Stephanie Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus: The Printing of Death in Colonial West Africa," *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Derek R. Peterson, Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newell (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 389–424.

[11] Ian Baucom, "Frantz Fanon's Radio: Solidarity, Diaspora, and the Tactics of Listening," *Contemporary Literature* 42, no. 1 (2001): 17.

[12] The term comes from Dominique Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang. Récits de crime et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

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to be very much invested in exploring the possibilities of the *fait divers* and news media in fiction.

## Senegalese literature and the press

As Alioune Diaw writes, "the relationship between literature and journalism [in Senegal] dates back to the birth of the press toward the end of the nineteenth century."[13] Early works by Massyla Diop, Ousmane Socé, Abdoulaye Sadji, and Abdou Anta Ka were first serialized in newspapers and magazines like the *Revue africaine artistique et littéraire, Paris-Dakar*, and *Bingo*.[14] This is a feature of pre-independence literature more generally: Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink suggests that before 1960, "nearly 95 percent of French-language African literary production appeared in the press, not in book form."[15] This proximity to the press continues to influence African literary production, not least because so many contemporary writers have also pursued careers as journalists or bloggers. In the case of Senegal, writers such as Abdou Anta Ka (Ka's husband), Elgas, Pape Samba Kane, Boubacar Boris Diop (Bubakar Bóris Jóob), and Mohammed Mbougar Sarr are prominent examples. As Diaw puts it, today, "journalism and literature [...] exist in a fundamentally intermedial and intertextual relationship."[16]

In this essay, I focus on how Ka takes up *fait divers* suicides in her literary works. However, I also want to extend this reflection on the *fait-diversification* of Senegalese literature to consider the way short, sensational news stories as presented in the local and international press inspire or inform recent creative works. Examples abound. Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's first three novels—*Terre ceinte* (2015), *Silence du chœur* (2017), *De purs hommes* (2018)—all were inspired by stories and specifically *images* that first circulated on news outlets and social media. The influence of news media on artistic production extends to contemporary cinema. Moussa Sène Absa's film about irregular migration from Senegal, *Yoolé* (2010), was inspired by news reports of a "ghost ship" of men trying to migrate to the Canaries; the same event likely also informed Mati Diop's short film *Atlantiques* (2009) and the feature-length *Atlantique* (2019), both "ghost stories."[17] The *fait divers* has been poeticized in works such as Meïssa Maty Ndiaye's collection of poems, *Tous contre le viol: poésie* (2022), which rewrites Senegalese *fait divers* about rape into a haunting series of poems.[18] The potential

[13] Diaw, 33

[14] Alioune Diaw, "Rethinking Genre Boundaries in Contemporary Senegalese Literature," *Senegalese Transmediations: Literature, New Media, and Audiovisual Cultures* (*Yale French Studies nos. 144–5*), eds. Doyle Calhoun and Cheikh Thiam (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2025), 32.

[15] Hans-Jürgen Lüserbrink, *La Conquête de l'espace public colonial: prises de parole et formes de participation d'écrivains et d'intellectuels africains dans la presse à l'époque coloniale (1900–1960)* (Québec/Frankfurt am Main/London: Éditions Nota bene; IKO-Verlag für Internationale Kommunikation, 2003), 12; cited in Diaw, "Rethinking Genre Boundaries."

[16] Diaw, "Rethinking Genre Boundaries," 34.

[17] Jill Jarvis and Doyle Calhoun, "Follow the Ghosts: On Teaching Mati Diop's *Atlantique(s)* Transmedially," *Senegalese Transmediations*, 69–99.

[18] Meïssa Maty Nidaye, *Tous contre le viol: poésie* (Dakar: Abis Éditions, 2022). For an analysis of this work, see Diaw, "Rethinking Genre Boundaries."

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of the *fait divers* to serve as fodder for fiction has reached other corners of West African literature. For instance, Teju Cole's born-digital "Small Fates" project (carried out between 2011 and 2013 on X, formerly known as Twitter) took direct inspiration from the *fait divers* tradition, namely Félix Fénéon's pithy "three-line novellas."[19]

The relationship between journalism and literary production is particularly interesting in the case of Senegal given that the country has the longest history of a local press in French West Africa. In Senegal, as in other formerly colonized countries, the emergence of a local press was tethered to missionization and colonization, the politics of language standardization and print literacy in European languages, as well as to histories of political dissidence, censorship, and the liberalization of media before and after independence.[20] Already, at the end of the nineteenth century, printed pamphlets and papers edited by the colonial elite and *métis* (or mixed-race Afro-European) merchants circulated in Saint-Louis.[21] Periodicals attached to missionary circles also began print runs before independence: namely out of the Spiritan press in Ngasobil, which published dictionaries and grammars of Senegalese languages as well as translations of religious texts. Parallel to this print tradition in European languages existed other, Arabic and Ajami print circuits.[22] In Senegal and the western Sahel, Murid texts—mostly *xasida* (Arabic: *qaṣīda*) or religious odes—printed by North African and local presses circulated widely throughout the twentieth century.[23]

The *fait divers* emerged in Senegal in the 1930s, when the French press mogul Charles de Breteuil (1905–1960) founded *Paris-Dakar* (1933–1961), the first daily newspaper in French West Africa.[24] Throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the paper served as the major news outlet in the region, largely following conventions of French papers, especially with respect to quasi-sensationalist rubrics such as "échos" or "faits divers." After independence, the paper was renamed, becoming the *Dakar-Matin* in 1961 and, in 1970, *Le Soleil.* In this final incarnation, it remains one of the largest general-interest state-run daily newspapers in Senegal.

[19] See Teju Cole, "'I Don't Normally Do This Kind of Thing': 45 Small Fates," *The New Inquiry*, August 13, 2013 (https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/i-dont-normally-do-this-kind-of-thing-45-small-fates/). See also Matt Pearce, "Death by Twitter," *The New Inquiry*, October 14, 2011 (https://thenewinquiry.com/death-by-twitter/).

[20] For an overview, see Judith T. Irvine, "Mastering African Languages: The Politics of Linguistics in Nineteenth-Century Senegal," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 33 (1993): 27–46.

