
Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*: The Vocation of Memory and the Space of Writing

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Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is composed as the autobiographical letter/journal ("cahier") of a middle-class Senegalese widow, Ramatoulaye (Rama for short) to her friend and correspondent, Aïssatou, living abroad in the United States. It recounts the events leading to Aïssatou's divorce, as well as the story of Rama's own life, her abandonment by her husband, Modou Fall, when he takes a second wife after 25 years of marriage, her difficult adaptation to this predicament, and finally her recent bereavement.

In Bâ's novel a *praxis* of memory converges with a redemptive women's history. The novel also articulates the spaces of modernity and writing as they impinge upon a bourgeois, urbanized consciousness in Africa. In fact, memory, space, and writing share odd family resemblances in the novel.¹ I suggest that the complex cleavages and contradictions found in the novel give it a historical density so often missing from more crudely manicheanizing colonial and postcolonial writings.² Bâ's novel illustrates how these cleavages are articulated in all their density and complexity. It is precisely the novel's acute responsiveness to the total range of social tensions and contradictions, I conclude, that articulates a memory of profoundly historical subjectivities, "torn between the past and the present" and thus produces a genuinely historical novel.³

Rama's class origins constitute a constant frame for her discourse. As a consequence her letter is fissured and compromised in complex ways: resolutely modern, progressive, and feminist, it also remains bound by class and imperfectly overcome caste prejudices, and a sentimentality for which she reproaches herself (11). While warmly endorsing the politics and independence movements of the "the aspect [visage] of the New Africa" (24), her letter confesses a deep nostalgia and affection for passing African traditions (19), but also for aspects of her colonial education and, as Christopher Miller has underscored, a lingering Eurocentrism. What emerges is in no way a monolithic image of the "Third-World Woman," a fabrication to which Western feminisms have sometimes fallen prey, but rather a society of Senegalese women variously united and divided along cleavages of class, caste, profession, gender, age, religious belief, and ethnicity.⁴ One commentator, Femi Ojo-Ade, properly stresses Rama's middle-class origins and Eurocentric biases, but uses this only to discredit Rama as

a character, and thus discredit her feminism, too, as “an occidental phenomenon.” By stigmatizing feminism, and emotionally blackmailing African women with tradition, Ojo-Ade seems ultimately intent simply on persuading African women not to think about their status at all.

The novel begins by burying a man—Rama’s ex-husband, Modou Fall; it ends anticipating a meal shared between two women—the two correspondents—and the resumption of an orality for which Rama’s “diary” (*cahier*) (1/7) has merely substituted. Observance of the last rites of a male dignitary under Islamic custom frames the opening episodes; the novel concludes contemplating the rites of hospitality that will rekindle a friendship and surround a reunion banquet.

From the beginning of Rama’s “lettre” (131) until the moment when, at last, it will be delivered into Aïssatou’s hands, Bâ’s text remains preoccupied with memory.⁵ The vocation of memory serves a variety of purposes: historical, communitarian, ethical, existential, therapeutic, and traumatic (I shall return to the obvious contradiction of these last two terms). Rama’s adoption of memory as a vocation and consolation, *à la recherche du temps perdu*; her fervent advocacy of a culture of Writing and an ideology of the Book; her anguish over the dizzying historical and spatial distances opened up by the brisk pace of modernization⁶; the novel’s expressive poetics as “a cry from the heart”; Rama’s ardent desire to create new bases of affiliation—her caste-crossing friendship with Aïssatou, a “goldsmith’s daughter” (54)—when existing forms of filiation (familial, marital) are being broken—all these symptoms situate *So Long a Letter* within a context of modernist priorities and anxieties.⁷

So Long a Letter begins “Aïssatou, I have received your letter. By way of response I am beginning this diary . . .” (1).⁸ I stress this opening because it signals the interlocutory dimension of Rama’s recollections, and alerts us to her broader inaugurating of a consensual, emancipatory legacy of women’s experiences, women’s stories, women’s triumphs, women’s days.⁹ It is a history, chronicled with howsoever much stoicism, best described as a Passion. What begins as the companionship of “the same stony road to the koranic school” (1) turns ultimately into a *via dolorosa*: “a new atmosphere in which I move, a stranger and tormented” (2), “une atmosphère nouvelle où j’évolue, étrangère et crucifiée” (9; emphasis added). This history is marked by moral, emotional, and psychological traumas: “a wound hardly healed” (26), “lacerations” (55), “pain” (1, 55), disillusionment, suffering, survival (51-52), “my loneliness” (52), and “nervous breakdown” (41). These traumas, which I suggest are contiguous with the stigmata of Africa’s colonial and modernizing Passion, directly determine the very duration of Rama’s “si *longue* lettre” (131; emphasis added)—the length of the letter is a function of the many sufferings Rama must record. After having recounted the biographies of several Senegalese women (herself, Aïssatou, her daughters Daba and young Aïssatou, Aunty Nabou, young Nabou, Lady Mother-in-Law, Binetou, Jacqueline [63-68], and even a European spinster who came to teach literature but lost *her* voice (in the larger drama of decolonization, a significant affliction [66-67]), she asserts, “often muzzled, all women have almost the same fate” (88).

