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Abstract

In her 2009 Goncourt-Prize-winning novel, *Trois femmes puissantes* (*Three Strong Women*), Marie Ndiaye experiments with a polyphonic, semi-fantastical rendering of identity-threatening displacements experienced by three women from different socio-geographic backgrounds. In a brief "Counterpoint" at the end of each of the novel's three sections—a narrative take on the musical technique employed by Ndiaye to introduce new focalizations and unexpected turns of events that complicate interpretations of the characters' behavior—each of the women is perceived as metamorphosed into a bird or a birdlike persona. This essay examines the innovative embedding of the shape-shifts in *Trois femmes puissantes* in both harrowing socio-political realities and the ambiguities of the fantastic and superstition to convey the dehumanizing, unequal power relations governing contemporary women's migration struggles.

Keywords

Marie Ndiaye, literary fantastic, women and migration, race and identity

Migration and Metamorphosis in Marie Ndiaye's *Trois femmes puissantes*

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In her 2009 Goncourt Prize-winning novel, *Trois Femmes puissantes* (*Three Strong Women*), Marie Ndiaye experiments with a polyphonic rendering of identity-threatening displacements experienced by three migratory women from diverse socio-geographic backgrounds. Their experiences of dispossession, elucidated by means of an innovative use of the literary fantastic, are reflective of the traumatically dehumanizing, unequal power relations governing contemporary women's migration struggles.¹ In a brief "Counterpoint" at the end of each section of the novel—a narrative take on the musical technique employed by Ndiaye to introduce new focalizations and unexpected turns of events that complicate interpretations of the characters' behavior—each of the women is perceived as metamorphosed into a bird or a birdlike persona. Avian imagery figures prominently throughout the novel. Birds signal a potential for liberation, but are also troublingly emblematic of both human predators and human prey. This essay examines the socio-political thrust of Ndiaye's mobilization of human-bird metamorphoses in her representations of women's migratory experiences. Ndiaye's novel effects the kind of "overlap" observed by Anne Whitehead between trauma novels "testing formal boundaries ... to foreground the nature and limitations of narrative and to convey the damaging and distorting impact of the traumatic event" and the politically driven agenda of postcolonial fictions intended to "rescue previously overlooked histories and to bring hitherto marginalised or silenced stories to public consciousness" (Whitehead 82). The shape-shifts in *Trois femmes puissantes*, inventively rooted in both harrowing socio-political realities and the ambiguities of the fantastic and superstition, powerfully personalize the increasing feminization that characterizes contemporary migratory movements.²

The migrations in *Trois femmes* range in direction from North to South and South to North. They vary in motivation from voluntary relocation to enforced exile and in scope of impetus from familial calamities to human trafficking. In the first of the three stories that constitute the novel, the central figure, Norah, is a Parisian lawyer. The daughter of a white French mother and a Senegalese father who long ago abducted her young brother to Africa while abandoning his impoverished wife and two daughters in France, she is summoned to Dakar to undo the consequences of an even more appalling paternal crime. In the second story, Fanta, a professor in her native Senegal, is isolated in the south of France as a consequence of her white French husband's nearly homicidal brawl with his students at the Dakar high school where they had both been teaching. In the third episode, Khady Demba, a childless, young Senegalese widow who is a

distant cousin by marriage to Fanta and was at one time Norah's father's cook, is forced by her late husband's family to join the throng of sub-Saharan Africans attempting clandestine emigration to Europe. Ndiaye conceived *Trois femmes* as a polyphonic novel where the divergent voices are connected by a recurring theme (Rousseau). The novel's overarching theme, "Nous n'avons pas le même pays, les sociétés sont différentes" (21) 'We don't live in the same country, societies are very different' (12), is presented early in the first episode. At the beginning of her sojourn in Dakar, Norah's musings forecast the broader socio-economic impasse the three women will confront when she imagines the kind of dismissive retort her Senegalese father would likely use to stifle any expression of concern on her part about his oppressive treatment of his servants:

Une telle réflexion, il ne pourrait pas la comprendre et, se disait-elle ... il la mettrait au compte d'une sensiblerie typique et de son sexe et du monde dans lequel elle vivait et dont la culture n'était pas la sienne. (21)

Any such consideration would have been incomprehensible to him ... he would put it down to the sentimentality that characterized her sex, the world she inhabited, and a culture he didn't share. (12)

The alignment of the three distinct stories of traumatic migration as "movements" of a larger composition broadens their thematic scope and highlights the relatedness of the three women's experiences even though their means to respond to potentially shattering encounters with racial and gender discrimination and to construct resilient identities are radically different.

Norah

Ndiaye's fiction since the publication of her 1991 novel, *En famille* (*Among Family*), has been memorably populated by female protagonists whose "étrangeté," to adopt Ndiaye's term for a gamut of cultural alienations, is underscored by an innovative use of the literary fantastic. The author's personal history as a dark-skinned *métisse* 'of mixed race' in France, the daughter of a white French mother and of a distant and distanced Senegalese father, has left substantial traces in her work. *En famille*, according to the author, marked a conscious culmination of long years of questioning her origins and geographical identity:

... de quel pays suis-je? Est-ce que tout pays n'est pas pour moi un pays étranger?