[21] Frank Wittmann, "La presse écrite sénégalaise et ses dérives. Précarité, informalité, illégalité," *Politique africaine* 101, no. 1 (2006), 182.

[22] As Isabel Hofmeyr points out, "accounts of printing in Africa need to include Muslim and secular circuits of print, whether African-run presses or print products (and personnel) from South Asia and the Middle East"; Isabel Hofmeyr, "The Politics of the Printed Page: Tracking Print Culture in African studies," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Postcolonial Print Cultures*, ed. Toral Jatin Gajarawala (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 89.

[23] See Jeremy Dell, "Printing and Textual Authority in the Twentieth-Century Muridiyya," in *Manuscript and Print in the Islamic Tradition*, ed. Scott Reese (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 271–87.

[24] See Mamadou Koumé, *Naissance de la presse quotidienne au Sénégal: L'épopée de Paris-Dakar et de Dakar-Matin (1937–1970)* (Dakar: L'Harmattan, 2023).

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Ka's oeuvre emerges in the immediate wake of the gradual liberalization of Senegalese news media in the decades following independence but before the emergence of a true tabloid press at the turn of the century. During Senghor's presidency, clandestine journals such as *L'Écho du Sénégal*, *Xarebi*, and *Momsarew*, the official periodical of the African Independence Party, circulated.[25] These papers were part of a vast print network of political dissent during Senghor's presidency and, later, under his successor Abdou Diouf (1981–2000). They were the print vectors of a range of textual, political, and cultural practices that Fatoumata Seck has characterized as "the cultural underground of decolonization."[26]

The year 2000 was a watershed year for post-independence Senegalese politics —as the year of the first "alternance"[27]—but also a turning point for mass media (newspapers, radio, and television), which played a significant role in the run-up to the elections and Abdoulaye Wade's victory over the incumbent Diouf. The first issue of *Le Populaire* appeared in late 1999 and print runs of this journal swiftly eclipsed general information papers.[28] The following years saw the rise of a robust and varied tabloid press or "presse people," with publications such as *Frasques, Mœurs, Scoop, Volcan, Révélations, L'Actuel, Nuit et Jour, Thiof, Rac Tac*, and *Teuss*.[29] Opposed to "classic"[30] general-interest journals like *Le Soleil, Wal Fadjir*, and *Sud*, the new popular tabloid press in Senegal is characterized by its comparatively low price (usually less than 100 CFA), linguistic hybridity (often making use of Wolof in titles and subtitles), and a penchant for scandal.[31] News stories are frequently graphic and sexually explicit, bordering on the pornographic.[32]

Despite a negative reputation, the tabloid press in Senegal exerts significant influence on the "classical" press. Indeed, the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first century saw a gradual *popularization* of Senegalese news media, with increased competition between traditional general information journals and newer popular tabloids.[33] In other

[25] Other subversive periodicals included *Boksareew* ("share your country") and *Defarsareew* ("Fix or remake your country"); see Fatoumata Seck, "The Cultural Underground of Decolonization," *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 10, no. 3 (2023): 308.

[26] Seck, "The Cultural Underground of Decolonization."

[27] In Senegal, "alternance" refers to the peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another through the ballot box. During Senghor's and Diouf's presidencies, Senegal remained dominated by one political party, the Senegalese Progressive Union or Socialist Party. The election of Abdoulaye Wade, the nominee of the *Soppi* (literally "change" in Wolof) part, in 2000 marked the first alternance.

[28] Frank Wittmann, "La monotonie du scandaleux: La presse populaire au Sénégal et son public," *Africultures* 71, no. 2 (2007): 43–46.

[29] Wittmann, "La monotonie du scandaleux."

[30] Alain Agboton, "La presse populaire–phénomène ou épiphénomène," in *Entre tradition orale et nouvelles technologies: où vont les mass média au Sénégal?*, eds. Martin Tuareg and Frank Wittmann (Mainz: Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikanstudien, 2004), 40.

[31] Wittmann, "La monotonie du scandaleux."

[32] Jean Meïssa Diop, "Sénégal: sexe, sang et potins *à la* 'Une', les quotidiens de la nouvelle génération," *Médi@ctions* 26 (2001): 8.

[33] Frank Wittmann, "Vers une réhabilitation de la presse populaire au Sénégal. Une enquête auprès des bonnes," in *Entre tradition orale et nouvelles technologies: où vont les mass média au Sénégal?*, eds. Martin Tuareg and Frank Wittmann (Mainz: Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikanstudien, 2004), 77.

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words, as Oumar Diagne suggests, the state-run press has had to "popularize itself [...] by adopting the attributes and characteristics of this people's press."[34]

Today, print news media remains overwhelmingly Francophone and urban in Senegal, especially in Dakar, despite the presence of born-digital Wolof-language outlets such as *Lu Defu Waxu*[35] (run by Bubakar Bóris Jóob) and, historically, Murid newspapers written in Wolofal (Wolof Ajami). While only about a third of the population speak and read French as a second language, over two-thirds of the country speak Wolof as a first or second language. This invites different modes of engagement with the printed page and press. Tobias Warner captures this succinctly in what he calls the "hospitality" of African print. "[I]n lifeworlds where normative literacy is narrowly distributed," Warner writes, the printed page can "play host to a variety of ways of relating to and making use of the medium. [...] [A] printed page may also open itself up to a multiplicity of audiences and forms of engagement."[36]

A vast majority of Senegalese actually *hear* the news in one or more of Senegal's national languages, especially in Wolof, Sereer, and Pulaar, on the many private and commercial radio stations (*Wal Fajiri FM, SUD FM/Sen-RADIO, Radio Dunya*, etc.), including "radios communautaires"[37] which serve communities far from urban centers. This is a relatively recent development in Senegal but has a longer colonial history and antiimperialist resonances. Throughout the colonized world, radio-listening was also a dissident, communitarian anticolonial practice by which colonized and neocolonized subjects built and maintained networks of solidarity.[38] Although French colonizers first opened a radio station in Dakar in 1939, it would be several decades before the creation of the Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision du Sénégal (1973), which operated two radio broadcast channels under Senghor's presidency. In 1992, the creation of the Société Nationale de Radiodiffusion Télévision Sénégalaise (Loi 1992–2002) meant that the state still maintained a monopoly over radio diffusion until the turn of the century (Loi 2000–2007), when smaller private radio channels began to proliferate.