It is important to insist upon the performative function of the frequent invitations to remember and to consent to the recollections she recounts (e.g., "Do you remember," 13, 22; "Let us recall," 15, as well as the performativity of all the forms of the first-person plural pronoun in asserting a *community* of memory.¹⁰ The function of this pronoun is doubled in the equally *virtual* form of Rama's letter, which still remains to be received, read, and assented to by its addressee at the end.¹¹ The communion can only in fact be accomplished at the end with Aïssatou's (and, by implication, the reader's) receipt, and ratification, of the letter. It is a community the novel deliberately holds in reserve, awaiting its completion by another. Rama's affiliation with Aïssatou is emblematic of the larger communitarian impulse of the novel, signalled by its dedication "To all women and men of good will" (epigraph). The fact, too, that Aïssatou is living abroad underscores that it is specifically addressed to the people of the African diaspora (Miller 275).

The spectacle and praxis of memory itself is constantly held before us in Rama's recollections. Remembering becomes the vehicle for recovering and constructing an anthology and an archive of specifically women's experiences, lives, and stories. In his study of nationalisms, Benedict Anderson has shown how crucial a role collective memory (and forgetting) play in the construction of *any* imagined community. This project is already signalled in the opening sentences by the genealogical and syntactical parallelism of "Our grandmothers . . . Our mothers . . . As for us . . ." (1). When her teenage daughter is distressed by an unwelcome pregnancy, memory urgently calls Rama to her own obligations as a mother, and the matrilinear filiation is carried into the next generation:

Remembering, like a lifebuoy, the tender and consoling attitude of my daughter . . . I overcame my emotion. . . . The umbilical cord took on new life, the indestructible bond beneath the avalanche of storms and the duration of time. I saw her once more, newly sprung from me. . . . The life that fluttered in her was questioning me. (82-83)

The association of memory with the vivid image of the umbilical cord and the phrase "the past is reborn" (1) asserts an especial kinship between motherhood and the vocations of memory, continuity and community.

Memories are evoked rhapsodically, wistfully, painfully. Initially they emerge as fragments, an "ebb and tide of feeling" (1), an "ebb and tide of images" (1). It will be the letter's function to organize, narrativize, and lend coherence to these recollections, and knit them into a cultural umbilical cord. In their purest form they evoke an idyllic space of lost completeness whose names are Ponty-Ville (13), Ngor Beach, the Dakar Corniche, Sangalkam (22):

Our communion with deep, bottomless and unlimited nature refreshed our souls. Depression and sadness would . . . be replaced by feelings of plenitude and expansiveness. . . . And we stuffed ourselves with fruits within easy reach. . . . And we danced about And we lived. (22, 23)

The lives of the two friends double each other: “we walked the same paths” (1); “Our lives developed in parallel” (19). Each gives back to the other an image of herself. Their dual biographies mesh and intertwine, allowing Rama eventually to observe, “I’ve related at one go your story as well as mine” (55).¹² Together, they serve as a synecdoche for an entire generation, an entire “imagined community” of women helping to make an independent Senegal. Their early lives are deeply embedded in the larger destiny of their gender and their young nation, “being the first pioneers of the promotion of African women” (14). Rama recalls, “We were true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation” (15). She continues:

[T]he path chosen for our training and our blossoming was not at all accidental [ne fut point hasard]. It accords with the profound choices made by the New Africa for the promotion of the black woman. (16; trans. slightly modified)

The solidarity Rama recovers from these evocations is reinforced by her celebration of their profession, which she compares to a noble army and a priesthood—two compelling models of the “imagined community”—adding, “How faithfully we served our profession” (23). The emphasis on “profession” points to the desire to forge new associations and new affiliations as traditional ones are dissolved¹³; wistfully, she evokes the declining vocations of the *griote* (“a role handed down from mother to daughter,” 7) and the goldsmith (“its code . . . transmitted from father to son,” 18). Rama desires for modern professions some of the prestige of traditional crafts, suggesting that they too have their rites and mysteries, “Ours . . . does not allow for any mistake” (23).

Undertaking the archeology of a “distaff” wisdom (“sagesse,” 112) and an oral culture, Rama recalls the advice of her mother and grandmother; male relatives are conspicuously absent from her narrative. Rama apostrophizes her: “Courageous grandmother, I drew from your teaching and example . . .” (76). Similarly, long spurned advice from her mother she now recovers, adding her own voice to the long strand, the “ligature indestructible” of oral wisdom, “I completed at last my mother’s thought with the end of the dictum” (37). Elsewhere, the aristocratic and traditionalist Aunt Nabou will duplicate herself in her *protégée*, young Nabou (“I will make this child another me,” 28). Aunt Nabou, responsible for destroying Aïssatou’s marriage, elicits decidedly mixed signals from Rama, who respects her attachment to precolonial orality and aristocratic traditions, but wishes to distance herself from Aunt Nabou’s conservatism.

The desideratum of an umbilical, historical continuity is explicitly stated: “It was the privilege of our generation to be the *link* between two periods of history” (25; emphasis added). Memory—individual and collective, connecting one to a past, to others *through* a common past—is again the instrument of this affiliation and continuity. Rama summarizes this point, remarking, “Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties” (72). The ingredient that should, of course, be added to this list is the writing that sets forth these items. Anderson has stressed the central importance of writing and print-capitalism to the emergence of

national consciousness and, implicitly, other secular forms of imagined community (see ch. 3).

The vocation of memory, however, has its burdens as well as its pleasures. Rama is well aware that much "active forgetting" is necessary for modernization: "We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present . . . we were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive" (18-19). And although Rama enunciates the cathartic virtues of her project ("confiding in others allays pain," 1), because of the double-time of memory—the repetition of the past in the present—remembering is as traumatic as it is therapeutic, "for pain, even when it's past, leaves the same marks on the individual when recalled" (55). The ambivalent power of memory later merges with the equally ambiguous functions of writing and space in the novel; the mimetic structure of memory is specifically disclosed when Rama invokes the classical trope of the "Book of Memory," a trope that pledges her text to a writing-culture. Rama exclaims after her husband betrays her: "Leave! Draw a clean line through the past. Turn over a page on which everything was not bright, certainly, but at least all was clear. What would now be recorded there . . ." (40).

