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## “Tributary Histories” Flowing into National Waterways: European Rivers in sub-Saharan African Immigration Literature

In the early morning hours of October 3, 2013, a boat carrying five hundred migrants across the well-established but treacherous route between Libya and Lampedusa — an Italian island just seventy nautical miles off the coast of North Africa — caught fire and capsized. Rescue boats could only save one hundred fifty-five passengers. Investigations into the Lampedusa disaster confirmed what many already knew: it was the most recent and deadly catastrophe to transpire along the decades-old migratory pathway — a sense that was also confirmed when another, smaller boat capsized on October 11, barely one week later. Inquiries into how this particular tragedy could happen reinforced that the treacherous trans-Mediterranean journey is but one segment of much larger networks of exploitation.

In the tragedy’s aftermath, two images would come to represent the Lampedusa disaster on international news media outlets: first, divers recovering the bodies still trapped within what the migrants themselves described as the ship’s hold, and second, silent bodies going about daily life in detention centers.<sup>1</sup> The divers’ work to recover the bodies from the Mediterranean parallels how literary and cultural works use the ocean as a metaphor to plumb the depths of forgotten histories. Standing in the ship’s hold, the migrants’ bodies unmistakably called to mind others, still submerged, who perished during earlier

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crossings such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade—a comparison that the Lampedusa migrants themselves proposed. Journalists tried to paint a more complete picture of those who risked everything to travel to Europe, but their attempts to make legible and coherent narratives that span what is fundamentally an illegible surface (the sea), made all the more evident the gaps that define these contemporary crossing narratives. While some succeeded in covertly interviewing migrants through the fence of detention centers—spaces off-limits to the press—most had to speculate on these individuals' stories. To do so, some used the literal waste, such as discarded food and clothing they found inside the abandoned vessels, which now line Lampedusa's shores, as points of departure to narrate the migrants' difficult and hasty journey. The real focal point of the images becomes the way their bodies are co-opted into service of tired refrains of “invasions” in a context that largely denies them the ability to tell their own story.

These images of the migrants following the Lampedusa disaster recalls the paradox Zygmunt Bauman describes in *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts*—that though modernization necessarily produced “redundant” or “wasted humans,” not all such individuals have been treated equally. Namely, whereas “redundant” persons from so-called developed countries found outlets abroad through imperial conquest, no such outlet exists for those individuals produced in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. Rather, these “wasted humans” are instead characterized as “illegal immigrants” and “asylum seekers” and denied entry into the former imperial powers (5–7). To characterize them thusly, however, one must overlook the larger imperial histories that produced them—a fact to which sub-Saharan African authors and artists drew (and continue to draw) their audience's attention.

In this essay, I turn to colonial and postcolonial works that similarly position Francophone immigration as a continuation of much larger transnational processes. Their protagonists' seemingly “wasted lives,” are products of the violence colonialism inflicted on both African lands and their inhabitants. The texts selected for study here—Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris* [*Mirages of Paris*] (1937), Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's short story “El Sueño” (1973) [“The Dream”], and J. R. Essomba's novel *Le paradis du nord* [*The Northern Paradise*] (1996)—re-map imperial violence onto the hydrography of colonial and postcolonial immigration. Unlike the Francophone crossing narratives that came later in the twenty-first century, which privilege *marine* environments (particularly the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean),<sup>2</sup> the earlier works studied in this essay give primacy to European

*riverine* spaces—both those that serve as borders between nations, as well as the river running through the heart of France’s capital, the Seine.

By connecting transnational marinescapes to European rivers, the texts reinscribe what are often considered “tributary histories” (Chambers 2) onto the former colonial power, ultimately suggesting that the “wasted lives” that end up in the former *métropoles* are, in fact, a direct product of colonial violence. Though the geographical, historical, and linguistic contexts of the works’ production differ significantly, they all share a similar plot—a young man from Francophone sub-Saharan Africa travels to France in search of economic prosperity only to face marginalization and racism in Europe, and disgrace in the eyes of his community back home. They also posit European rivers as contested sites where imperial history lurks just beneath the surface. At the same time, however, their central protagonist’s migration experience differs in two significant ways: his ability to penetrate the European nation and arrive at the national river (the Seine) and his ability to survive his plunge into it.