Bubakar Boris Jóob's Wolof-language novel *Bàmmeelu Kocc Barma* ("Kocc Barma's Grave," 2017) offers an especially vivid portrait of the complex translingual news-scape in Senegal, where print bumps up against and intersects with New Media.[39] The novel retraces a highly mediatized national tragedy—the sinking of the *Joola* ferry off the coast of the Gambia in 2002—from the

[34] Oumar Diagne, "Discours d'ouverture," in *Actes de séminaires: La responsabilité des journalistes, 18 novembre 2000: Presse populaire, public et déontologie, 12 novembre 2001* (Dakar: Fondation Konrad Adenauer/Centre d'études des sciences et techniques de l'information, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 2001), 27. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Wolof and French are my own.

[35] https://www.defuwaxu.com.

[36] Tobias Warner, "On the Hospitality of Print: Ousmane Socé's *Bingo* and Its Publics," *Research in African Literatures* 51, no. 1 (2020): 21–22.

[37] On the local radio in Senegal, see Mame Less Camara, "Attitude de proximité des radios locales," in *Entre tradition orale et nouvelles technologies: où vont les mass média au Sénégal?*, eds. Martin Tuareg and Frank Wittmann (Mainz: Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikanstudien, 2004), 105–16.

[38] Ian Baucom, "Frantz Fanon's Radio."

[39] Bubakar Boris Jóob, *Bàmmeelu Kocc Barma* (Dakar: EJO Éditions, 2017).

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perspective of one of the victims, Kinne Gaajo, as told by her friend, Njéeme Payen, over a decade later. However, as Serigne Seye has shown, *Bàmmeelu Kocc Barma* is *also* very much a "postmodern" novel about the intersections between "New Media," audiovisual culture, and the press—a novel in which journalists and radio hosts play central roles.[40] One of the characters, Ngañ-Demba, spends his mornings translating the French-language urban news for his friends:

> La mu jotoon a foortaatu as néew ci Kàllaama tubaab, Ngañ-Demba di ci tanqal xarit yeek dëkkandoo yi, su xéyee di déglu rajoo ka tekkil moroom yi yéenakaayi Ndakaaru yi, muy *Le Soleil* di *Sud Quotidien*, di *La Torche*, di *Le Matin* walla *Walf* ak *Le Témoin.*[41]
>
> (With what little French [=White peoples' language] he mastered, Nga-ñ-Demba badgered his friends and neighbors, when he listened to the morning radio and translated the news coming from Dakar such as *Le Soleil, Sud Quotidien*, *La Touche, Le Matin* or even *Walf* and *Le Témoin.*)

While Ka's emphasis is largely on the narrative potential of *print* news media in literature, her works depict a transmedial, translingual, and translational news-scape, such as that depicted in Jóob's novel, showing characters participating in a range of listening and reading practices as they consume the news. Her work reflects, tracks, and contributes to the *fait diversification* of Senegalese literature while holding a "mirror" up—as the title of one of her *nouvelles* suggests—to Senegalese society and its increasingly diverse audiovisual culture.

## Aminata Maïga Ka: From dramatic news to *nouvelles dramatiques*

Born in 1940 into an upper-middle-class family in Saint-Louis, Rokhayatou Aminata Maïga Ka studied English and American literature at Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar followed by stints in San Francisco and Iowa City. Upon returning to Dakar, she taught English at the Lycée Malick Sy in Thiès before becoming a government official, serving in various posts including in the Ministry of Education and as Cultural Attaché to the Senegalese Embassy in Rome. She was a contemporary and friend of Mariama Bâ and wrote about her work.[42] Ka was the editor-in-chief of the official paper of the National Movement of Socialist Women (Mouvement des femmes socialistes) in Senegal. Her husband, Abdou Anta Ka (1931–1999), was a playwright and professional journalist.

During her lifetime, Ka published several "dramatic short stories" (*nouvelles dramatiques*)—"La Voie du Salut" and "Le Miroir de la Vie," published in 1985, followed by "Brisures de vies" in 1998—and one novel, *En votre nom et au mien*

[40] See Serigne Seye, "*Bàmmeelu Kocc Barma* de Boubacar Boris Diop ou comment écrire un roman postmoderne en wolof," *Études littéraires africaines* 46 (2018): 31–43.

[41] Jóob, *Bàmmeelu Kocc Barma*, 106.

[42] Aminata Maïga Ka, "Ramatoulaye, Aïssatou, Mireille et … Mariama Ba," *Revue du livre: La littérature sénégalaise* 81 (1985): 129–34.

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(1989). Her works are all sociopolitically engaged, focusing on the intersections of gender, class, and caste with local and national politics, especially against the backdrop of Diouf's presidency, the economic crisis and widespread inflation of the 1980s, the liberalization of national media, and reforms to the Senegalese Family Code.[43] As Claire Griffiths notes, Ka was "not considered the best stylist of her generation," but she was "consistently cited as the most explicitly feminist and politically engaged."[44] Ka's ostensible lack of "style" actually brings her writing closer to journalistic writing: her texts favor the relaying of facts and plot elements over dense prose and rhetorical flourish. Perhaps this is why her works have not garnered a broad audience in literary-critical circles outside Senegal; unlike her contemporaries, Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall, and Ken Bugul, Ka rarely figures on university syllabi, and she not been translated into English.[45]

Of her works, Ka said that her "main themes [were] polygamy, caste and education ... a criticism of our society."[46] Indeed, her texts all revolve around "marriage plots," namely intrigues related to marriage between castes or classes, the negotiation of the *may bu jëkk* "first gift" made to the fiancée's family and the *warugal* "dowry," and rivalries between *awaa* "first wife" and *ñaareel* "second wife." But marriage in Kay's oeuvres is typically a pretense for examining other social phenomena: economic precarity and unemployment, access to education, migration, and the tensions emerging between traditional values on the one hand and those taught at the "École des Blancs" and espoused by urbanizing Dakarois, on the other. By Ka's own account, the results are "very dramatic and gloomy"[47] and her views of the status of women especially grim. Centering the suffering of women, Ka's texts stage searing critiques of economic inequality, governmental corruption, patriarchy and gender violence, neocolonial domination, and the failures of the education system, while bringing to the fore topics long considered taboo: forced marriage, rape, mental illness, domestic violence, addiction, skin lightening, prostitution, homosexuality, and suicide. Her works document a postcolonial Senegal in a state of rapid transition.