The sovereign obligation to remember is further signalled to us in the systematic stigmatization of its antithesis. The moral poverty of the major male characters and certain female characters, especially the venal and caricatured "Lady Mother-in-Law," is conveyed above all by their self-serving amnesia, their expedient *failure* to remember. It also becomes a synecdoche for the larger vice of "cultural amnesia" that overlooks the "true heroes . . . unknown in the mainstream of history" (11) among whom, in addition to the "victims of a sad fate" (11), are the nation's teachers, "never honored, never praised" (23), housewives distinguished by their "silent action" (63), and even the young, idealistic Modou Fall who did "obscure work" (14) on behalf of trade unions.¹⁴ In addition to evoking a personal history, the novel seeks to revoke a greater cultural amnesia, by paying tribute to those whom mainstream history has passed over. Again one notes the extent to which Rama's text is prepared to pardon Aunty Nabou, despite her vengeance against Aïssatou, precisely because she is a strong force of memory. Rama's vocation of remembrance is thus defined in vehement contrast to male amnesia, "[Modou's] new found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot about us" (46). Forgetting emerges as the stigmatizing mark of those who have abandoned their social and moral responsibilities.¹⁵ This arises most palpably when Rama's daughter, Daba, quasi-ritualistically scourges and "exorcizes" Lady Mother-in-Law from the house with a repeated "Remember . . . Remember . . . Remember . . . You deserve no pity. Pack up" (71). The injunction to remember carries beyond the frame of the novel to become an exhortation to the reader; assenting to the canon of memories being established here becomes the basis for a new association, and constitutes Rama (Bâ) as "the founder of a tradition that is to come" (Miller 271).

The vocation of memory, however, occurs within a unique space: Rama's unusual and overdetermined "scene of memory" and "scene of writing"; Mildred Mortimer points to the "dual process of introspection and writing, enclosure and disclosure" (144). Rama is officially in mourning: "This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman . . . she gives up ["elle s'ampute de"] her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her . . ." (4). Her role is entirely passive: "my co-wife and I *are put* inside a rough and ready tent," 4; emphasis added). According to the precepts of Islamic law, as a widow she is confined to her home against her will ("forced solitude and seclusion," 26), and swaddled under "black wrappers" (3, 86), for a mourning period of "four months and ten days" (8).¹⁶ She is under a kind of house-arrest or "internal exile."¹⁷

This period, marked by visits and observances of decreasing frequency, is "a monotony broken only by purifying baths" (8). It does, however, confer a rudimentary temporal frame on the narration. The Koranic script for mourning provides a simple, repetitive narrative ("it's the same story on the eighth and fortieth days," 8) against which Rama's much more sensational disclosures, her personal *mirasse*, are projected.¹⁸ Her sensuously evoked surroundings—sights, sounds, odors, "comforting words from the Koran"—gradually recede, and give way to the past, a space punctuated by the repetitive, ritual time of the present.

There is a mischievous irreverence in the fact that Rama, cloistered "under my black wrappers" to consecrate the memory of her feckless husband, elects instead to commemorate the life and times she has shared with her close friend and double, Aïssatou. When she describes the wake as "a ceremony for the redemption of a soul" (6), one is inclined to wonder: whose soul? Rama shrugs off the gag placed on her by her obligatory physical confinement through an act of writing that symbolically transgresses the bounds of the ritual claustral space prescribed to the widow, and simultaneously appropriates and reinscribes the concept of the *mirasse* for a feminist discourse, a discourse she later pointedly describes as "[t]his commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities" (88)/"Cet ébranlement qui *viole tous les domaines*, révèle et illustre nos capacités" (129, emphasis added; the translation [88] loses the crucial *spatial* metaphor). She announces defiantly, "The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have memories in me to ruminate upon" (8). Rama's recollection of the past is given as a direct effect of her physical confinement ("I cannot help remembering in my forced solitude and seclusion," 26), which is in turn a material function of her status as a woman in Senegalese society, and under Islamic law. Again, Rama's self-positioning with respect to Islam is nuanced and complex: it is precisely from the security of her faith in the "noble words of consolation" (2) and "comforting words" (5/13) offered by the Koran that she feels emboldened to challenge aspects of the gendered social legislation that it authorizes.

This particular scene of writing is, finally, a striking metaphor—and more than *just* a metaphor—for the "limited horizon" of women in

general; a metaphor for the broader "social constraints" (19, 61, 68, 88), "restrictions" (89); "frustrating taboos" (16), and "heavy burden of custom" (19) placed on women's mobility and freedom of expression: "often muzzled [*muselées*], all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed" (88). Rama's confinement is thus a literalization, a visible manifestation of the widespread "social constraints" that hem women in and circumscribe their prospects in a male-dominated society. Bâ herself articulated this protest very clearly on the occasion of receiving the Noma award for *So Long a Letter* in 1980:

[T]his book which has so often been described as a "cry from the heart," this cry is coming from the heart of all women everywhere. It is first a cry from the heart of the Senegalese women, because it talks about the problems of Senegalese women, of Muslim women, of the women with the constraints of religion which weigh on her [sic] as well as other social constraints. But it is also a cry which can symbolize the cry of women everywhere. . . . Thus there is everywhere a cry, everywhere in the world, a women's cry is being uttered. (Harrell-Bond 3, 4)

Rama's act of writing from her forced seclusion—which offers its own image in the climactic and cathartic moment when Rama speaks her mind: "My voice has known thirty years of silence. . . . It bursts out, violent. . . ." (57-58)—is thus an emphatic violation of all the constraints and "domaines" imposed by "male expression" (67). Her voice is "cet ébranlement qui viole tous les domaines" (129).