Focusing on these particular differences reveals how each text uses European rivers to critique the sociopolitical climates in which they were produced, while simultaneously suggesting the timelessness of water metaphors in immigration narratives. Fara in *Mirages de Paris* successfully arrives at the Seine, but his death in its waters (which, in the novel reflect idyllic, precolonial Senegal) becomes a critique of how imperialism produced disposable humans who can neither thrive off of their own land, nor find economic opportunities in the colonial *métropole*. The protagonist in “El Sueño,” by contrast, perishes not in the Seine, but in another river serving as the border between Spain and France. Published on the eve of French President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s official decision to close France’s borders to immigration in July 1974, this text ultimately uses riverine environments to contest the narrow, terrestrial visions of history that brand postcolonial migrants as foreign bodies that must be denied entry into the former *métropole*. Finally, Cameroonian author J. R. Essomba’s 1996 novel, *Le paradis du nord*, seems to stand in stark contrast to the others: not only does the main protagonist, Jojo, penetrate into the heart of the nation, but he also survives his plunge into the Seine. Yet his life, too, is characterized by marginalization, and his “foreign” body is ultimately slated for expulsion from the nation—a direct consequence of France’s 1980s and 1990s immigration reforms, such as the Pasqua (1986/1993) and Debré (1997) laws.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, each text proposes European rivers as repositories of what Rob Nixon has termed “slow violence”: “a violence that occurs

gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space" (2). The African bodies that turn up in France's rivers in these works are not merely economic migrants, but also direct—albeit deferred—legacies of the imperial environmental violence Europe inflicted on its former colonies. In the end, then, these authors implore their readers to revisit France's myopic, territorially bounded national history (including its blind spot of imperial environmental violence) underpinning the exclusionary immigration legislation that slates these Africans' bodies for expulsion.

### Taking the Fatal Plunge: Ousmane Socé's *Mirages de Paris*

Though the majority of the text is set in Paris, *Mirages de Paris* begins in Senegal. The novel's first paragraph makes environment central, critiquing how colonial forces irrevocably altered the African landscape: "Ils y construisirent un chemin de fer qui transporta des outils . . . Ils y tracèrent de larges rues droites, y plantèrent une double rangée de fromagers qui, maintenant, se donnaient l'accolade au-dessus des boulevards pour arrêter les rayons du soleil" (9) ["They constructed a railroad to transport tools . . . They mapped out large, straight roads, planted double rows of palm trees that now embraced each other above the boulevards to block out the sun's rays."] Curiously, this is the only explicit environmental critique of colonization in *Mirages de Paris*. The rest of the text outwardly falls silent on the ways the Senegalese landscape is irrevocably altered by the colonial presence.

Instead of critiquing the imperial environmental violence explicitly, *Mirages de Paris* remaps it onto Fara's body. The text announces this connection through its very first description of Fara, which likens his young body to a natural, precolonial landscape: "Dans ce village [*sic*] un petit noir poussait comme les tamariniers de la brousse, libre dans l'espace. . . . Ses cheveux étaient aussi emmêlés que les fourrés de broussailles; certains d'entre eux étaient droits et formaient des îlots d'épis; d'autres se recroquevillaient, faisaient des collines et des vallées" (12) ["In this village, a young black man grew like a tamarind tree, free in its space. His hair was as tangled as the underbrush; certain hairs were straight and formed islands of cobs; others curled back up on themselves, forming hills and valleys."] *Mirages de Paris* posits colonial education as the system through which Fara's "wild" body is tamed and which instills in him a desire to pursue economic opportunities in the *métropole*.

The novel also highlights how colonization, as a larger and more sinister exploitative system, fundamentally changed Africans' relationship to their own land. Though Fara makes it to Paris, pervasive racism

prevents him from finding a job. He thus decides to become an entrepreneur; however, the only business he can envision—one where he serves as a middleman selling African foodstuffs to European consumers (163)—suggests that to profit economically, Fara must align himself with the colonial vision regarding Africa as a land that produces raw materials for Western consumption. This change in his relationship to his own land also affects the way Fara imagines spending his anticipated wealth and leisure time: taking his French wife, Jacqueline, on an African safari. He fills their anticipated itinerary with natural sites such as “an emerald lake,” “the Fouta-Djallo mountains,” the “lagunas in Abidjan,” that he likens to the Venetian canals, and the “phosphorescent lake” in Pointe-Noire (167). Strikingly absent in his description of the sites, however, is any trace of how colonial violence altered the African landscape. Gone are the images of European colonizers perfectly aligning palm trees, or tracing a railroad to extract resources; in their place one finds images of pristine wilderness. Though racist colonial violence has destroyed his natural environment and has led him to become “human waste” in the colonial *métropole*, Fara also becomes complicit in perpetuating the same cycle to which he falls victim.

In the end, Fara becomes bound up in a system over which he has little control. After Jacqueline’s death he decides to return to Senegal to cultivate the “fertile ground” (247), understood both literally and figuratively: farming and participating in grassroots political activities and preparing for Senegal’s independence. On his way home from the administrative building where he has obtained his paperwork to return, Fara crosses one of the many bridges traversing the river running through the heart of Paris, the Seine. When he peers down, the water’s surface transforms before his very eyes:

Dans l’eau calme qui commençait à geler, il aperçut son village natal, ses cases dissimulées au milieu des cailcédrats.