The vicissitudes and challenges of a rapidly urbanizing society become a refrain for Ka's characters, who both bemoan and benefit from such changes. Many of them believe the onslaught of news media is to blame. As the protagonist of *En votre nom et au mien*, Awa Gueye, asks:

> Can the media's aggression, the flooding of our market with products from all over the world, the cost of living, and the changes in our society with the

[43] On the 1980s reforms to the family code, see Annelien Bouland, "Family Law in Senegal: Opposition and Pragmatic Pluralism," *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 56, no. 1 (2022): 161–80.

[44] Claire H. Griffiths, "African Women Writers: Configuring Change at the Interface of Politics and Fiction," *Relief* 5, no. 1 (2011): 11.

[45] The exception is a short, translated excerpt from "La Voie du salut," titled "New Life at Tandia," published in Charlotte H. Bruner, ed., *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1993), 40–44.

[46] Bruner, *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing*, 190.

[47] Bruner, *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing*, 190.

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rapid evolution of customs explain the change that has occurred among the Senegalese?[48]

Among Ka's female protagonists, Awa is the only one to have something of a cautiously hopeful, though certainly not outright happy, ending (she lives). The other women who populate Ka's textual universe—students, housemaids, *griottes*, *marabouts*, magistrates, prostitutes, *drianké*, mothers, wives, daughters, sisters—are invariably less fortunate. Most die violent, tragic deaths. Those who survive are abandoned by their partners or family, ostracized by society, and financially ruined. Even women who live in extreme comfort—such as the demanding "Madame" in "Le Miroir de la vie," Arame Dieng—are unhappy. Dieng ruins her skin using *xessal* (contraband bleaching agents), becomes alienated from her children, and drowns her problems in alcohol.[49] The only female characters who seem to navigate society with success are the enterprising prostitutes and cosmopolitan *drianké* who adopt essentially materialist outlooks and take a transactional approach to their interactions with men. Men, meanwhile, in Ka's texts are rapacious, dishonest, self-interested, out-of-touch, or cruel. Even—or especially—the schoolteachers are not to be trusted. Some are outright scheming, such as Racine in "La Voie du salut," who uses his pregnant wife's savings to marry a *drianké* and rent her a lavish villa. Others are simply clueless, naïve, and broke, as in the case of Demba in *En Votre nom et au mien*, who proves incapable of protecting his wife from being brutalized by his own sisters.

As it emerges across her oeuvre, Ka's portrait of post-independence Senegal is largely pessimistic. Ka writes directly against the traditional values espoused by gerontocratic and masculinist proverbs of the Wolof Sage Kocc Barma Fall such as *jigéen soppal te bul woolu* ("love woman but do not trust her") or *ku muñ muuñ* ("the one who is patient, smiles"),[50] insofar as her works condemn stasis, inaction, and acceptance of the status quo, especially for women. In Ka's narratives, good things never come to those who wait.

We might also consider Ka as combatting the patriarchal values incarnated in the popular Wolof praise song (*taasu*) known generally as "Fatou Gaye's song," which became a media sensation in the 1970s, saturating the national radio.[51] Written in Wolofal and recited in deep Wolof, this "ode to patriarchy," as Marame Gueye writes, was considered by many women to have been "conspired by men to reinforce women's subordination and control their conduct within marriage."[52] Ka's works show the human cost of this male fantasy.

What makes Ka' works politically engaged and quietly radical—and thus ultimately oriented toward a more just and equitable future—is the fact that

[48] Aminata Maïga Ka, *En votre nom et au mien* (Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1989), 25.

[49] Aminata Maïga Ka, "Le Miroir de la Vie," in *La Voie du salut; suivi de, Le Miroir de la vie: nouvelles dramatiques* (Paris/Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1985), 197.

[50] Dior recalls this proverb in *En votre nom et au mien*; Ka, *En votre nom*, 48.

[51] Marame Gueye, "Ode to Patriarchy: The Fine Line Between Praise and Criticism in a Popular Senegalese Poem," in *Gender Epistemologies in Africa: Gendering Traditions, Spaces, Social Institutions, and Identities*, ed. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2011), 63–83.

[52] Gueye, "Ode to Patriarchy," 65.

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Ka shows the suffering of her characters to result from broader structural problems, outgrowths of colonial and postcolonial asymmetries. In her reliance on more or less similar plot configurations and character *habitus* across her works, Ka insists on the structures of exclusion and oppression that both entrap and produce her characters. Ka's characters are not simply bad, hapless people but "hostage[s] of the economic problems traversing the country," as the narrator of "Brisures de vies" puts it.[53] Her sharpest criticism is reserved for an "insatiable" government that has abandoned its people and refuses to "do politics within its means."[54] At the time, this would have been Abdou Diouf's administration. The impotent, greedy, and careless men who populate Ka's texts, leaving "broken" lives in their wake, ultimately become powerful allegories for the failures of the masculinist state.

If the men in Ka's works are largely one-note characters, the case of women is more complex. Her depiction of female characters, especially female suicide, would seem to emerge in direct conversation with Sembène's transpositions of the *fait divers* in "La Noire de ..." as well as local histories of female suicide, such as the well-known tale *Xaru Xanju* ("the suicide of Xanju"), which tells the story of two young women, Xanju and her friend Ndaté, who drown themselves in a well to protect one another's honor and to uphold the value of *sutura* (discretion, privacy, secrets). As with Sembène's protagonist, Diouana, the tragic deaths of Ka's female protagonists serve as indictments of overlapping systems of neo/-postcolonial and gender oppression while reflecting a local code of honor based in notions of *jòm* (dignity, honor, courage) and *gàcce* (personal shame).