Ces interrogations ... suscitées par des particularités de ma biographie...ont provoqué dès mon enfance un état de malaise constant, ou plutôt une perpétuelle sensation de déplacement, telle qu'il me semblait

que je ne me sentirais jamais nulle part chez moi et que nulle part non plus on ne me considèrerait comme une compatriote. (Ndiaye Préface 65)

... to what country do I belong? Is not every country a foreign one for me? These questions ... prompted by the distinctive features of my biography ... have provoked since my childhood a constant state of uneasiness or rather a perpetual sense of displacement, such that it seemed to me that I would never feel at home anywhere and that nowhere would I be considered a compatriot.

She returns to these questions some twenty years later in Norah's story, albeit within a more comprehensive geo-social framework and from a more direct and far less ironic perspective on her protagonist's struggle with gender and racial othering than in *En famille*. In an explanation of the title, *Trois femmes puissantes*, which is far from self-evident given the three protagonists' circumstances, she noted that she wanted to keep the reader focused on their capacity to maintain dignity and a degree of independence in the face of relentless humiliation and malice ("La discrète empathie" 28-29).

The first episode, narrated in Ndiaye's characteristic highly literary and visual style, is focalized through the perspective of Norah up until the "Counterpoint." It opens with Norah standing at the threshold of her father's house in Dakar. She is disconcerted by the sudden appearance of her withered, birdlike father who seems to have emerged from a poinciana tree: "Elle fut certain ... que la douce senteur fétide qu'elle avait remarquée sur le seuil venait à la fois du flamboyant et du corps de son père car l'homme tout entier baignait dans la lente corruption des fleurs jaune orangé" (20) 'She now felt certain that the sweet fetid smell that she'd noticed at the threshold came both from the poinciana and from her father's body; in fact his whole person seemed steeped in the slow putrefaction of the yellowy-orange flowers' (11). In response to her father's highly unusual summons to Senegal, she has left behind her young daughter, her law practice, and the protective shield of her modest Paris apartment whose difficult acquisition had been driven by "le désir spirituel d'en finir avec la confusion dont son père ... avait été sa vie durant l'angoissante incarnation" (30) 'her spiritual longing to put an end to the lifelong confusion of which her ... father ... had been the agonizing incarnation' (21). Norah arrives expecting to find in her father the contemptuous, physically prepossessing, successful businessman she remembers from rare, long ago trips to see him in Senegal after his desertion of his wife and young daughters in Paris and the abduction of his son, Sony. She is met instead by an unkempt figure whom, in an association to past experiences of the paternal bigotry that has deformed familial relations, she likens to an enfeebled bird of prey. Norah and her sister, mirroring the experiences of the two daughters in Ndiaye's play, *Papa doit manger* ('Daddy

Must Eat'), have been subject since childhood to their father's traumatizing denigration of their gender and physical appearance. Although he is fiercely proud of his son's black skin, he sees in his daughters only the result of a disappointing miscegenation: "Le défaut rédhibitoire d'être trop typées ... de lui ressembler davantage qu'à leur mère, témoignant ainsi fâcheusement de l'inanité de son mariage avec une Française" (26) 'the irremediable defect of being too much like him, that is quite unlike their mother, and attesting to the pointlessness of his marriage to a Frenchwoman' (17).

Norah wears "une robe vert tilleul ... semée de petites fleurs jaunes assez semblables à celles qui jonchaient le seuil tombées du flamboyant" (14) 'a lime-green dress covered with little yellow flowers rather like those strewn over the doorstep under the poinciana' (5). When her father's flip-flops crush the small yellow poinciana flowers that have fallen from his neck and shoulders, Norah has the impression that he is trampling on her dress. The dress initially represents for Norah the controlled organization of her life in France as opposed to a dysfunctional foreign social order that is epitomized by her father's house:

lorsque Norah enleva sa robe ce soir-là elle mit un soin particulier à l'étendre sur le lit de Sony afin que les fleurs jaunes semées avec un très léger relief sur le coton vert demeurent intactes et fraîches à l'œil ne ressemblent en rien aux fleurs gâtées du flamboyant dont son père transportait l'odeur coupable et triste. (37)

when she removed her dress to go to sleep she took particular care to spread it out on Sony's bed so that the yellow flowers embroidered on the green cotton cloth remained fresh and distinct to the eye and bore no resemblance to the poinciana's wilting flowers and the guilty, sad smell left in her father's wake. (27)

As the story develops, the match between the pattern in the fabric of the dress and the flowers of the poinciana tree takes on a phantasmagoric quality suggesting a return of the repressed that ultimately creates a breach in her resolute resistance to an African identity and links Norah and her father in their birdlike transmogrifications. Norah learns to her horror that she has been called to Dakar because her father needs her to serve as a lawyer for Sony, who has been jailed in the Reubeuss prison for the murder of his father's young new wife. The news of Sony's imprisonment reinforces the indelible traumatic imprint made by her childhood experience of finding her father's letter announcing his departure with her brother for Dakar and seeing the room she shared with Sony emptied of his clothes and toys. The revelation retriggers for Norah the pain, undiminished by time, the memory of herself as an eight-year old child "sidérée de constater que ce qui avait été accompli, que ce qui était souffert serait accompli et souffert pour

toujours et que, cette heure terrible, plus rien ne pourrait faire qu'elle n'eût pas eu lieu" (47) 'staggered by the realization ...of the huge suffering already inflicted and certain to go on being inflicted, and of the fact that nothing could undo the terrible thing that had occurred' (37).