De fines aiguilles d’or de soleil traversaient la chevelure des arbres, tachetaient de pourpre les prés verts et ombreux. . . . Sa sœur, revenait d’un puits et portait, en équilibre, sur la tête, une calebasse pleine d’eau. (186)

[In the calm water that was beginning to freeze over, he saw his native village, its huts hidden among the African mahogany trees.

Fine needles of golden sun penetrated the trees' hair, staining the shadowy, green fields purple. . . . His sister was coming back from a well and was carrying, perfectly balanced on her head, a gourd filled with water.]

Personifying the Senegalese landscape (describing the trees' hair) inverts the relationship Socé had established between Fara's body and the Senegalese landscape. Remarkable in these images, too, is the sense of symbiosis between the land and its inhabitants, emphasized through the huts' perfect integration into their natural surroundings and his sister's balance.

These images of idyllic precolonial Senegal, however, disappear, giving way to terrestrial symbols of France's imperial conquest, which Fara sees reflected on the river's surface: "Tout cela s'effaça devant la silhouette écrasante de la Tour Eiffel, du métro roulant avec fracas dans sa voie souterraine . . . 'l'Arc de Triomphe', l'Avenue des Champs-Élysées, le fourmillement de ses voitures élégantes" (186) ["All that faded away, replaced by the dominating silhouette of the Eiffel Tower, of the metro roaring along its underground rails, . . . the Arc de Triomphe, the Champs-Élysées Avenue, the swarming of its elegant cars"]. Logistically speaking, Fara could not possibly have seen these monuments reflected on the Seine River: not only are both the Champs Élysées and the Arc de Triomphe too far from the Seine to be reflected there, but it is also impossible to see an underground metro reflected on an above-ground river. This scene, then, symbolizes France's imperial conquest of the African landscape. The once perfectly balanced territory the monuments now dominate is no longer visible; rather, all that remains are terrestrial emblems of the national, cosmopolitan landscape.

Finally, these visions give way to a final one: Jacqueline's hand emerges from the water, and beckons to Fara, who, "delirious with happiness" (187) takes the ultimate plunge to join her: "[il] plongea dans l'eau froide de la Seine, réchauffé et enchanté par les visions qu'il étreignait dans ses bras" (187) ["[he] plunged into the frigid waters of the Seine, warmed and enchanted by the visions he embraced in his arms"]. When he does so, Fara's body joins the African landscape he saw reflected in the Seine's waters, and he—like colonized Senegal—becomes just another fatality in a long line of colonial conquest. His "wasted life," now floating in the contested site of the Seine River, is a direct outgrowth of the violence the colonial project inflicted on the African landscape and peoples. Yet as the Seine continues to freeze, his story—like the environmental and colonial history for which it stands—becomes forever locked under the river's surface. Those who

peer into the river will likely miss Fara's submerged body; his history cannot compete with the national symbols the water's surface reflects.

This ending anticipates how, like other iterations of "slow violence," which are, by their very definition both anti-sensationalist and inflicted on far away (and out of sight) lands, few traces of France's imperial environmental violence will ever be recorded in the nation's official history. Ultimately, France's late-twentieth-century immigration and national identity legislation, which will brand the protagonists of the two postcolonial works to which I now turn as "foreign bodies," depends on privileging terrestrial, national histories over those like Fara's that remain trapped beneath the Seine's surface.

### Caught in History's Current: Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's "El Sueño"

"El Sueño," written by Equatoguinean journalist Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo who was living in Spain at the time, was figuratively ripped from the headlines. A newspaper article describing how a group of clandestine sub-Saharan African immigrants drowned while attempting to cross a river separating Spain from France in a makeshift vessel inspired Ndongo-Bidyogo to write and publish his first work of fiction, the short story (Otabela Mewolo and Onomo-Abena 89).<sup>4</sup> Like *Mirages de Paris*, "El Sueño" recounts a young Senegalese man's multiple, intertwined journeys. The unnamed protagonist's metaphorical journey into manhood, symbolized through his quest to earn twelve cows for his fiancée's dowry, catalyzes his literal journey from his native region of Casamance to France, the land he hopes will offer him economic prosperity. Unlike *Mirages de Paris*, however, "El Sueño" charts the intersection of the hydrography of colonization and that of postcolonial, rather than colonial, immigration. Like in *Mirages de Paris*, rivers contained exclusively within the *métropole* (the Seine) function as a contested site where the history of colonial conquest (a "tributary history") flows back into the nation. This history, however, is overshadowed by territorial histories, which form the basis for exclusive notions of national identities. The story's protagonist never arrives at the Seine; rather, he meets his demise in another river serving as a border between nations. The protagonist's failure to cross the river-as-border highlights how postcolonial immigration policies ignore the larger histories of colonization that produce those "wasted lives."