Before examining "La Voie du salut" and "Le Mirroir de vie" with an eye to their transformation of the *fait divers* suicide *à la* Sembène, I want to briefly consider the role of news media in Ka's only novel, *En votre nom et au mien*, written between 1986 and 1987 and published in 1989, and in her final short story, "Brisures de vies." In these latter two texts, Ka's characters exhibit a deeply ambivalent relationship to the press. On the one hand, they frequently demonize the popular press for contributing to general desensitization and accelerating the degradation of social values. On the other hand, they are avid consumers of news, extolling its consciousness-raising potential. This ambivalence is summarized by the schoolteacher Modou in "Brisures de vies":

> The awakening of consciousness through the intellectual curiosity of its fellow citizens, supported and reinforced by a multitude of press outlets, private radio and television channels, contributed to the emergence of a new type of Senegalese. More modern, more demanding of himself and others, more aware of national and international events, more capable of engaging in conversations on the most varied and challenging subjects. [...] But critical thinking and discursive reason [...] strongly contributed to the hardening of hearts, the drying up, and the withering of human relationships![55]

[53] Aminata Maïga Ka, *Brisures de vies* (Saint-Louis: Xamal, 1998), 17–18.

[54] Aminata Maïga Ka, "La Voie du salut," in *La Voie du salut; suivi de, Le Miroir de la vie: nouvelles dramatiques* (Paris/Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1985), 65.

[55] Ka, "Brisures," 62.

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Ka's works should be read as offering a more general, situated critique of the gradual liberalization of media and the press in post-independence Senegal, which has, as Modou asserts, "contributed to the emergence of a new type of Senegalese." In each of Ka's texts, print and audiovisual media, especially *fait divers* and death notices, play central *narrative* roles, driving the plots forward or to their conclusion.

## En votre nom et au mien

Formally and thematically, Ka's novel much resembles her short stories. It follows the trials and tribulations of the Gueyes, a middle-class Muslim family in Dakar. After failing her entrance exam to high school, Awa, the oldest of four children and the novel's protagonist, must abandon her studies and remain at home to assist her mother because "only wealthy people can take the luxury of having a maid."[56] While accompanying her two younger brothers, Aliou and Samba, to their first day at the École nouvelle, she meets the schoolteacher Demba Dieng. The two strike up a relationship, fall in love, and Demba asks permission to marry Awa. Awa's paternal aunts or *bàjjen*, responsible for determining the *warugal* and *may bu jëkk*, set an exorbitantly high dowry, totally *hors de portée* for a young schoolteacher, essentially disqualifying him from marriage. After some hesitancy, Awa marries her father's wealthy childhood friend, Tanor Fall, as his second wife. She thoroughly embraces her new life, fully "caught up in the spiral of griots, homosexuals [*goor jigéens*] and the display of her wealth," as a member of the new moneyed elite.[57] Although Tanor effectively abandons his first wife for Awa—spoiling her with exotic voyages and lavish gifts—things sour. Awa bankrupts Tanor, he files for divorce, and Awa returns to her family disgraced. Only at this point can Demba, returned from studying in the United States, marry Awa without paying a hefty *warugal.* Despite finally marrying for love, Awa's second marriage is not a happy one: Demba's sisters terrorize her with verbal and physical abuse, and she is completely shamed when her husband finally comes to her defense.

In the novel, print media drives the plot, especially the subnarrative focalized on the downward spiral of Awa's brother Samba Baac. Ironically, Samba, the character most resistant to formal schooling and suspicious of print literacy—drawn instead to listening to songs played on the family's radio—becomes the most fully "(en)textualized" in the novel.[58] Samba plays hooky and eventually is brought under the wing of a "light-skinned" drifter who initiates him into the use of drugs.[59] Soon, the only "lessons" Samba attends are "leçons de tabagie" (smoking lessons), and the only "papers" that interest him the smoking papers rolled expertly between his friend's deft fingers.[60] Samba descends into addiction, and after an unsuccessful stint in rehab runs away from home, eventually

[56] Ka, "Brisures," 6–7.
[57] Ka, *En votre nom*, 85.
[58] Newell, "From Corpse to Corpus."
[59] Ka, *En votre nom*, 48.
[60] Ka, *En votre nom*, 48–9.

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dying from pneumonia on the streets. In rehab, Samba's doctor suggests that "the aggression of media" is responsible for the boy's troubles:

> Today's youth, coming from all backgrounds but especially from the dissociated, i.e., problematic environment, thought to solve their difficulties by turning to drugs to make up for their psycho-affective immaturity; idleness and unemployment, the aggression of the media, of which they are the victim, contribute to it.[61]

The doctor's diagnosis of Senegalese youth—the psychosomatic strain of "absorbing dismal news"—is perhaps as old as news media itself but deeply familiar to twenty-first-century audiences used to "doomscrolling" and suffering from what psychologists now call "media saturation overload" and "headline stress disorder."[62]

Samba does effectively become a "victim" of the press as his doctor predicts. His anonymous death on the streets of Dakar is reported days later in the local newspaper. Whereas in his film, Sembène strategically reveals the *fait divers* of Diouana Gomis's death to underscore the apathy of the White reader and the callousness of the colonial press, Ka uses the report of a dead body to highlight the tragedy of an alienated and troubled urban youth. Samba's mother, Binta Tine, learns of her son's death by pure chance. One night, preparing to light the stove, she strikes a match and brings it close to a bit of newspaper, briefly illuminating an image on the crumpled page:

> A photo in the newspaper had caught her attention: however, it was not that of a living being, for here, the relaxed face and closed eyes of the individual reflected eternal rest. This prominent forehead, those greedy lips that only aspired to drink the water of life, were well known to her; they were those of her son Baacc. [...] Mother Binta Tine went out and handed the scrap of newspaper to her husband, who, sitting on his lounge chair, was sipping his coffee. [...] He took the time to put on his glasses and deciphered the crumpled piece of paper 'An adolescent of about 1.65 m, slim and dark-skinned, was found dead in front of the hospital guardroom. His parents are requested to come and retrieve his body from the morgue'.[63]

This image, of print news being used as a source of kindling or warmth, becomes a leitmotif across Ka's texts, reflecting to the various, often ingenious ways that print is used in contexts where literacy rates are low (indeed, here, Binta must rely on her husband to read the article). The scene is made more poignant by the fact that, earlier in the novel, we learn that Binta Tine faithfully listens to the daily "taagués" (*taage*) on the radio.[64] Far from reductive death notices, Wolof

[61] Ka, *En votre nom*, 89–90.