One material precondition of epistolarity is always space, sheer physical distance. A recent theorist of epistolarity comments further, codifying the co-ordinates of a private, epistolary cartography:

The *I* of epistolary discourses always situates himself [sic] vis-à-vis another; his locus, his "address," is always relative to that of his addressee. To write a letter is to map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual. . . . Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of the writer and addressee: underlying the epistolary dialogue are common memories and often common experiences. . . . (Altman 119)

A less visible antagonist of *So Long a Letter* is what might be described as modern, or industrial space: the space opened up by communications and transport technologies that until very recently in the West still made a modern culture of letters and correspondence, possible and necessary.¹⁹ These are the distances and forces of *spacing*, contemporary with rapid urbanization, that have ruptured and dispersed the agrarian, oral (and, as we shall see, still numinal) space of the traditional African village, encompassed by the range of the voice ("Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would *exchange messages daily*. Our mothers used to argue. . . ." 1; emphasis added).

Much of Rama's letter is engaged in a project of "cognitive mapping": a project to "map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional,

intellectual. . . ." (see Jameson 399-418). A visceral, peripatetic experience of space ("we wore out wrappers and sandals on the same stony road to the koranic school,"¹) is replaced by the more alien, abstract conceptualization of space both evoked and spanned by the letter. The sentimental cosiness of McLuhan's "Global Village," giddily celebrated in the West with the rise of the Internet and the World Wide Web, is for many still a source of greater alienation and disorientation. The annihilation of space in a shrinking world of international capital and communications conversely demands that one situate oneself in an ever more complex and incomprehensible global grid that determines the material bases of one's life. These new distances and networks compose the space of urbanization ("the frenzy of the city," 22), neocolonialism, restlessly expanding and predatory capital, globalization of markets, technology, modernity, and the hegemony of Western culture.

The contrasting character of the modern and secular space Rama inhabits in Dakar and the "numinous" space of the village is best illustrated by Aunt Nabou's return to the traditional and ritually constructed space of her natal village, Diakhao. Aunt Nabou's "retour au pays natal" is both spatial and temporal: the bus carries her "towards the place of her childhood" (27). Her journey from space to space is a journey from time to time, too, tracing a geography of time as well as a topography. The countryside is a space putatively changeless, set in a pastoral, integral time before History—"How many generations has this same unchanging countryside seen glide past! . . . Men and animals blended, as in a picture risen from the very depths of time" (27). Aunt Nabou murmurs to herself, "You have to come away from Dakar to be convinced of the survival of tradition" (27). Finally, arriving in Diakhao, Aunt Nabou sets foot on a ground steeped in history, a space still dense with the presence of the past, the numinousness of the ancestors, the observance of "ancient rites and religion" (trans. modified): "Here, the dead and the living lived together in the family compound" (28).

In contrast to this primordial village space, modern, urban, and transnational space is everywhere registered in Bâ's text. It is a space that writing both needs in order to breathe yet seeks to elide. It is constantly evoked by the presence of taxis, telephones, an infrastructure of roadways (27), radios (3, 52-53), "electricity bills" and "cinema" (51), "the inadequacy of public transport" (53), pollution (73), traffic (78-79), "town planning" (80), and, of course, all forms of writing-culture: the letters themselves (1, 2, 13, 31, 42, 68-69, 71), "love notes, check stubs . . . bills" (42); bank loans, mortgages, and title deeds (10); promissory notes and "bailiff's affidavits" (10); examination papers (72) and diplomas (73), which all saturate the text of the novel. As Mortimer notes, it is this "public space," contrasted with the "domestic space" traditionally reserved for women, over which Rama acquires some measure of control in the latter half of the novel (144). The space of the city, the "friction of distance," is even a silent collaborator in Modou's death: "Mawdo recounts how he [Rama's husband] arrived too late with the ambulance" (2). This is also the global space of foreign policy, trade relations, North/South power

relations, and international diplomacy that takes Aïssatou first to France to continue her education, and then to “the Senegalese Embassy in the United States” (32) to work as an interpreter. It is ultimately the space that separates Rama and Aïssatou. It is thus a space—topographically, between continents; economically, geopolitically, and culturally, between “First” and “Third” worlds; temporally, between past and present—that the text discreetly invokes in order to perpetuate itself. It is a space that makes recourse to writing necessary and makes room for the narrative itinerary of “une si *longue* lettre”; yet it is also a space that the letter perpetually wishes to spirit away. It is the space that occasions and makes possible the writing that wishes it away, wishes it volatilized, and ultimately wishes itself away, too, for the restoration of an oral space “as before” (89).

Given the rapid acceleration of “History” under the time of imperialism and capitalism, the duty of memory is rendered all the more urgent and poignant for a society in which certain modes of subjectivity are threatened with obsolescence—Rama says, “[W]e belong to the past” (73)—modes of subjectivity among whose characteristics might very well have been the obligation to remember itself.²⁰

The therapeutic space that Aïssatou has put between herself and her past, her culture—“the break” (31: in French, “Tu choisis *la rupture*,” 49 emphasis added; see also 77, 107 in the French)—is first felt on a moral and emotional plane as “a wound,” one that Rama’s letter, speaking for both women (19, 55) seeks to suture (“confiding in others allays pain,” 1), yet admits aggravating (“I know that I am shaking you, that I am twisting a knife in a wound hardly healed,” 26]; “Forgive me once again if I have re-opened your wound. Mine continues to bleed,” 55).