The short story's first lines, in which the narrator recalls his native region, establish water as a repository for both local and transnational



histories and memories that will be affirmed throughout the text. The narrator announces his geographical and temporal distancing from his origins, remembering,

Hace ¿veinticinco? años que fui circuncidado en una aldeúcha sin importancia, a orillas del Casamance. En ese río corrió mi sangre, en ese río aprendí a nadar. Aguas calientes, otras aguas, aguas como espejos, que reflejaban con toda nitidez los pechos erectos de las mozas del lugar. (83)

[It's been twenty-five—I think—years since I was circumcised in a nowhere village on the banks of the Casamance. My blood spilled into that river; I learned to swim in that river. Warm waters, other waters, like mirrors sharply reflecting the firm breasts of the young ladies from around there. (Ugarte 75)]

The markers of heteronormative masculinity in this passage—the narrator's circumcision and his sudden attention to the young ladies' breasts—reaffirm the Casamance River's centrality in his coming of age as a man. Furthermore, the image of his blood joining the water of the Casamance River attributes to these waterway metaphorical properties of both a family tree and the human circulatory system, underscoring its role as the community's blood and lifeline. Finally, insisting on the water's warmth in the passage above establishes a point of comparison for European rivers, which, as the narrator will discover, are literally and metaphorically cold.

The short story reveals another, more sinister role that water has played in African history: the conduit for European colonization. The protagonist's Grandfather Diallo embodies the meeting of local and imperial memory currents; in the narrator's eyes, the *abuelo's* wisdom stems from having witnessed the arrival of both indigenous bodies (birth) and foreign ones (imperial expansion): “¡Cuánta razón tenía el abuelo! El conocía muy bien a los hombres: había visto nacer a todos los varones de mi tribu, había visto llegar a los hombres blancos a bordo de aquel barco encallado en las arenas de Joal” (85–86) [“He was so right! He knew all about men: he saw the birth of everyone in my tribe. He saw the white men arrive on the boat grounded on the sands of Joal Beach” (Ugarte 76).] Putting the arrival of indigenous and foreign bodies into dialog repositions the community as a metaphorical body in which the Casamance functions as the major artery. Visibly enclosed and demarcated from the marine space into which it flows,



the Casamance guards the community's traditions and history. Yet, this community has been forever altered by the arrival of "foreign bodies"—colonizers—who used rivers to maintain control. As the narrator discovers, however, such processes do not work in reverse: considered a "foreign body," he will be denied entry into France.

The narrator's journey north pairs the hydrography of migration (defined by port cities such as Saint Louis, and Algeciras, marine spaces including the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and islands such as the Canary Islands) with the narrator's decreasing economic and personal liberty. After choosing to seek economic prosperity away from the banks of the Casamance, the narrator becomes swept up in a larger system of exploitation. Though set firmly in the postcolonial moment, this system, the story suggests, has its roots in colonization and the slave trade. Nowhere is the parallel between slavery and contemporary immigration stronger than in the narrator's description of the life he lives in a work camp outside of Barcelona: "en cuanto a los jornales, se los daban al mandinga. . . . Casi casi, no podíamos hacer nada a voluntad" (87) ["As for the wages, they gave the money to the Mandinga. . . . We could barely do anything of our own free will" (Ugarte 77–78).] The crowded sleeping arrangements call to mind the inhumanly cramped quarters of the slave hold. The narrator's time in Barcelona—"in transit" between his native community and his dreams of economic success—becomes his own Middle Passage.<sup>5</sup>

Though the narrator will never set his own eyes on the Seine River, it nevertheless stands as an important landmark for postcolonial immigration. Strikingly, the way the protagonist imagines the Seine bears many similarities to the description Socé offers in *Mirages de Paris*. The narrator connects the Seine to his local Casamance River, recounting to his fiancée, "Cuando esté en París, cuando vea con mis ojos el Sena—que debe ser más grande que el Casamance—intentaré explicarte cómo es." (87) ["When I am in Paris, when I see the Seine with my own eyes—it must be bigger than the Casamance—I will try to explain what it is like" (Dietrick and Zaradona, 252).] In hydrographical terms, the Seine's watershed is contained entirely within France's national borders; it is the artery of the French nation. By putting these two arterial rivers into dialog, "El Sueño" suggests that French national history cannot be divorced from that of other territories with which France came into contact. Mapping the Casamance River onto the Seine brings foreign histories, often cordoned off, into the heart of the nation. Though not explicitly an environmentalist work, "El Sueño" nevertheless uses the

telescoping rivers to connect the “slow violence” inflicted on the African landscape back to its European source.