Norah reels between Africa and France, loyalty to Sony, whom she had long ago promised to protect, and revulsion at staying to mount a defense for a criminal act against a woman, the kind of crime she would be prosecuting in Paris. Eventually she learns that he pleaded guilty to a murder committed by their father. As Norah resolves to remain in Africa to defend her brother, she loses the safety net of her meticulously constructed Western professional and maternal identity. Ndiaye's fiction, as Michael Sherringham observes, "fait coexister des modes de compréhension très différents—le réel et le fabuleux (ou le fantastique), la science et le folklore (ou la superstition), l'euro péen et le non-euro péen" (Sherringham 175) 'makes very different modes of understanding coexist—the real and the fabulous (or the fantastic), science and folklore (or superstition), the European and the non-European.' Norah's experience of the coexistence of the real and the fantastic intensifies the haunting grip of her traumatic past as she struggles to come to grips with the harrowing circumstances of the present. Her reactions when she visits the incarcerated Sony at Reubeuss introduce an element of stark social realism into the novel in the graphic depictions seen through Norah's eyes of corruption, starvation, filth, and disease at Dakar's infamous prison.³ At the same time, her recurring attributions of the calamities that beset her family to a "demon ... assis sur le ventre" 'a demon ... seated on the stomach' of its vulnerable members are indicative of a slippage into a psychological state that is increasingly permeated by superstition and the fantastic (my translation).⁴ Indeed, the very rational defensive strategies she had constructed to escape her messy parental legacies had already begun to fail her in France. In a reverse replication of her parents' relationship, she had uncharacteristically allowed a disorganized, freeloading and very blond German named Jakob, and his daughter, to invade the protective cocoon of her orderly Paris apartment, "car terrible était le pouvoir d'enchantement de Jakob et sa fille" (35) 'such was the terrible power of enchantment wielded by Jakob and his daughter' (26). Norah has abandoned her young daughter to Jakob's questionable care in order to make the voyage to Dakar. On her way to the Reubeuss prison, she glimpses Jakob with her daughter and his own child improbably seated on the terrace of a Dakar hotel. Her relief upon returning to find the terrace empty is quickly dispelled when she sees the silhouette of a large bird "au plumage clair, au vol lourd et malaisé, qui abattit soudain sur la terrasse le froid d'une ombre excessive, anormale" (66) 'with pale feathers outlined against the sky. It flapped its wings heavily and clumsily, casting over the terrace a huge, cold, unnatural shadow' (55). The startling, semi-fantastical, fair-feathered bird portending Jakob's actual physical presence in

Dakar perturbs her numbness to the full scope of the complications of her hybrid identity.

Introducing a device effectively used to trouble assumptions about familial relationships in her earlier works, Ndiaye further obscures the boundaries between the real and the fantastic in the complex construction of Norah's identity by mobilizing an equivocal photographic image. Norah's father confronts her with a blurry photo of a young woman in a yellow-flowered, lime-green dress standing before a house in a Dakar neighborhood in order to substantiate his claim that she had lived in Africa as a young adult, having come there, he maintains, "pour te rapprocher de moi" (85) 'in order to get closer to me' (79). Although she adamantly positions herself as a stranger, insisting against growing contrary evidence that the woman in the photo is her sister and that she has only rarely visited Dakar, her daughter and Jakob recognize her in the picture. Shirley Jordan's description of the "énigmes photographiques" ("photographic puzzles") in Ndiaye's *En famille* and *Autoportrait en vert* ('Self-Portrait in Green') is pertinent to *Trois femmes* as well: "Déroutant, instable, la photographie chez elle ne fait plus office de preuve; on ne peut plus y croire" (Jordan 69) 'Disconcerting, unstable, photography in Ndiaye's work no longer offers proof; it can no longer be believed.' As Jordan further observes, this is disconcerting to protagonist and reader alike. It becomes increasingly unclear to Norah and to the reader whether her denial of the hazy photographic evidence corresponds to repression of psychic trauma or to factual countering of her father's manipulations. Ultimately, having acknowledged to herself that the dress in the photo had been made for her from a fabric she had personally selected, Norah consents to her African roots "humblement, déraisonnablement comme à un mystère" (92) 'humbly, without reason, as a mystery' (79). At the end of the story, she has moved into the house depicted in the photo. Willing to admit that she might have lived there a decade or so ago because acceptance is less draining than her anxious, angry denial, she experiences an uncharacteristic serenity: "son corps tout entier était au repos et son esprit était au repos pareillement" (88) 'her whole body was at peace and her mind was equally calm' (75). Whether the change is due to the actual unleashing of a repressed memory, weariness with her struggle to construct an unfringeable French identity in opposition to her father, or, in reaction to her increasing sensation of being "coincée" 'stuck' in Paris, an unexpected cathartic resonance with her current African surroundings is never made clear (40).