Aïssatou’s “rupture” repeats and externalizes a psychological rupture first introduced by the male practice of polygamy and the emotional oppression of women.²¹ She replies to a ruptured society created by the male subject with a defiant counter-rupture. She replies to Mawdo Bâ’s originary “amnesia” with a counter-amnesia, ironically fulfilling the vengeful Auntie Nabou’s prophecy about goldsmiths’ daughters (26): “You did not care about Mawdo . . . the past crushed beneath your heel” (34). This is an amnesia Rama has paradoxically elected to *commemorate*. She replies to an interior, traumatic “division” (*clivage*) with a counter-space, a therapeutic distance that paradoxically sutures her wound, a wound that Rama’s letter, bridging this distance, equally paradoxically re-opens once more (26, 55). Aïssatou transforms a space of alienation first forced on her into a space of triumph by leaving and reconstructing her life abroad. The meaning of this space thus emerges ultimately as profoundly undecidable; at once therapeutic and traumatic, it functions throughout the text as a version of what Derrida has called the *pharmakon*.²²

In a letter whose contents Rama has very significantly *remembered*, Aïssatou writes to her husband:

Princes master their feelings to fulfil their duties. “Others” bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its

absurd divisions [clivages insensés]. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love. I say that there can be no union of bodies without the heart's acceptance. (31; emphasis added)

There is much to remark in this letter. First, it *is* a letter, attesting again to the culture of letters and literacy in which the novel is immersed. Its function here is once more performative since it effectively, at least for the purposes of the narrative we read, revokes the marriage and divorces Aïssatou from her husband, Mawdo Bâ. It assumes its place as an artefact in Rama's larger project of memory: "I remember the exact words" (31). It also takes its place as an exhibit from the battle of the sexes in Rama's (and Mariama Bâ's) broader archeological and emancipatory project: the collection of a common canon of women's stories ("I had heard of too many misfortunes," 41), and the kindling of a new sense of community and affiliation out of this shared history of sufferings. It denounces, finally, the dystopian society of "clivages insensés" ("le pouvoir de *décision*" that remains "aux mains des hommes," 107; emphasis added) which the utopian association of women (see Bâ's own *Soeurs Optimistes*) among the emergent generation hopes to expunge, an "association where there is neither rivalry nor schism [*clivage*]" (74; emphasis added).²³

Polygamy, the origin of Rama's "own crisis" (35) too, functions as the *archè*-rupture, or *archè*-trauma existing between men and women within traditional society. External forces of rupture, penetrating the agrarian and oral space of the "compounds . . . separated by a fence" (1), exacerbate and compound the power differential latent in this originary "clivage." The colonizing technologies of writing and spacing, as well as the alienating and divisive power of capital introduced by economic neocolonialism, graft themselves into the originary traumatic space, that is into the interior division made by men between "heartfelt Love and physical love" (31), a division that profoundly sets men and women at odds. This originary traumatic space of "clivages insensés" that Aïssatou diagnosed as the "internal ordering of our society" (*règlement intérieur de notre société*) finally becomes literalized by Aïssatou's flight. Rama, having subsequently undergone a similar alienation from her own husband, Modou, finally solicits through her letter to Aïssatou, the compensatory affiliation of the *sorority*. This utopian sorority aims at a lack of hierarchy and division, and translates into an activism that promises the suture of the originary psychic trauma: "a healthy militancy whose only reward is *inner* satisfaction" (74; emphasis added).

Insofar as the advent of this urban and cosmopolitan space is coextensive with the advent of colonial education and the irruption of writing-culture, Rama's letter dreams, too, of the end of writing. Her letter projects a time when her "cahier" will no longer be necessary, and dreams—a letter in which dreams are always presented as broken, dead, ill-conceived, or somehow vulgar (1, 16, 40, 66, 84)—of recovering once more, even if only fleetingly, that idyllic (and agrarian, 72) space of intimacy, communion,

and oral exchange: “[Y]ou will be there in reach of my hand, my voice, my eyes” (73). It will be the “utopian” space of friendship and of the shared meal, a temporary remission of the time of the market, a vacation, a “jour de fête” (35) once more: “[W]e will then have time to ourselves, especially as I have obtained an extension of my widow’s leave” (88). And if Rama’s “heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows” (88), it will be a time of double rejoicing: for the return of her friend, and for her own “return” from the shadows: from her confinement, her silence, and her widow’s weeds.

The claim that Rama dreams nostalgically of an end to writing will seem singularly unconvincing about a novel that reflects not only a deep immersion in the technologies of writing- and print-culture, but also valorizes writing-culture in the strongest possible terms. Rama actively promotes a culture of the Book and a fetishization of the commodities of print-culture:

[B]ooks saved you [Aïssatou]. Having become your refuge they sustained you. The power of books, this marvellous invention of astute human intelligence. Various signs associated with sound: different sounds that form the word. Juxtaposition of words from which springs the Idea, Thought, History, Science, Life. Sole instrument of interrelationships and culture, unparalleled means of giving and receiving. Books knit generations together in the same continuing effort that leads to progress. (32)

Here we read an altogether ringing endorsement of Thought, History, Science, Knowledge, the Book: precisely all those sovereign Enlightenment fetishes currently threatened with obsolescence in the postmodern West (Miller 275).