Unlike Fara, the narrator in “El Sueño” never realizes his dream of seeing the Seine in person; his journey ends in a river dividing Spain from France. After he spends six months in Barcelona, smugglers arrive and confiscate the clandestine immigrants’ passports and money. Bereft of the only vestiges of their identity, they are forced to board a boat and begin to row. The narrator recalls, “Y hemos llegado al río. No sé cómo se llama, ni dónde estoy. Imagino que debe ser la frontera franco-española. Amanecía. Estaba cansado” (88) [And we’re at the river. I don’t know its name or where I am—I imagine on the French/Spanish border. Dawn was breaking. I was tired . . .] (Ugarte 78). The setting is replete with boundaries: that between land and water, between nations, and between days (“dawn was breaking”). Though one often associates the Pyrenees Mountains and not rivers with the Spanish/French border, this reference might not be purely fictional. The narrator might be crossing La Muga River—which, significantly, signifies “border” or “limit” in the Basque language—a river that serves as the border between Spain and France for a three-mile stretch separating the Coustouges municipality in France from the Spanish municipality of Albanyà. In “El Sueño,” crossing these boundaries, however, proves impossible. When the boat capsizes, the narrator straddles another border: that between life and death. He remembers,

Sé que no conseguiré llegar a cualquiera de las orillas. Noto que esto se acaba. No más vacas. Mi último recuerdo es para nuestras rotas ilusiones. No sé si oirás, allá en el otro río, el grito de mi muerte. Ya no creo demasiado en nuestros espíritus, pero rogaré al abuelo Diallo por ti. Yo. . . (88 – 89)

[I know I will not be able to reach either bank. I realize that this is the end. No more cows. My last memory is of our broken dreams. I do not know if you can hear my last cry of death down there on the other river. I do not really believe in our spirits, but I will pray to Grandfather Diallo for you. I. . .] (Dietrick and Zarandona 252)

In this scene, both time and space telescope, uniting African and European histories and riverine environments. The narrator’s suspended, quasi-lifeless body floating in the river becomes the most recent victim of the colonial project’s postcolonial legacies.

His failure to penetrate the former *métropole* by means of the river stands in stark contrast to Fara, who meets his end not in a river that serves as a border, but rather in the heart of the nation. Published just months prior to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing's 1974 proclamation that France's borders would close to all immigration, "El Sueño" highlights how control of waterways (and the borders, national histories, and identities they metaphorically represent) has always been unequal. Policed to keep out foreign bodies, this particular European river serves as the ultimate symbol of national protectionism and territorial claims to identity. This border depends on (and seeks to enforce) the neat separation between Europeans and Africans—a division that also rests on territorial conceptions of history that the short story's interconnected waterways destabilize.

### J. R. Essomba's *Le Paradis du Nord*: Journeying toward Elysian Fields or River Styx?

Published twenty years after "El Sueño," and almost sixty after *Mirages de Paris*, J. R. Essomba's novel, *Le paradis du nord*, testifies to the political climate of national identitarian protectionism (the outgrowth of Giscard d'Estaing's decision to close France's borders) in which it was published. Like the other works examined in this essay, *Le Paradis du nord* begins in Africa, highlighting how Africans' image of France has its roots in the imperial project. Unlike *Mirages de Paris* and "El Sueño," however, *Le Paradis du nord*, set in Cameroon's *de facto* economic capital Douala, does not describe the natural African landscape. Its initial attention focuses squarely on the economic, cultural, and above all psychological environment of a postcolonial African metropolis.

*Le paradis du nord* represents a shift in the way water is deployed in later twentieth as well as twenty-first century crossing narratives. Though the Seine remains a contested site, unlike the two other works' protagonists, not only does *Le paradis du nord*'s central protagonist Jojo successfully arrive at the Seine River, but he also survives his plunge. Read metaphorically, these differences seem to indicate that the political climate in 1990s France was much more favorable to immigrants: they no longer fail to penetrate literal national borders, nor are they destined to perish in the heart of the nation. Yet these successes remain superficial. As the rest of the novel illustrates, geographical and psychological marginalization and expulsion now characterize the migrant experience. All three works use rivers and the larger marine environments into which they flow to resuscitate the imperial histories that created their protagonists' "wasted lives." Whereas *Mirages de*

*Paris* used European national rivers to suggest an impossibility of return, and “El Sueño” uses them to highlight a failure to penetrate into “fortress Europe,” *Le paradis du nord* uses them to critique the prevalent mentality that postcolonial immigrants must “return home.” Ultimately, its marine crossings evoke the imperial histories, including colonization and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which bound European nations, Africa, and the African diaspora together to radically critique territorial histories and the identities that depend on them.

From an early age, images of the former colonial power have drawn Jojo’s gaze northward. Though he cannot fund a literal trip to France, his figurative journeys there—facilitated by a map that hangs on his wall—have given him more intimate knowledge of French political geography than most French citizens. For instance, when a French client visiting the bar where Jojo works casually mentions that he called his wife in Douarnenez, Jojo immediately places it on the administrative map: “Douarnenez, c’est en Bretagne, dans Le Finistère, près de Quimper” (12) [“Douarnenez is in Brittany, in the Finistère department, close to Quimper”]. Opening the novel with the image of Jojo who knows France better than the “locals” charts a local landscape very different from the other two texts. Unlike the other works, Essomba’s novel does not begin with a description of the colonial scars that mark the literal African environment; rather, here the scars are psychological. Jojo’s “local” environment is as much France as it is Cameroon, even if he has never set foot outside his country.