[62] Charlotte Huff, "Media Overload Is Hurting Our Mental Health. Here Are Ways to Manage Headline Stress," *Monitor on Psychology* 53, no. 8 (2022): 20.

[63] Ka, *En votre nom*, 101–2.

[64] Ka, *En votre nom*, 50.

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*taage* are memorial praise poems honoring and glorifying the dead. This is arguably the elegiac tenor of the poem, "Nostalgie," that Sembène appends to his short story.[65] In other words, *taage* serve as a complement or correction of the dehumanizing *fait divers.* In Ka's text, Samba's death is rendered more tragic and more solitary by the fact he is denied this sort of bereavement.

## "Brisures de vies"

"Brisures de vies" takes up many of the themes present in Ka's novel, offering glimpses or fragments of fractured lives, as its title suggests. The text chronicles the struggles of Diégane and his wife, Gnilane, to scrape out a meager living while crippled with debt, and especially their news-obsessed son, Macodou, who emerges as the story's protagonist. Despite the obstacles, Macadou is determined to gain an education and study in France. Lacking adequate textbooks and qualified teachers, he teaches himself "by every means possible," but especially by turning to "[t]he written and spoken press."[66]

When Macodou finally does manage to study in France, his experience of deception, disillusionment, and racialization reads like a variation on the suicidal trajectories of Ousmane Socé's Fara in *Mirages de Paris*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Samba Diallo in *Aventure ambiguë*, and Sembène's Diouana; all had read about or consumed images of France before departing, only for France to prove a deadly mirage.[67] Like Diouana, who is suddenly constrained and terrified by her Blackness in the metropole (Sembène writes: "The previously expansive horizons of not so long ago were limited to the color of her skin, which now provoked in her an invincible terror. Her skin. Her blackness"[68]), Macodou's experience in France is poisoned by anti-Blackness: "At every moment, he was reminded of the blackness of his skin. [...] Sometimes he thought that being black was a curse."[69] He is even pushed to the brink of suicide: "He wanted to disappear underground, wishing to die. Death must be white in its relentless cruelty."[70]

Like many literary figures of *migritude*,[71] Macodou's ambiguous European adventure is an experience of deception and disillusionment. He is forced to exist "in black-and-white," an experience that Sembène literalizes in his film, and which takes on symbolic significance given the way Diouana herself is rendered in black and white—*in print*, as text—by the press at the film's end.

[65] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 175–7; for an analysis of the poem, see Calhoun, *The Suicide Archive*, 147–52.

[66] Ka, *Brisures*, 71–2.

[67] Ka, *Brisures*, 77–9.

[68] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 167.

[69] Ka, *Brisures*, 77–78.

[70] Ka, *Brisures*, 78.

[71] See Jacques Chevrier, "Afrique(s)-sur-Seine: Autour de la notion de 'migritude'," *Revue des littératures du Sud* 155, no. 156 (2004): 96–100; Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 5.

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Ka's short stories "La Voie du salut" and "Le Miroir de la vie" explore the printerly and racial dimensions of this metaphor.

## "La Voie du Salut" and "Le Miroir de la vie"

"La Voie du salut" was written in Thiès, Dakar, and Conakry between 1977 and 1980 while "Le Miroir de la vie" was written in Dakar during the summer of 1983. Both were published in a single volume by Présence Africaine in 1985 and labeled *nouvelles dramatiques* or "dramatic short stories." Both are also dramatic *news stories*—literary works that engage the press in important ways. These texts draw most directly on Ousmane Sembène's *fait-diversification* of suicide in his original short story "La Noire de ..." published by the same imprint two decades earlier.

### I.

"La Voie du salut" is a transgenerational tragedy. It is also a ghost story which, like Sembène's text, makes substantial use of flashback. The narrative begins in the hereafter, focalized through the perspective of an initially unnamed female narrator who has succumbed during surgery, watched over by the doctor, her daughter, and her daughter's unborn child.[72] The woman's spirit awakes in the afterlife, surrounded by "shadows" and tightly bound by a shroud.[73] Her consciousness drifts into the past, recalling a scene from her childhood when a young Sudanese doctor arrived in her village with a "magic box that had the supernatural power to reproduce the image and posture of an individualize and to immortalize them."[74] She and her childhood friends marvel at the photographer-doctor's apparatus, "the white man's science"[75]: the very science that will, years later, lead to her bleeding out on an operating table.

The opening of Ka's text bears strong similarities to the first pages of Sembène's story, which, in contrast to the film, opens with the protagonist's death. At the beginning of "La Noire de...," Diouana is already a dead woman: a body on a stretcher hidden beneath a shroud, surrounded by onlookers, including a photographer and doctor, headed for an autopsy.[76] Only then does the narrative move back in time to tell Diouana's story.

In Ka's case, the flashback portraying the introduction of colonial "science" into the village becomes the pretext for telling the dead woman's story. Her name, we learn, is Rokhaya, and Baba, the young doctor who takes her photo as a girl, eventually falls in love with her. The couple conceive, and Rokhaya gives birth to a baby girl, Rabiatou—the pregnant daughter introduced in the frame narrative.

[72] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 8.
[73] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 7.
[74] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 9.
[75] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 9.
[76] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 152.

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Rabiatou's father educates her in a Western model, sending her to study in France, where she becomes a magistrate. Like Diouana and Macadou, Rabiatou "experiences a great deception in France,"[77] becoming deeply aware of her Blackness: "No matter what she did, she would never (fundamentally) be a White woman."[78]

Rabiatou's sojourn in France is interrupted by news of her father's death back home. Reminiscent of the way (ghostwritten) letters circulate in Sembène's film, Rabiatou receives a letter from her mother penned by her friend Sokhna, informing her of the death and urging her to return to Senegal.[79] This letter and the return it provokes set the stage for the story's tragic dénouement. Back in Senegal, the schoolteacher Racine Ly pursues Rabioatou and asks for her hand in marriage. In a scene common to all of Ka's works, the negotiation of the *waragul* and *may bu jëkk* goes awry, with Rabiatou's *bàjjen* setting an exorbitant bride price. Rabatiou short-circuits the process by getting pregnant so that Racine can marry her without paying a dowry, according to the custom of "la voie du salut."