It is now perhaps a commonplace that writing (*écriture*) functions as a *pharmakon* producing effects valorized both positively and negatively, a double writing that inhabits and divides the speaking voice, too. It should not surprise us, then, to find this structure of oscillation and ambivalence reproduced in Mariama Bâ’s novel, a work still troubled by Eurocentric priorities. Thus, among the frequent representations of the powers of language in *So Long a Letter* we discover the ambivalent operations of the *pharmakon*: a power to heal, but also a power to injure. In *So Long a Letter* “noble words of consolation” (2) and “comforting words from the Koran” (5) dispel “words that create around me a new atmosphere in which I move, a stranger and tormented” (2). Letters, above all—the genre that women make their own in this novel—harness this demonic power. Letters by and large prove very detrimental to the health and well-being of the novel’s male figures. Language, the “caressing words” (71) from Aïssatou to Rama, elsewhere composes Rama’s “cruel message” (67) that figuratively “killed a man” (69). This is not, incidentally, the first fatality associated with letters in the novel: the heart that Modou had suppressed or forgotten reasserts itself with a mortal vengeance “while he was dictating a letter” (2). It is additionally worth noting that this last letter silences Modou’s “voice and . . . gift of oratory” (14).

Writing repeats the undecidable meaning of space in this novel. It, too, is an instrument of both communion and separation; it, too, is at once solicited, invoked, eulogized even, yet also a supplement to a full orality, and the intimate time of friendship and presence, when “you will be there in reach of my hand, my voice, my eyes” (73). But lest we too quickly leap to celebrate this “full” orality and the purity of the unmediated voice, we are obliged to note that Rama in fact privileges a *literate* orality, mediated through writing, over an *illiterate* one. One can thus speak of a “good” orality and a “bad” orality: a good orality that is paradoxically thoroughly ventilated by writing and writing-culture, contrasted against what is abjected and marginalized as an uncouth, primitive, and *female* orality, embodied by Farmata, the griote. Thus, to follow the internal logic of Rama’s letter—what Rama says without precisely saying it—only the *sutured* space of a tradition, an orality recovered *via* the colonial trauma and written detour, a tradition first denatured in the colonial “crucible” (24) perversely emerges as an authentic, “civilized” orality.

It would be easy, a little too easy, to attribute the central emphasis given to memory not only in this fictive autobiography, but in other recent writings by Senegalese women to the narrator’s identification with the traditional role of the griote as an oral historian²⁴; within the novel, Rama maintains a tetchy relationship with orality and the older traditions of oral culture. She is careful to measure her distance from the traditional griot. As she works to define a *neo-griotic* role for herself, closer to that of Historian, a logocentric prejudice defined against a “naïve” or primitive orality overlays more traditional caste prejudices.²⁵

The antagonism between orality and literacy surfaces powerfully in the concluding episodes of the novel as an *agon* between the “letter” and the voice (with the attendant traditions subtended by each) embodied respectively by Rama and her griote, Farmata. This “mini-allegory” commences in the closing episodes of the novel with the merciless irony that Farmata, the custodian of oral traditions and customs, is unwittingly used, like Homer’s Bellerophon, as the courier of a “cruel message” (67) to which she is denied access, but whose reception nevertheless “injures” her: “brought a look of sadness to her face” (69). An *agon* ensues between the lore she espouses and the European lore that Rama has adopted. Despite her salutary feminism, and her caste-crossing friendship with Aïssatou, Rama’s own class and caste prejudices reemerge emphatically here in her repeated silencing or repudiation of her griote.

Each encounter between Farmata and Rama seems to involve Rama’s repudiation or denial of Farmata’s predictions as well as the cultural heritage she espouses. It is striking that Daouda Dieng’s face is for Rama “an open book . . . easily interpreted” (66), while the interpretation of the griote’s cowries remains a mystery to her, whereas conversely, for Farmata, Dieng’s anguished face on receipt of the “cruel message” is a *voice*: “His crestfallen face cried [*criait*] it out to me” (69).

After the Dieng episode Rama avers, “The truth of this woman, a childhood companion... could not hold good for me” (70). Further on she affirms, “[W]e had diverging points of view on everything” (80). What is

particularly striking about all these moments is that Rama, who as narrator clearly controls the podium, confides these reflections to Aïssatou (and to us "literate"), but never clarifies her position or rationale to Farmata. Farmata is deliberately kept in those "shadows" from which Rama is typically glad to see "a woman emerge" (88).

Farmata is thus consistently associated with a degraded orality that embraces gossip and superstition: "public rumour" (80), "gossipy cowries [*cauris bavards*]" (81). Rama regards their gossipy orality with a lofty detachment, "I followed their language indifferently" (81). On this occasion, however, her hubris is her undoing. The griote's intuitions and folk wisdom here triumph in divining young Aïssatou's pregnancy and for once Rama is silenced: "I was dumbfounded. I, so prone to chide, was silent . . . I gnawed at my tongue" (81). Farmata's victory is brief, however. Rama has the final and protracted satisfaction of once more repudiating the griot woman and stupifying her with her subsequent course of action. She appears to revel in thwarting the griot's powers of divination by remaining inscrutable and unintelligible herself:

Farmata was astonished. She expected wailing: I smiled. She wanted strong reprimands: I consoled. She wished for threats: I forgave. No doubt about it: she will never know what to expect from me. To give a sinner so much attention was beyond her. (83-84)

The antagonism between orality and literacy does not end here however. It is not simply a contest between speech and writing although these instrumentalities feature prominently. What emerges is a contest between a "lettered" voice and an unlettered one, as well as a contest between an educated "aristocratic" orality and a "caste" orality. Rama elsewhere reclaims as a "good" orality that associated with the aristocrat, Aunt Nabou (XI). Although Aunt Nabou is the "villain" responsible for secretly plotting Aïssatou's undoing (20, 25), she is, as I noted earlier, favorably represented in contrast to Farmata, or to the *arriviste* Lady Mother-in-Law and her hapless and exploited daughter, Binetou. And what especially redeems her in Rama's sight is her proud embodiment of ancestral memory, and her strong grip on the "virtues and greatness of a race" (47), preserved and reproduced in her "oral education." Elsewhere too, we have seen Rama's own "lettered" orality strongly rehabilitated. Rama's momentous reclamation of her own voice constitutes one of the most dramatic assertions of independence and empowerment in the novel. It is not merely the condition of possibility for the narrative we read, it is a voice that carries beyond the frame of the novel to become the bold voice of an emergent women's literature in Africa.