Ndiaye holds that a certain imprecision enhances the impact of fiction: "il me semble qu'on revient d'autant plus souvent vers un livre... lorsqu'il reste après lecture une certaine incompréhension.... Et puis en écrivant j'ai moi aussi l'impression de ne pas avoir toutes les réponses" (Kapriélian) 'it seems to me that one returns all the more often to a book...when after the reading there is some lack of understanding....Moreover, when writing, I also have an impression of not

having all the answers.' Norah's unaccustomed calm and optimism that, once she has freed Sony from prison, she will recover the affection and deep sense of responsibility for her young daughter that have inexplicably diminished upon her arrival at her father's house suggest that acceptance of African roots has occasioned a liberating coming to terms with her troubled paternal heritage and allowed her to renegotiate a hybrid identity on her own terms.⁵ This interpretation is complicated, however, by the "Counterpoint," which is focalized through the perspective of the father, not Norah. In the "Counterpoint," a bird-like Norah has joined her father in the poinciana tree:

perchée parmi les branches défleuries dans l'odeur sure des petites feuilles, elle était là, sombre dans sa robe vert tilleul, à distance prudente de la phosphorescence de son père, et pourquoi serait-elle venue se nicher dans le flamboyant si ce n'était pour établir une concorde définitive? (93-94)

perched among the branches now bereft of flowers, surrounded by the bitter smell of the tiny leaves; she was there in the dark, in her lime-green dress, at a safe distance from her father's phosphorescence. Why would she come and alight on the poinciana if it wasn't to make peace, once and for all? (80)

Although Norah's birdlike transmogrification can be read as wishful thinking on the part of the unrepentantly exploitative and cruelly Afro-centric father, it leaves the reader, like Norah, unsettled, hovering over unresolved dilemmas posed by hybridized cultural identities and the "monstrueuse pensée" 'monstrous thought' that torments her early in the story: "Et si, en accourant chez son père, elle avait choisi sans le savoir entre deux camps, deux formes de vie possibles pour elle mais dont l'une excluait l'autre fatalement, entre deux attachements féroce ment jaloux l'un de l'autre" (92) 'And what if, in hastening to her father's side, she'd unwittingly chosen between two camps, two possible ways of life, the one inevitably excluding the other, and between two forms of commitment fiercely jealous of each other?' (32). Norah's perceived shape-shift perturbs the reader's empathy for a character who, albeit perhaps only temporarily and with the justification of both loyalty to Sony and traumatic psychic scarring, has left her daughter in Paris and disengaged herself from her parental responsibilities like her father before her. Ndiaye thus leaves open the question of the extent to which Norah's migratory circumstances can lend themselves to the forging of an empowering "branchement" 'connection,' to adopt Jean-Loup Amselle's metaphor for syncretic identities (7).⁶

Fanta

In *Fictions contemporaines au féminin* ('Contemporary Women's Fiction'), Colette Sarrey-Strack proposes that to create a place for oneself in any culture, "il importe ...de posséder soi-même une identité culturelle forte, ou de pouvoir s'identifier à la culture existante, et en retour, être accepté et reconnu par elle" (83) 'What matters is to possess one's own strong cultural identity, or to be able to identify oneself with the existing culture, and in return, be accepted and acknowledged by it.' The second section of the novel, Fanta's story, bears witness to the immense difficulty of such a negotiation, particularly when gender and racial bias are further complicated by prejudicial immigration policy. Fanta's character is created indirectly through the grudgingly regretful ruminations of her white French husband, Rudy Ducas, whose words: "Tu peux retourner d'où tu viens" (109) 'You can go back where you came from' (94), hurled in anger at his Senegalese wife during a quarrel, pick up the motif from the first episode: "Nous n'avons pas le même pays" (21) 'We don't live in the same country' (12). Until the "Counterpoint," Fanta remains an absent reference point. She exists only through the dissembling brooding of Rudy. Having deceived Fanta about her prospects in France after he is fired from his post at a Dakar high school for his overdetermined bellicosity in response to racially motivated antagonism on the part of some of his students, Rudy has effectively exiled her to an isolated, rundown house in his native Dordogne where he sourly ekes out a substandard living as a salesman. Rudy is haunted by the traumatic childhood event of his French father committing suicide in the Reubeuss prison where he was imprisoned for the brutal murder, perhaps witnessed by his young son, of his Senegalese business partner. The episode is structured around Fanta's personally costly part in Rudy's belated recognition of the role this event has played in his Oedipally-charged social breakdowns, first in Dakar and then in France.

Fanta's invisibility reflects Rudy's inability to really see her outside the parameters of his stereotypical fantasy of what would constitute a black African woman's success story. It also captures her individual loss of social value and the widely-shared émigré experience of being plunged into affective, intellectual and material deprivation by immigration policies that deny her meaningful employment as a professor in France. The guilt-laden residue of Rudy's most recent quarrel with Fanta unleashes on his part a troubled anamnesis that Ndiaye exploits to trace his unacknowledged and, to a considerable extent, unwitting involvement in a racist French colonial and postcolonial history. Ndiaye also makes use of his musings to encourage the reader to extrapolate from Rudy's internal monologue an image of Fanta that stubbornly resists the kind of patronizing admiration that defines her husband's ruminations. Rudy represents what Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley describe as "the other side of a politics of