At this point, the plotline initiated by the initial flashback catches up to the narrative present, with Rokhaya's death. Mourning the loss of her mother and struggling with a difficult pregnancy, Rabiatou's sort worsens further when her friend Sokhna again delivers crushing news: Racine has married a second wife, a drianké, and squandered their savings. This "news" (*nouvelle*) is too much for Rabiatou to bear; she is stricken and falls dead.[80]

Sokhna, the bearer of deadly news, rushes out into the street, and the story closes with a report of her suicide in the daily newspaper the next day. Her act of self-destruction is written off as madness:

> The next day, the national newspaper headlined:
>
> A young girl named Sokhna Sow was pulled out of a well where she threw herself late last night. According to a reliable source, the victim was not in full possession of her faculties.[81]

This textual closure is strikingly similar to the last lines of Sembène's short story, in which Diouana's death is reported in the press the following day in terms that pathologize her suicide:

> The next day, the newspapers published on the fourth page, column six, barely visible:
>
> In Antibes, a nostalgic Black woman cuts her throat.[82]

In both cases, the meaning of female suicide is radically overdetermined by the press, rendered in terms that sever the act from its context and possible motivations.

[77] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 58.
[78] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 60.
[79] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 60–61.
[80] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 99.
[81] Ka, "La Voie du salut," 100.
[82] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 174.

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## II.

In "Le Miroir de la vie," Ka takes up the themes of "La Noire de …" even more directly by staging the struggles and suicide of the Sereer maid Fatou Faye, who works for the family of the Secretary of State, Saliou Cissé, in Dakar. The sufferings and suicides of Senegalese maids or *mbindaan* have become something of a *lieu commun* in Senegalese cultural production, at least since the success of Sembène's short story and film. This should not be surprising, given that domestic workers constitute one of the largest groups of laborers in Senegal and thus have become emblematic of the kinds of disenfranchisement and mistreatment suffered by the working class. Seydi Sow's novel *Misères d'une boniche* (1997) is another case in point.[83]

However, the *mbindaan* also occupy a very particular status in the history of the Senegalese press, as both protagonists and victims of scandalous news stories. The fascination of the press with the figure of the *mbindaan* continues today, with maids regularly serving as "actors" in "scandalous articles" in popular papers such as *Mœurs*.[84] At the same time, *mbindaan* in Senegal see in the press a possible avenue for recourse and redress. Mistrusting the police, maids turn to the press to make their suffering and abuse known. According to a survey carried out in the early 2000s:

> 90%, or 18 out of 20, of maids see the popular press as an instrument that gives them security: while threatening bosses with a complaint to the ineffective and corrupt police proves almost impossible, a threat to make illegitimacy or any other mistreatment public is much more effective.[85]

Given that most domestic workers have not received formal schooling and are illiterate, this faith in the printed word as an avenue for voicing their justice claims and holding people accountable is rather striking. Here, we might also point out the etymology of the word for maid in Wolof: *mbindaan* is a nominalized form of the verb *bind* which literally means "to write" but can also mean "to hire" (in the sense of someone being registered or "on the books"). In multiple senses, not least in how they regularly are entextualized by the popular press and literary works, *mbindaan* are women who are *written down.*

From its first pages, Ka's short story associates the *mbindaan* with the press and the printed word. The story opens with a grim fresco of the daily life of Dakar's maids: the city's invisible labor force. These women and girls rise early and retire late, working in the homes of the upper-middle-class and upper-class families of the Plateau neighborhood, only to return exhausted to their shacks in poorer neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city, where they sleep ten or fifteen in a single room.[86] The press is what keeps them warm at night—not by dint of its capacity to amuse and distract, but as literal insulation: the maids sleep

[83] Seydi Sow, *Misères d'une boniche* (Paris: l'Harmattan, 1997).
[84] Wittmann, "Vers une réhabilitation de la presse populaire au Sénégal," 83.
[85] Wittmann, "Vers une réhabilitation de la presse populaire au Sénégal," 87.
[86] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 103.

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surrounded by the printed word, "The magazine pages stuck into the gaps and the newspaper rolled into balls to block the holes didn't manage to prevent the wind from seeping into the room."[87] Like Sembène, Ka draws direct parallels between the conditions of Senegalese maids and enslavement: these maids, Ka writes, are "modern-day slaves."[88]

This bleak overview prepares the ground for Ka's moving portrayal of the young Sereer woman Fatou Faye. Like Sembène's Diouana, Fatou clashes with her indolent and demanding "Madame," Arame Dieng, and becomes a *bonne à tout faire*, responsible not only for domestic tasks but also for taking care of the family's children.

Even in the absence of an overtly colonial dynamic, as exists between Diouana and her White employer, Ka insists on a class-based and subtly racialized hierarchy: Madame whitens her skin with bleaching agents and insists that everything be accomplished "according to the norms of Western *savoir-vivre.*"[89] Whereas the home of Diouana's employers resembles "a hunter's den," with myriad animal skins, African masks, figurines, and other artifacts,[90] Madame's bedroom is an altar to Western society: crammed with souvenirs and products from her travels to Europe.[91] And like Diouana's acquiescent refrain of "Viye Madame"[92] and "Merci Madame,"[93] Fatou's dialogue in the short story consists largely of a chorus of "Oui Madame!" and "Bien Madame!"[94] In this way, Ka transposes the race-based drama of Sembène's "La Noire de ..."—which unfolds between France and Senegal and crystallizes in the struggle between a Black African woman and a White European woman—onto postcolonial Dakar, pitting the Francophile Wolof Madame against her rural Sereer maid. In doing so, Ka underscores the epistemic violence and long afterlife of colonialism in postcolonial societies, where the colonial dynamic is replicated and projected onto other class-, caste, or race-based relations.