What finally makes *So Long a Letter* a fully historical novel is its reflection and preservation within its narrative, of all these contradictory and disjunctive slices (*tranches*, with all the trauma implicit in that term) within recent African history. Within its complex, not to say tortuous, negotiations with the total field of competing, conflicting, and often contradictory values and allegiances—African, Western, Islamic, colonial, postcolonial, feminist, ethnic, regional, national, universal humanist, modernist, and

postmodern—that comprise the hybrid space of contemporary African culture, it bears witness to the Passion of modern African history. The novel offers no comfortable synthesis of these tensions, but rather a persistent, restless motion and negotiation, emblemized finally in the *dialogue* between African and Western customs that Rama and Aïssatou—the “Interpreter” (32)—will resume, in the continuing search for a way forward: “I would so much like to hear you check or encourage my eagerness, just as before, and, as before, to see you take part in the search for a new way” (89). Rama’s long *via dolorosa* promises to become a passage to hope once more.

NOTES

1. I wish throughout to evoke the *dual* valence of space as encompassing both physical and temporal spaces. In this respect I am seeking to foreground some of the more occulted aspects of this text. Jacques Derrida reminds us, “*Spacing* (notice that this word speaks the articulation of space and time, the becoming-space of time and the becoming-time of space) is always the unperceived, the nonpresent and the non-conscious” (*Of Grammatology* 68).
2. I allude here to anticolonial literature that tends simply to reproduce negatively the crudities of the “colonial mentality” that Abdul JanMohamed, following Fanon’s famous remark that “[t]he colonial world is a Manichean world,” argues is “dominated by a manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object” (4). These terms yield a compelling and persuasive mythography of colonialism and, as Fanon makes clear in his essay “Concerning Violence” (*The Wretched of the Earth*) are certainly indispensable to any insurgent, anti-colonial rhetoric; however, they provide a far from adequate reflection of colonial realities, where such satisfying allegories are blurry, and the boundaries of power, collaboration, and powerlessness more complicated and compromised.
3. Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*, trans. Modupé Bodé-Thomas. All quotations are from this edition. The novel was originally published in French in 1976 by Nouvelles Editions Africaines. Page references are to the English translation. I shall only cite the French at those points where stylistic nuances lost in translation are important to my reading.

For a discussion of Rama’s vestigial Eurocentric preferences, especially “Thought, History, Science” (32) in their hegemonic, upper-case forms, see Miller.

4. For a critique of Western critical discourses that homogenize Third World women as common victims of a universal patriarchy without regard to these other factors, see Mohanty; Spivak.
 5. In a high-school essay, Mariama Bâ’s first published work, the phrases “je me souviens” and “je me revois” recur with an incantatory regularity (Richard-Molard 224-26). I am indebted to János Riesz’s essay for this invaluable reference.
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6. Nafissatou Diallo, justifying her own autobiography, reflects this rapid historical acceleration: "Senegal has changed in a generation. Perhaps it is worth reminding today's youngsters what we were like when we were their age" ("Foreword").
7. Fredric Jameson suggests that modernism is generally recognized by a "thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation and isolation" and alludes to "the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *durée* and memory" (11, 16). Edward Said has argued that modernism is also characterized by the search for new bases of *affiliation* as older forms of *filiation* lapse (16-24). Anderson's recent study of the emergence of nationalist affiliations, distinguishing religious, dynastic, and nationalist communities divides the historical cake somewhat differently again (see ch. 2).
 Mariama Bâ acknowledges her novel as "a cry which can symbolize the cry of women everywhere" in her acceptance address for the Noma award in 1980 (Harrell-Bond 3). Her claim for the representativity of the novel is important for appreciating its larger social and emancipatory motives.
8. Miller identifies Dadié's 1959 epistolary journal, *Un nègre à Paris*, as an important precursor (278). Bâ's novel should be regarded as both a reply to that "lettre" and a postcolonial and feminist rejoinder written back to the metropolis.
9. Mbye Cham writes, "The heroines of *Une si longue lettre*—Rama, Aïssatou, Jacqueline—are a living testimony to the positive transformative capabilities of a negative experience born of the problem of abandonment" (91). Miller allows us to identify this vocation with Bâ's own when he describes her as "the founder of a tradition that is to come" (271).
10. For an extended meditation on the performative in the construction of notions of community and nationhood, see Bhabha, "Dissemi-Nation" (*Nation and Narration* 287-325).
11. Miller explores the way *So Long a Letter* so palpably violates the conventions of the epistolary novel (see ch. 6). The fact that *Une si longue lettre* bears all the formal marks of the letter yet always holds in reserve its destination and its addressee is perhaps the most obvious of these formal deviations.
12. Mildred Mortimer is correct to point out that their stories diverge in one obvious respect: their response to polygamy (see ch. 5).
13. It is worth noting that Mariama Bâ was herself affiliated with a women's association called "Les Soeurs Optimistes Internationales" (Harrell-Bond 11).
14. David Harvey points to the source of this progressive amnesia, a sort of cultural Alzheimer's, when he notes that "the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life" with the effect that "space appears to shrink to a 'global village' of telecommunications . . . and . . . time horizons shorten to the point where the present is all there is . . ." (240).
15. Mariama Bâ in her interview adds a complication to this dialectic of memory and forgetting when she comments wryly on male expectations from marriage: "He has inherited a certain vision of marriage from his father These include the pattern of conduct for the husband, the way to treat a wife, the children etc. . . . So he comes to marriage with that kind of education in his head. She is the one who must cook, who must wash his clothes, who must do all things for him. He comes this way because he has been taught. If today he