recognition”: “the tolerant gaze assumes the power to set limits, thresholds, modes through which the racialized presences are recognized, contingently, as ‘desirable’ or ‘not that desirable’” (31). That Fanta’s confidence and academic achievements, given her family’s low socio-economic status in Dakar, border on the miraculous from Rudy’s particular French perspective sets up an effective conduit to a fantastical metamorphosis of Fanta into a *buse* ‘buzzard.’ Persuaded that he is being pursued by a menacing bird that attacks him throughout the day, Rudy experiences each aggression as a supernatural punishment inflicted by his transmogrified wife. The pursuit by the powerful raptor he links to Fanta suggests a guilty projection on Rudy’s part that assigns to the unhappy Fanta the vengeful role of the Greek Furies, guardians against ethical crimes and protectors of strangers. His young son also sees the bird, however, in the kind of realistic intrusion into the fantastic in Ndiaye’s work that complicates the reader’s assumption that apparently hallucinatory events and responses are the troubled workings of an individual psyche. At the end of the second chapter, Rudy, who is both terrified of the furious bird he identifies with his wife and obsessed throughout the story with fear that Fanta will flee, runs over with his dilapidated old car that has come to signify his multiple professional and spousal failures “quelque masse indistincte qui n’avait pas lieu de se trouver là” (244) ‘an indistinct lump of something that had no reason to be there’ (224). His son identifies the crushed object as a bird.

In the “Counterpoint,” which is focalized through the perspective of a solitary neighbor woman whom Rudy habitually treats with contempt, a birdlike Fanta appears waving toward the neighbor in what can be construed as a nascent gesture of feminine solidarity:

le long cou et la petite tête délicate de sa voisine ... paraissaient surgir du laurier comme une branche miraculeuse, un improbable surgeon pourvu d’yeux grands ouverts sur le jardin de Pulmaire et d’une bouche fendue en un calme et large sourire....Elle salua Pulmaire, doucement, avec intention et volonté, elle la salua. (245)

her neighbor’s long neck and small delicate head that seemed to emerge from the bay tree like a miraculous branch, an unlikely sucker looking at Madame Pulmaire’s garden with big wide eyes and lips parted in a big, calm smile....She waved to Madame Pulmaire, she waved to her slowly, deliberately, purposefully. (225)

Contextualized as a contemporary feminist fusion of Western and African myths and mythological figures, Fanta’s ostensible metamorphosis symbolizes the potential for an empowering transformation. (*Buse* is a feminine noun in French, making the choice of that particular bird of prey richly emblematic.) The

multifarious associations conjured by the shifts from a menacing, to a fallen, and finally to a reincarnated bird evoke not only the Furies but also the self-regenerating phoenix of Egyptian and Greek mythology and the spirit's capacity for survival and vengeance in African animism.⁷ Although Fanta is trapped for the moment in a geo-social trough exacerbated by racial and gender chauvinism, Ndiaye appears to suggest by means of the multicultural connotations of Fanta's perceived shape-shifts that she may be better poised to recover her independence and resist the consequences of the enforced uprooting from Dakar than Rudy. At the same time, however, just as in Norah's story, the shape-shifts keep in play troubling geo-social issues. In light of the persistence of immigration policies that leave Fanta isolated and vulnerable in France by denying her meaningful work, her story may also be read as representative of the fate of well qualified migratory women who, as Laurence Roulleau-Berger observes in *Migrer au féminin* ('Women's Migration'), "sont souvent contraintes de vivre des mobilités descendantes en France ... contraintes de faire un deuil des aspirations passées et celles à venir" (92-93) 'are often limited to an experience of downward mobility in France ... forced to mourn their past and future aspirations.'

Khady Demba

When Khady Demba's mother-in-law puts her in the hands of a human trafficker, she tells her to find the presumably rich Fanta in France and to send back money, a grim reference to the widespread and all too often fatal illusions propelling contemporary migratory movements. The theme of "Nous n'avons pas le meme pays" develops in a crescendo of psychological and physical violence in the final episode where Khady is delivered to the abuses inflicted on undocumented aspiring emigrants to Europe. The horrible trajectory of Khady's fictional saga reflects Ndiaye's careful attention to testimonial documents collected by human rights organizations. In particular, it closely parallels the wrenching testimony in *Guerre aux migrants: Le livre noir de Ceuta et Melilla* (War on Migrants: The Black Book of Ceuta and Melilla), which depicts the inhuman condition of migrant encampments, police brutality applied with extra rigor to sub-Saharan black Africans, and death at sea or at the barbed wire barriers constructed to maintain the integrity of Fortress Europe (Blanchard and Wender). The spiritually but not physically indomitable Khady dies falling from a barbed wire barricade. Her physical resources have been depleted by a festering wound sustained in a leap from a sinking refugee ship, by malnutrition, by physical abuse and by disease contracted during years of prostitution. Her minimal affective and monetary capital has been lost to a cruel theft by her "protector."

In an early stage of her exile, Khady is packed in a crumbling colonial house "qui lui semblaient prendre dans le crépuscule violet l'aspect de très vieux os soutenant quelque grand corps animal ravagé" (274-75) 'that seemed, in the

fading light of violet dusk, to take on the look of very old bones propping up the ravaged body of some large animal' (254). In the failing light, she distinguishes emerging from the formless heap of belongings in the courtyard "les visages gommés par le soir, sans âge ni traits, de femmes, d'hommes, d'enfants" (275) 'faces erased by the evening, ageless, featureless, of men women and children' (my translation).⁸ Recalling depictions of the slave trade, the image is a blunt reminder that the economics driving European immigration policies are still implicated in the harboring of human traffic in the ruins, both literal and figurative, of colonial Africa. Ndiaye also targets entrenched African cultural and economic inequities as Khady is driven into exile because of her gender. Impoverished, widowed and without a son to support her, she has no human value for her dead husband's parents:

ils l'avaient tacitement, naturellement, sans haine ni arrière-pensée, écartée de la communauté humaine, et leurs yeux durs, étrécis ... ne distinguaient pas entre cette forme nommée Khady et celles, innombrables, des bêtes et des choses qui se trouvent aussi habiter le monde.