Jojo’s opportunity to travel to France comes more quickly than expected when his friend, Charlie, proposes that they rob a business to fund their migration. When the robbery goes awry and the two Cameroonians kill a guard, they find illegal passage on a cargo ship headed north. The ship’s cargo—coffee and bananas—underscores the neocolonial relationships that continue to shape the postcolonial African environment. In the space of the ship, the immigrants’ bodies become just one more export. Moreover, the cargo ship’s ecosystem recalls a slave economy, framing the protagonists’ immigration through the lens of other historical crossings. If for Paul Gilroy the ship “refer[s] us back to the middle passage, to the half-remembered micro-politics of the slave trade and its relationship to both industrialisation and modernisation” (17) the image of the cargo ship, carrying the clandestine Cameroonians between Cameroon and Spain becomes the quintessential symbol for new orientations of European modernity that rely on immigrant labor. Moreover, DeLoughrey’s assessment that “the constitutive components of modern nation-building can be traced back to the hydrarchy of the slave ship itself” (83) are made manifest in

*Le paradis du nord*. Charlie and Jojo must work for their board while on the ship; however, the fact that their contributions will never appear in any official records parallels how French histories often exclude the colonial labor that built the nation.

After their cargo ship passes through the Strait of Gibraltar, the Cameroonians must swim to the Spanish shore, guided only by a lantern held by smugglers waiting on the coast. This light serves literally as a lifeline for the clandestine immigrants, but metaphorically, it symbolizes the images of economic success in France that first oriented the Cameroonians' dreams northward, similar to Odile Cazenave's formulation of the "lark mirror" or the image of France as an economic haven for migrants (123). In *Le paradis du nord*, the lantern is extinguished the very moment the immigrants arrive on *terra firma*, leaving them isolated in the dark: "Je ne comprends rien, lorsque je suis sorti de l'eau, la petite lumière qui nous guidait a disparu" (45) ["I don't understand anything, when I got out of the water, the little light that was guiding us disappeared"]. This sudden blackness signals that the Cameroonians have passed from the world of dreams into that of the harsh realities of life as a clandestine immigrant. The "northern paradise" announced by the work's title will be nothing but an illusion.

In addition to foreshadowing the immigrants' marginalization in France, the sudden darkness also has fatal consequences that recall the circulation of black bodies in the slave trade. Although Charlie and Jojo arrive on shore safely, only one of the three Senegalese men, who also attempt the perilous swim with them, reaches the shore alive. The Mediterranean's surface bears no evidence of the migrants' crossing, yet, as Iain Chambers proposes of marine spaces more generally, traces of similar journeys nevertheless remain "held in a suspension through which we ply our present-day routes" (142). In this way, the Mediterranean Sea, like other transnational aquatic environments, becomes a palimpsestic archive, "the very opposite of those systematically catalogued in a national museum" (Chambers 149). The image of the Senegalese immigrants' bodies suspended within the Mediterranean forces the reader to confront larger histories of ocean floors littered with other bodies, such as those of slaves cast overboard during the trans-Atlantic trade, or the 2013 Lampedusa tragedy. The extinguished lantern ensures that no one can witness their fate; their history will always be defined by incompleteness.

After being smuggled in a truck transporting oranges across the border from Spain into France, drugged and left in a stolen car in a Parisian carport, and accused of attempted rape when they try to ask a French woman for assistance, the Cameroonians discover that they are unwelcome in both French and African diasporic communities. After

wandering Paris's streets for hours, Charlie and Jojo traverse a bridge over the Seine, and decide to seek shelter in a park. They make their camp out of and among discarded items, evidence of the itinerants who have occupied the space before the Cameroonians: "le sol était jonché de vieux cartons, de boîtes de conserves vides et de mégots de cigarettes. Il y avait même aussi, roulée en boule, une vieille couverture sale" (81) ["the ground was strewn with old cardboard boxes, empty cans of food, and cigarette butts. There was even, rolled up into a ball, an old, dirty, blanket"]. The literal trash in which Charlie and Jojo sleep echoes their own status as "human waste."