- wants his wife to be happy, he has to *forget what he has been taught*" (Harrell-Bond 9; emphasis in original).
16. Compare Rama with a description of the widow, Daba, in Catherine N'Diaye's lively cultural commentary on modern Senegal (138).
 17. I suggest "exile" because it allows us to appreciate that Rama acquires a compensatory distance on her circumstances: what Edward Said calls "the executive value of exile" (8). Rama signals this in the opening episode when she alludes to her existential sensation of being "a stranger [*étrangère*]" (2/9) following her husband's death.
 18. Mbye Cham offers an excellent commentary on Bâ's adaptation and extension of the notion of *mirasse* "to provide Rama with the structural and, indeed, cultural framework within which to undertake a comprehensive exposition. . . . *Mirasse*, therefore, becomes the principle that legitimizes and regulates Rama's act of systematic personal revelation" (91-92).
 19. This is not quite the disjunctive "hyperspace" of postmodernism theorized by Jameson in *Postmodernism*, but would clearly be contiguous with it, as marking one of the many "Third World" peripheries of global late capitalism. (As yet, there is no consensus about the identifiable existence of a distinct "postmodern space"; see the skepticism voiced in Marden 41-57. There is no question that the modernist and urban space of contemporary Dakar is a function of its incorporation into the global markets of late capitalism that have given rise to the putative postmodern space in the "developed" world of the G-7 nations. The kind of space that characterizes the Dakar of recent Senegalese literature seems still to be predominantly "modernist," more akin to the urban spaces of early and mid-twentieth-century Europe. N'Diaye, reflecting "sombrement sur la laideur urbaine" 'somerly on urban ugliness,' finds in Dakar "tous les rebuts de l'Occident" 'all the detritus of the West' (142; my trans.). And among these "rebutis" one might be inclined to include modernist space itself.
- The communications technologies and culture of letters that I am describing are similarly those that characterized the age of industrialism in the West and that currently, in an age of intercontinental air traffic, international telecommunications, computer technology, and FAX machines, seem on the point of extinction.
20. The destruction of colonial space and toponyms and the fabrication of a post-colonial space are concisely figured in the opening moments of Diallo's autobiography where she writes, "I was born in Tilène on 11 March 1941 in the area known as the 'Guards' Camp'. Don't try to find this camp; it is now the Iba Diop Stadium" (1).
 21. In a phrase that helpfully magnifies the political and sociospatial contents of confinement that I've been evoking, Ojo-Ade describes Rama's letters as "a reflection of life in a psychological ghetto of mental torture and social disorder" (73).
 22. The *locus classicus* (if one can call it that!) of this pharmaceutical oscillation is of course Derrida's essay on Plato's pharmacy (in *Dissemination*).
 23. Bâ, identifying particularly the temporal rhythms of global capitalism, offers a sobering adjunct to any utopian ambition to restore an idyllic rural past of "jours de fête" in her interview with Barbara Harrell-Bond. Harrell-Bond asks, "Are these associations [such as the Soeurs Optimistes] providing women with some of the solidarity which African women in rural society enjoyed?" Bâ responds: "No, not really. In traditional society, we gathered for instruction, to

- see one another, to kill time. We left our domestic work, our cooking behind and got together for pleasure. Often we met to eat, to have fun, to dance, to tell stories [Rama's days at Sangalkam (23) come immediately to mind]. . . . We consult together more now. We do not have time. We do not have the right to waste time if we are going to bring something better to African women" (11).
24. See for example Diallo: "That year of idleness was marked by numerous little events that I can recall exactly: baptisms, deaths, marriages. These events still serve to unite scattered members of families. And I act as the collective memory [*mémoire collective*] of past gatherings for my whole family" (4-5).
- Bugul's *Le baobab fou* (1984), translated as *The Abandoned Baobab* (1991), is similarly epigraphed "The obliterated shall be remembered," and elsewhere "Ken Bugul remembers" (23). In Bugul's more disillusioned autobiography, however, desperately resisting neocolonial European transferences, and lamenting a profound severance from traditional and familial ties, rather than offering a redemptive history, memory is more complexly positioned and more distressingly isolated from any sense of collectivity.
25. See Miller's comprehensive analysis of the status of the griot in Senegalese and Mandé society at large (chs. 3, 6). The suggestion here that there are competing notions of orality (Western and non-Western, for want of a better distinction), might serve to complicate the hypothesis of a single logophonocentrism. In *So Long a Letter* one glimpses an allegiance to a phonocentric orality that logocentric discourse has liked to masquerade as, while a more "primitive," indigenous concept of orality is abjected as "uncouth." It becomes necessary to think the distinction between a Western, phonocentric orality and a non-Western orality that Rama pejoratively associates with "the bog of tradition, superstition and custom" (15).

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