Khady savait qu'ils avaient tort mais qu'elle n'avait aucun moyen de le leur montrer, autre que d'être là dans l'évidence de sa ressemblance avec eux, et sachant que cela n'était pas suffisant elle avait cessé de se soucier de leur prouver son humanité. (256)

they had tacitly, naturally, without animus or ulterior motive, separated her from the human community, and so their hard, narrow ... eyes made no distinction between the shape called Khady and the innumerable forms of animals and things that also inhabit the world.

Khady knew they were wrong, but she had no way of telling them so other than by being there and looking obviously like them. But she knew that would not be enough, and she'd ceased concerning herself with proving to them that she was human. (237-38)

When Khady is told of her fate, her stepsisters sit by impassively wearing skirts imprinted with images of snakes biting their tails and black women with happy faces and the inscription "L'année de la femme Africaine" (258) 'The Year of the African Woman' (239). For the reader, the images of the eternally returning Ouroboros belie the optimistic imprinted faces and slogan by serving as a reminder that time and again, harsh realities of entrenched misogyny exacerbated by dehumanizing poverty negate the promise of a better future for women. Khady's torpor and limited experience render her incapable of registering the irony of the scene or imagining her destiny beyond the immediate threat to her immurement from the reality of her situation by means of withdrawal into a near

catatonic stupor. Nonetheless, when her stepsisters make no gesture of farewell as she departs, she does speculate that, knowing she is headed toward death, “elles préféreraient dès maintenant ne plus avoir affaire avec elle, mues par l’appréhension bien compréhensible de se trouver unies si peu que ce fût à son sort funeste” (260) ‘swayed by the very understandable fear of getting involved somehow in her fate, they chose to have nothing further to do with her’ (241). The thought is filtered through Khady’s perspective, but the language clearly belongs to an external narrative interpretation. In this episode, as in the first two, Ndiaye makes effective use of the temporal, linguistic and affective versatility of interior monologue and indirect discourse to convey Khady’s inner experience of the numbing atrocities that shape her existence. However, whereas the rich lexicon and formal literary style of the narrative voice can plausibly match Norah’s voice or that of the well-educated Rudy, the erudite narrative voice and use of literary past tenses in the third episode cannot correspond to the limited cognitive and linguistic range of the nearly mute, illiterate Khady. The discrepancy draws attention to both the challenge and crucial importance of creating a plausible and compelling voice for the masses of anonymous victims of contemporary immigration policies erased from history by their incapacity to articulate their circumstances.

Ndiaye’s narrative approach to Khady’s plight marks a significant difference from her earlier novels such as *En famille* and *Rosie Carpe* (2001), where the irony conveyed by the implied superior moral perspective and rhetorical and linguistic prowess of the external narrator distance the extradiegetic voice from the hapless feminine protagonists’ fantastical compensations for their deficiencies. Lydie Moudileno has criticized, for example, the dismissive tone created by narrative hierarchies in Ndiaye’s portrait of the socially disadvantaged Rosie Carpe (83-94). In contrast, the use of what Moudileno aptly describes as “stylistic *décalage*” ‘gap’ calls compassionate attention to the disparity between Khady’s indomitable self-image and the actual resources for survival, both linguistic and material, at her disposal (89). This “*décalage*” allows Ndiaye to avoid pitfalls confronted by writers seeking to give a voice to victims of traumatic events that lie outside their direct experience. Crucially nuanced by the multiple functions of the bird motif, it creates the “empathic unsettlement” that historian Dominick LaCapra argues is essential to effective trauma narrative: “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (LaCapra 78).

Birds accompany every stage of Khady’s fatal migration, blending the real and the fantastic and the known and the unknowable. They function as metaphors for the misery of the migrants and the cruelty of the traffickers, as memory markers, and as catalysts to phantasmic interpretations and identifications. As she starts out, Khady hears the shrieking of crows “dans leur colère d’éternels

affamés” (265) ‘in their fury at being always hungry’ (245). Impaired by inanition, she registers the similarity of the trafficker’s round sunglasses and nervous agitation to nearby crows and drifts into a phantasmagoric state that turns the trafficker into a terrifying crow “finement changé en homme le temps d’emporter Khady” (269) ‘subtly changed into a man in order to carry Khady off’ (249). Seagulls flying over the mass of migrants being pushed toward the dilapidated boat occasion a flashback to a childhood memory of birds at the fish market where she bargained on behalf of her grandmother, a memory that fortifies her sense of an indomitable identity.¹⁰ Letting go of the barbed wire barricade, she pictures herself as a kind of supernatural bird: “pensant alors que le propre de Khady Demba, moins qu’un soufflé, à peine un mouvement de l’air, était certainement de ne pas toucher terre, de flotter éternelle, inestimable, trop volatile pour s’écraser jamais, dans la clarté aveuglante et glaciale des projecteurs” (316) ‘thinking then that the person of Khady Demba—less than a breath, scarcely a puff of air—was surely never to touch the ground, but would float eternal, priceless, too evanescent ever to be smashed in the cold, blinding glare of the floodlights’ (292).