Their tribulations, however, are far from over; as they settle in on the banks of the Seine, police enter the park and give pursuit when the Cameroonians flee. Charlie trips, but calls out to Jojo to save himself, which Jojo initially manages to do by returning to the bridge over the Seine. Before he has a chance to take up shelter under the bridge, however, the police searchlight spots him, and "Sans réfléchir, il plongea dans les eaux noires de la Seine" (85) ["Without thinking, he plunged into the Seine's black waters"]. By the time he floats back to the surface, Jojo notes that the swift current has already swept him well out of sight of the police. Initially responsible for saving his life—Charlie, the reader later discovers, is killed in what the media call an act of "police self defense" (95)—the Seine's high walls and freezing temperature quickly render Jojo suicidal:

Il n'avait plus envie de lutter. Il n'était pas un lutteur. Et pourquoi lutter? Ce serait tellement simple si tout s'arrêtait . . . Ne plus vivre, ne plus courir, ne plus souffrir, mourir. Oui, c'était la solution: mourir!

Il s'arrêta de nager, ferma les yeux, bloqua sa respiration et se laissa couler. (86 – 87)

[He no longer wished to fight. He was not a fighter. And why fight? It would be so easy if everything just ended . . . No more living, no more running, no more suffering, death. Yes, that was the solution: death!

He stopped swimming, closed his eyes, held his breath, and went under.]

The French phrase "se laissa couler" ("to go under"), which, first and foremost, signals Jojo's resignation to his fate of drowning in the Seine, also calls attention to the passivity inherent in his entire migratory experience. Jojo, like the protagonist in "El Sueño," has been swept along



well-established migration networks, progressively losing his agency at each stage. Though Jojo ultimately manages to escape from the Seine, the image of his nearly lifeless body floating downstream calls to mind both the Senegalese bodies that remain suspended within the Mediterranean and those who perished at sea during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Connecting these transnational histories to the Seine positions this national waterway as a repository for these marginalized histories.

Jojo's plunge into the Seine and Charlie's death (unarmed) at the hands of French police also calls to mind another moment in French history when those deemed France's "internal others" perished in the waters of the Seine: October 17, 1961. On this night, Parisian police forces violently repressed peaceful Algerians protesting a racist curfew enacted against them just twelve days prior. Although no definitive conclusion has been reached regarding the number of victims, approximately two hundred were reported to have been killed; many of their bodies were found in the Seine.<sup>6</sup> Regarded as disposable humans, their bodies were cast into the river, effectively silencing their history. Unsurprisingly, the Seine becomes a silent memorial to this violence (largely overlooked in French history) in literary, cinematic, and musical works commemorating October 17. Like in the works depicting sub-Saharan African migration studied in this essay, in fictional works commemorating the massacre, protagonists' plunges into the Seine catalyze this marginalized history to return to protagonists' consciousness (such as is the case in Mehdi Lallaoui's *Une nuit d'octobre* [2001]). Others such as Médine's rap song "17 octobre" (2006), for instance, position the Seine as the site where these wasted lives—and the occluded histories they symbolize—join quintessential symbols of French history and cultural patrimony (Joan of Arc and Monet's waterlilies, in this case).<sup>7</sup> Though just as central to French history, this massacre—like the imperial violence depicted in the sub-Saharan African immigration works—remains hidden beneath the Seine's surface.

Ultimately, J. R. Essomba's *Le paradis du nord* illustrates how France's 1980s and 1990s immigration and national identity legislation, such as the Pasqua (1986/1993) and Debré (1997) laws that expel Jojo's "foreign" body, depend on ignoring histories of colonial violence. In fact, though they are voiced explicitly in the novel, it is not Jojo who can speak them, nor can they prevent his ultimate deportation. Relegated to the margins of French society, Jojo lives the ultimate "wasted life"—he becomes a naïvely unaware drug trafficker. When he is arrested for unknowingly delivering drugs, he refuses to speak out on his own behalf (for fear of implicating his sister who found him the job in the first place). It is his French lawyer who implores the jury



members to consider Jojo's contemporary situation as just one point in a much larger history of exploitation. He reminds them, "Nous sommes allés, et parfois très brutalement, imposer la France chez lui. . . . [L]'histoire de ce jeune homme n'est que la fin tragique de votre histoire d'hier. Alors avant de prononcer une sentence, dites-vous bien que vous ne pouvez pas le juger sans vous juger. . . . [F]aites votre devoir: jugez-le! jugez-vous!" (167) ["We went and, sometimes very brutally, imposed France on his country. . . . [T]he story of this young man is nothing more than the tragic end of your history from not long ago. So before rendering a verdict, tell yourself that you cannot judge him without judging yourself. . . . [D]o your job: judge him! Judge yourself!"] Through this scene, the novel makes concrete the arguments it also makes through the geography and hydrography of postcolonial crossings: colonial histories continue to drive postcolonial migrations. Yet these histories are also excluded from discussions bearing on national identity and belonging. This historical myopia allows restrictive immigration and national identity legislation to be put into place. While simultaneously charting these colonial histories onto the contemporary French geography and hydrography, Essomba's novel remains pessimistic on their ability to gain prominence.