Fatou's real troubles begin when she meets the charming drifter Mamadou Sene one day while taking her employers' children to play in a nearby garden. The two strike up a relationship and Fatou, somewhat naively, "gives herself" to him in the hopes that he will marry her if she becomes pregnant. Instead, he rejects and abandons her. This is the beginning of the end. In a final effort to convince Mamadou to marry her, she tries to find him at his place of work, only to learn that no one by that name had ever been employed there. She comes to the horrible realization that she has been completely duped.

After a difficult pregnancy she conceals from everyone, Fatou goes into labor one night and gives birth alone in the "enclosure serving as the communal toilets."[95] The scene is heart-wrenching. Surrounded by human filth, Fatou

[87] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 103.
[88] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 104.
[89] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 107.
[90] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 150.
[91] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 113.
[92] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 155.
[93] Sembène, "La Noire de ...," 158.
[94] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 116.
[95] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 187.

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strangles her own moans of pain "like a wounded animal," eventually "expelling" a stillborn baby onto the "stinking ground" in the early hours of the morning.[96] Somewhat mechanically and "showing no remorse," she scoops up the fetus and disposes of the corpse in a "fetid sewer."[97]

Although Fatou reassures herself that "a still-born baby has no legal existence" and thus her act should be "less criminal," a neighbor witnesses the scene and chases her down, reporting her to the police who arrest her and place her in jail.[98] For Fatou, returning disgraced and destitute to her village is not an option; the only viable escape is through death:

> No, Fatou would not return to the village. The horizon was blocked! All exits closed!
>
> Fatou threw herself to the ground and sobbed. Then, calmed, she got up. She untied her pagne and, with eyes raised, searched for a protrusion on the ceiling. She saw a hook and tied the pagne to it. Making as little noise as possible, she pulled the mattress that served as a bed to the level of the pagne. She climbed onto the bed, passed the slipknot of the pagne around her neck, and let herself fall into the void. They will sing about her, but it will not be to cover her with ridicule! No, it will be to celebrate the courage of a young Sereer girl who preferred to absolve, in death, her violated honor![99]

Fatou's suicide is couched in terms that clearly align her death with the values of *jom* and *sutura.* Through suicide, Fatou upholds and affirms her dignity, purifies herself of shame (*gàcce*), and takes her secrets with her to the grave. Her act of self-destruction is also an act of self-preservation, in line with the proverb *bañ gàcce, nangu dee* "resist shame, embrace death." Her suicide becomes a way for her to determine how her death will be received and recorded with respect to specific social values, even if she cannot control whether her suicide becomes the subject of a *fait divers*, as in the case of Sokhna (Ka) or Diouana (Sembène).

Fatou's suggestion, as she hangs, that, one day, "people will sing of her," is especially prescient and brings us back to Sembène, who ends his 1966 film with a thrilling and penetrating extradiegetic performance by the singer Khady Diouf: a Sereer folk lyric that recounts the suicide of young maid in Dakar.[100] Fatou's suicide emerges in intertextual reference to this other, well-known musical "text" about a maid's suffering—one that played on the radio throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

[96] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 188.
[97] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 188.
[98] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 191.
[99] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 195.
[100] See Calhoun, *The Suicide Archive*, 152; Amadou T. Fofana, *The Films of Ousmane Sembène: Discourse, Politics, and Culture* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2012), 223–24.

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Ka's story could have ended here: with the scene in the jail cell. For instance, in his account of a Sereer maid's illicit pregnancy and infanticide, Seydi Sow concludes with the harrowing image of his ill-fated protagonist Satou carrying her dead child to the police station after giving birth alone in the streets of Dakar and suffocating the infant.[101] But Ka does not give her maid the last word. Like Sembène, she insists on the way that this subaltern suicide is coopted and "entextualized" by more powerful voices.

The story ends with an excerpt of a letter from Fatou's Madame, in which she recounts *her* suffering. Like the performative grief of Diouana's Madame at the beginning of Sembène's short story, Fatou's Madame uses the death of her maid to underscore the difficult turn her own life has taken. But Diouana's Madame can more or less "wash her hands" of the death of her maid (she remains in France while her husband returns Diouana's affairs to Senegal). Fatou's Madame, meanwhile, cannot extricate herself entirely from the social world that led to this young woman hanging in a jail cell: her entextualization of Fatou's act perhaps also reflects the ways the death will continue to haunt her and her family.

As with Diouana's death, Fatou's suicide is ultimately reduced to a mere few lines at the end of the story. The Madame writes: "Our maid Fatou Faye took her own life in prison. Deceived and abandoned by a young man, she found only this solution to wash away her shame."[102] Then she—and the world—swiftly moves on. As Sembène, cited in my epigraph, writes, the death of a maid "is not sensational material."

* * *

Across her works, Ka clearly embroiders on the *fait divers* tradition as pioneered in Senegalese literature and cinema by Sembène. At the same time, Ka expands Sembène's critique of the colonial press to encompass a broader sociocultural exploration of postcolonial news media and its role in the transformations of Senegalese society at the end of the twentieth century. She mobilizes Senegalese news media both thematically and as narrative device, crafting *nouvelles dramatiques* out of dramatic news; in so doing, Ka exposes the risks of the popular press's handling of private dramas but also points up how the lives and deaths of the "commonfolk" or *baadolo*, to borrow a Wolof expression, might be dignified in literature. Her oeuvre contributes to the ongoing *fait-diversification* of Senegalese cultural production by which Senegalese literature and film increasingly engage directly with print and audiovisual news media.

Despite the diversity of media forms and genres that circulate in Ka's works—print, radio, television, literature, journalism, song—and the emphasis placed on print literacy and formal schooling, Ka importantly situates her transformation of the *fait divers* within a rich feminine oral tradition of improvisation and verbal play, one that aligns with her own project of intertextual reference and creative elaboration. For in Ka's oeuvre, it ultimately is the *géwël* or griots, specifically the *griottes*, who are both reviled and renowned for "The consummate art they [=the

[101] Sow, *Misères*, 128.
[102] Ka, "Le Miroir de la vie," 197.

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*griottes*] had of narrating the most trivial news [*les faits divers*], transforming them into true epics."[103] These figures, drawn from the oral tradition, possess the true art of turning mere "news" into the stuff of literature.

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[103] Ka, *En votre nom*, 91.

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