In the third episode, according to the author, she wanted “moins de romanesque, pas de magie ou à peine, mais une volonté de rendre compte, tout en faisant malgré tout un objet littéraire, pas un documentaire” (Ndiaye “Discrète empathie” 29) ‘less fiction, no magic or very little, but rather a determination to bear witness while creating nonetheless a literary object, not a documentary.’ For the most part, the human-bird shape-shifts that connect this chapter to the others are less fantastical than in the preceding ones. Khady’s history is one of unspeakable loss even before the exile. The events provoking her dissociations signal that deviations from reality in this story are far closer to manifestations of trauma than to the fantastic. As her head hits the ground after her fatal fall, she sees a bird with long gray wings gliding above the fence: “c’est moi, Khady Demba, songea-t-elle dans l’éblouissement de cette révélation, sachant qu’elle était cet oiseau et que l’oiseau le savait” (316) ‘that’s me, Khady Demba, she thought in the bedazzlement of that revelation, knowing that that she was that bird and that the bird knew it (my translation).¹¹ Even here, the shape-shift most essentially measures the distance she has covered from the willed apathy that marks the beginning of her exilic journey to the active assumption of a unique, incontrovertible identity in the final stages of her migration.

In the “Counterpoint,” where the internal narrative perspective is that of a young man, Lamine, who has reached France at Khady’s expense after years in the horrible migrants’ limbo, Khady’s transformation takes on explicitly political significance. The third episode introduces a wretched version of a love story tarnished by Khady and Lamine’s circumstances. Lamine first protects, then prostitutes, then robs Khady. Their relationship illustrates the fine line separating

clandestine existence and slavery, as highlighted in a recent study of violence inflicted on migratory women: “Le ‘compagnon’, le ‘mari’ le ‘frère’ ou le ‘papa’ peut être *à la fois* celui qui ‘protège’ contre les agressions sexuelles des autres hommes, être un bourreau, celui qui donne à manger et héberge, qui soumet à un véritable esclavage sexuel et à un travail domestique forcé la femme qui est sous sa protection” (Laacher 12) ‘The ‘companion,’ the ‘husband’ the brother’ the ‘father’ can be *simultaneously* the one who protects against other men’s sexual aggressions, a torturer, the one who feeds and shelters, who submits the woman who is under to his protection to a veritable sexual slavery and to forced domestic labor.’ Lamine lives hand to mouth in France:

Au Bec fin, où il lavait la vaisselle le soir, dans l’entrepôt où il déballait les marchandises d’un supermarché, sur un chantier, dans le métro, partout où il allait pour louer ses bras ... il l’implorait muettement de lui pardonner et de ne pas le poursuivre d’exécutions ou de songes empoisonnés....Et quand, à certaines heures ensoleillées, il levait son visage....il n’était pas rare qu’un demi-jour tombât soudain inexplicable, et alors il parlait à la fille et doucement lui racontait ce qu’il advenait de lui, il lui rendait grâce, un oiseau disparaissait au loin. (316-17)

Au bec fin, where he was an evening dishwasher; at the warehouse where he unpacked goods for supermarkets; on a construction site or in the metro: wherever he went to sell his labor...he thought of the girl, he silently begged her to forgive him and not to haunt him with curses and poisoned dreams....And when, on bright days, he raised his eyes...it wasn’t unusual for the sky to cloud over suddenly for no obvious reason, and then he would talk to the girl and tell her softly what had become of him, he would give thanks to her, a bird would vanish in the distance. (293)

The juxtaposition of the barely human conditions experienced by undocumented migrants who do reach their destination with the name of a French restaurant denoting epicurean comfort and a bird’s beak connotative of a bird of prey is jarring. The fantastic quality of the final shape-shift dissolves in a dark irony targeting very real European politics of immigration and asylum as they affect men and women.

Laurie Vickroy points out that “(e)ven if their protagonists do not always emerge from repetition, trauma narrativists demand more than pity” (Vickroy 21). “Rather,” Vickroy contends, “such narratives provide narrators, characters, or consequences that point to breakages or losses demanding deliberation and social action” (21-22). It is very much in this vein that the final metamorphosis in the novel unsettles the privileged reader’s position by compelling consideration of the

writer's and reader's own place in a geo-political order that is not committed to finding livable space for a Khady or a Lamine. "Empathic unsettlement," as LaCapra argues in a similar vein, "raises in pointed form the problem of how to address traumatic events involving victimization, including the problem of composing narratives that neither confuse one's own voice or position with the victim's nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure" (78).