### Conclusions

By charting the protagonists' fraught journeys through waterways—both transnational and European—Socé's *Mirages de Paris*, Ndongo-Bidyogo's "El Sueño," and Essomba's *Le paradis du nord*—resuscitate the historical depths of contemporary migratory pathways. They expand the watershed for European rivers (particularly the Seine) beyond national and even European borders to include African territories. In so doing, the works urge their readers to reconsider contemporary crossings, such as Lampedusa, in a much broader historical context and to revisit narrow national, and above all, territorial rhetoric of belonging. These works subvert the spatiotemporal borders separating Africa from France and the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial moments, positing the Seine River as the site where these divisions break down. Recasting the Seine in this way not only interrogates this central symbol of the French nation, but also the French cultural patrimony—particularly literary history—surrounding it. One cannot help but think of Guillaume Apollinaire's seminal poem "Le Pont Mirabeau" (1913), in which the flowing water symbolizes the unidirectional passage of time that renders the past irretrievable. The sub-Saharan migration works analyzed above complicate this image: far from out of reach, the histories of French imperial expansion they chart

lie dormant just beneath the river's surface. Through their works, these authors metaphorically dredge the Seine, bringing back to light the colonial histories that flow into it.

Real-life testimonies of postcolonial sub-Saharan African immigration crossing marine spaces reaffirm how the migration networks the works studied in this essay map are just as prevalent, and deadly, as ever. The 2013 Lampedusa disaster discussed in this article's opening has prompted a return to the large questions at the heart of contemporary international debates: how should such "immigrants" and "asylum seekers" be treated? What rights do they have when they leave their country? Whose responsibility is it to accommodate them? The works analyzed above, however, insist on reexamining the very suppositions behind such questions, bringing legacies of French imperialism's "slow violence" back into the charted waters of European rivers. To characterize these individuals as "wasted lives" or foreign bodies who wash up on Europe's shores, these works insist, ignores how colonial and postcolonial immigration is a direct outgrowth of the way colonization forever altered the African landscape and the global environment.

#### N O T E S

1. As Nick Squires reports, the migrants "described how an estimated 500 people were packed on board the 66ft-long fishing vessel, as though it was a modern-day slave ship, with those in the hold having no chance of survival when the boat flipped over."

2. Even the most cursory glance at twenty-first century Francophone literature (such as Fatou Diome's *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* [*The Belly of the Atlantic*]), film (such as Abderrahmane Sissako's *Heremakono: En attendant le bonheur* [*Waiting for Happiness*], Moussa Touré's *La Pirogue* [*The Pirogue*] or Merzek Allouache's *Harragas*), and music (such as Didier Awadi's song *Sunugaal*) confirms that by this time, oceans and seas will become so central to Francophone immigration narratives that one could consider them protagonists in their own right.

3. The Pasqua and Debré laws limited foreigners' ability to enter France, facilitated the expulsion of those who were in France illegally, and removed the right of *jus soli* which, since 1889 had accorded French citizenship to any foreigner born in France when s/he reached adulthood. See "Loi n° 86-1025 du 9 septembre 1986 relative aux conditions d'entrée et de séjour des étrangers en France," [http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid5F118C1E9BD8460D4F0054A46C15EB57.tpdjo05v\\_1?ci dTexteJORFTEXT000000317301&dateTexte20130516](http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid5F118C1E9BD8460D4F0054A46C15EB57.tpdjo05v_1?ci dTexteJORFTEXT000000317301&dateTexte20130516); "Loi n° 93-1027 du

24 août 1993 relative à la maîtrise de l'immigration et aux conditions d'entrée, d'accueil et de séjour des étrangers en France," <http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexteLEGITEXT000006082579&dateTexte20090827>.

4. Donato Ndong-Bidyogo's title also calls to mind two seminal works in Spanish literature: Pedro Calderón de la Barca's 1635 baroque play *La vida es sueño*, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's baroque poem on the philosophical significance of consciousness entitled *Primero sueño* (1692). Through these allusions, Ndong-Bidyogo not only traces a literary history between the former colonial power and its formerly colonized subjects, but he also draws attention to and interrogates the place those formerly colonized by Spain occupy within the Spanish literary canon.

5. Of course, Ndong-Bidyogo's text is hardly the only migration narrative to put postcolonial immigration into dialog with the trans-Atlantic slave trade. For two examples from the Francophone context, see Christopher Miller's analysis of, Ousmane Sembène's film *La noire de ...* (1964) and novel *Le docker noir* (1973) (369), or Dominic Thomas's reading of Henriette Akofa's *Une esclave moderne* (2000) (114–30).

6. The death toll is still highly disputed; see Neil House and Jim Macmaster's *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror and Memory* (2006), 161–67.

7. I discuss the way Médine rewrites these symbols in more detail in "Rapping Postmemory, Sampling the Archive: Reimagining 17 October 1961."

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