Trois femmes puissantes, where Ndiaye has turned to contemporary Africa for the first time as the principal setting for a novel, stands out from her previous fictions as the most overtly socio-political of her literary creations to date and also the most explicitly feminist.¹² The shape-shifts connect the three women's common experience of the "l'instable attelage de [leur] existence" (286) 'the precarious, unsteady equipage that was [their] existence' (265), their very dissimilar socio-economic circumstances, reasons for migration and degrees of mobility and vulnerability notwithstanding. The human-bird transmogrifications in Ndiaye's novel bring to mind an essay on women and migration by the sociologist Mirjana Morokvasik entitled "Birds of Passage Are Also Women." Drawing on socio-economic data, Morokvasik importantly argues in this essay that "sexist oppression and subordination experienced by women in different parts of the world are not an individual matter, nor a matter of specific personal relationships that concern some individuals exceptionally. Neither is women's escape from it" (899). The powerful magic of fiction brings Ndiaye's readers to this same crucial understanding. The troubling metamorphoses in *Trois femmes puissantes* create an esthetic and affective distance from the migratory experiences of the protagonists that permits the author to incorporate a political and cultural critique that neither submerges the fiction in didacticism nor dilutes its esthetic vibrancy. Ndiaye's "empathic unsettlement" also makes room for reflection.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated (see Endnotes 4, 8 and 11), the English translations of *Trois femmes puissantes* are taken from the John Fletcher translation, *Three Strong Women*. Translations of other texts are mine.
2. "The current share of women in the world's population is close to half, and available evidence suggests that migration flows and their impacts are strongly gendered" (Morrison, Schiff, and Sjöblem 1). According to a 2010 Kering Foundation report, "Today, women represent nearly half of the world's international migrants."

3. RADDHO, La *Rencontre africaine pour la défense des droits de l'homme* (African Assembly for the Defense of Human Rights) has described conditions at Reubeuss as “exécrables” ‘atrocious’.

4. See pages 58, 61, 62, 64, 67, 77, 84 and 93 of the French edition. Fletcher’s use of varying translations of this image, such as “A devil had possessed” (48), “fallen into a devil’s clutches” (50), “a devil had grabbed hold” (53), “the devil...who held Sony in his grasp” (65), “devils had sunk their claws into them” (79), does not fully capture the haunted quality of Norah’s obsessively repetitive phrasing in the original version.

5. This would fit Nikos Papastergiadis’s summary of a key notion in Homi Bhabba’s concept of hybridity: “Identity always presupposes a sense of location and a relationship with others. However, this attention to place does not presuppose closure. For the representation of identity most often occurs precisely at the point where there has been a displacement” (193).

6. Amselle adopts the metaphor “branchement” ‘connection’ to avoid the emphasis on biological difference in the term *métissage* ‘crossbreeding’: “En recourant à la métaphore électrique ou informatique du branchement ... on parvient à se démarquer de l’approche qui consiste à voir dans notre monde globalisé le produit d’un mélange de cultures vues elles-mêmes comme des univers étanches, et à mettre au centre de la réflexion l’idée de triangulation” (7). ‘Having recourse to a metaphor related to electrical or computer connections ... creates a distance from an approach which consists of seeing our globalized world as a mixture of cultures perceived as impermeable, and puts the notion of triangulation at the center of the deliberation.’

7. The imagery invites comparison to a “North-South” antagonism between foundational elements of Rudy’s cultural formation and traditional African religious practices too readily equated in Euro-centric valuations with barbarism.

8. Fletcher leaves this passage out of the English translation.

9. Khady’s ignorance, is compassionately portrayed, for example, as the consequence of poverty-driven social and economic injustice captured in her memory of herself during a brief period of schooling as a skeletal child hunched on the floor listening to “les mots rapides, secs, impatients, contrariés d’une institutrice...n’ayant aucune idée de l’ordre de choses auquel ces mots se rattachaientVoilà pourquoi, aujourd’hui, elle ne savait de l’existence que ce qu’elle en avait vécu” (268) ‘the rapid, dry, impatient, cross words of a

teacher....She'd no idea what sort of things the words referred to....That was why, today, all she knew of life was what she'd lived through' (248).

10. Khady overcomes threats to her validity as a unique human entity by repeatedly reciting her full name, mobilizable as a kind of talisman because it is deeply connected to the rough lessons of the grandmother who cared for her after her parents' desertion: "qui avait su reconnaître, bien qu'elle l'eût traitée avec rudesse, qu'elle était une petite fille particulière nantie de ses propres attributs et non une enfant parmi d'autres" (253) 'who had been able to see, even while treating her harshly, that she was a special little girl with her own attributes and not any old child' (235). Khady's saga invites comparison to the peregrinations of the young beggar woman in Marguerite Duras's *Le Vice-Consul* (*The Vice-Consul*) who is similarly cut off by linguistic limitations and suffers festering wounds that are graphically "real" and also metonyms for the dysfunctional social status that impedes mobility. Duras's protagonist clings to the protection of an increasingly elusive identity by chanting the name of her original province to the point of assuming it as her own name.

11. Fletcher has not included this key paragraph, the last before the "Counterpoint," in his translation.

12. Prior to "Les Soeurs" ('The Sisters'), the short story that prefaces her historian brother, Pap Ndiaye's 2008 essay, *La Condition noire* ('The Black Condition'), the subject of racial and ethnic othering in her fictions, although central, tends to remain imprecise. In *En famille*, for example, that the young métisse, Fanny's, self-destructive behavior is motivated by her skin color and African father is conveyed fantastically rather than specifically contextualized. In *Mon Coeur à l'étroit* ('My Cramped Heart'), 2007, it is only strongly hinted that the protagonist's broadly damaging "haine froide ... portais au milieu d'où je m'étais extraite" 'cold loathing ... of the milieu from which I had removed myself' responds to her shame at North African origins (161).

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