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Beyond human-centredness

An ocean-centred reading of Celles qui attendent

(Fatou Diome), Le pagne léger and Patera (Aïssatou

Diamanka-Besland)

Monika Christine Rohmer, 2023

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An ocean-centred reading of *Celles qui attendent* (Fatou Diome), *Le pagne léger* and *Patera* (Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland)



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Abstract

This paper engages in an ocean-centred reading of the novels *Le pagne léger* and *Patera* by Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland and *Celles qui attendent* by Fatou Diome. I show how the liminal space of the coast enables the characters to think and imagine beyond restrictions on land, but also to overcome notions of the ocean as either an adversary or a source of income. In the novels, the acknowledgment of the powerful presence of the ocean opens new paths to navigate towards self-determination and rebirth. The novels can inspire us, as readers and researchers, to acknowledge the powerful presence of the ocean in our academic work. I argue that Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland propose to navigate *with* the ocean, an ally and agent in drafting a 'blue' ecocriticism.

Keywords: ocean, ecocriticism, Franco-Senegalese writers, blue humanities

Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture centrée sur l'océan des romans *Le pagne léger* et *Patera* d'Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland et *Celles qui attendent* de Fatou Diome. Je montre comment l'espace liminal de la côte permet aux personnages de penser et d'imaginer au-delà des restrictions terrestres, mais aussi de dépasser les notions d'océan comme adversaire ou source de revenus. Dans les romans, la reconnaissance de la puissante présence de l'océan ouvre de nouvelles voies vers l'autodétermination et la renaissance. Les romans peuvent nous inspirer, en tant que lecteurs et chercheurs, à reconnaître la présence puissante de l'océan dans nos travaux universitaires. Je soutiens que Fatou Diome et Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland proposent de naviguer *avec* l'océan, un allié et un agent dans l'élaboration d'un écocriticisme "bleu".

Mots-clés : l'océan, écocritique, écrivaines franco-sénégalaises, sciences humaines bleues

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Beyond human-centredness

An ocean-centred reading of *Celles qui attendent* (Fatou Diome), *Le pagne léger* and *Patera* (Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland)

Monika Christine Rohmer

1 Introduction

In this paper, I engage in an ecocritical re-reading of the novels *Le pagne léger* and *Patera* by Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland and *Celles qui attendent* by Fatou Diome. The novels initially sparked my attention, because of their shared focus on women waiting in Senegal for loved ones who have departed for Europe. *Celles qui attendent* (2013, Flammarion) tells the story of Arame, Bougna, Coumba, and Daba, staying on the island Niodior, while their sons and partners travel to Europe via pirogues, traditional fishing boats in Senegal. *Le pagne léger* (2007, Éditions Henry) centres on the protagonist Soukeyna, a law student in Dakar, who is waiting for her boyfriend Babacar to return from studying in France. *Patera* continues Soukeyna's story who eventually migrates herself to Europe and subsequently decides to write about the miseries of African migrants in Europe (2009, Éditions Henry).

A first comparison of Diamanka-Besland's and Diome's writing has been attempted by Rosia Beer who justifies the comparison by the authors' personal histories of migration from Senegal to France and the prominent topic of "irregular migration" in their writings (Beer 2011: 45). While Beer was the first scholar to include Diamanka-Besland's writing in an academic article, Fatou Diome's work gained significant attention in literary scholarship already earlier. Next to her widely discussed debut novel *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique*, first published in 2003 (Diouf 2010;

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Zadi 2010; Hogarth 2016), *Celles qui attendent* was discussed from different angles. Thus, Anna-Leena Toivanen (2011) highlights Diome's anti-globalist stance voiced within the novel, while Stéphanie Leclerc-Audet (2013) analysis the (societal) constraints and coping strategies of the four female protagonists, and Christopher Hogarth (2014) focuses on the possibilities for accumulation and hoarding.

In a prior analysis (my MA thesis, Rohmer 2020) I showed in a comparative reading, how the novels complicate the idea of non-migration and immobility. While this is a valid argument, it is also a human-centred reading, not only erasing part of setting and context of the novels, but also an important protagonist: the ocean¹. Theoretically grounded in an emerging 'blue' ecocriticism, this paper raises the question: "How is the ocean depicted in the novels *Le pagne léger* and *Patera* by Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland and *Celles qui attendent* by Fatou Diome respectively?". This focus allows me to critically reflect on the necessity and challenges of an ocean-centred reading in literary analysis. However, this theoretical and methodological approach and the notion of an emerging 'blue' ecocriticism require some explanation.

Since the 1980s, the intersections of literature and ecology have been discussed in literary studies under the heading ecocriticism (Slovic 2020: 167). Hereby, a focus lies on criticising human-induced environmental degradation (Devine/Grewe-Vopp: 1). Hence, Cheryll Glotfelty (1996: xix) defined the field as following:

Ecocriticism takes as its subject the interconnections between nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature. As a critical stance, it has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman.

While in its beginnings, ecocriticism focused on nature writing and romanticized conceptualisations of wilderness, attention meanwhile shifted to interdisciplinary endeavours of exploring the "more-than-human world" (Slovic 2020: 167) or "toxified environments" (Buell 2011: 6). Recent scholarship further started to question Glotfelty's land-focus expressed as having "one foot in literature and the other on land". Dan Brayton (2016: 173-174) criticises the limitation to land in ecocriticism while inhabiting a 'blue' planet. At issue are the tremendous effects of humans on marine ecosystems, which are overlooked when nature is equalled with the 'green' land (Clarke 2019: 154). However, a growing body of 'blue' ecocriticism addresses this shortcoming, including the edited volume "Words on Water: Literary and Cultural Representations" (Devine/Grewe-Vlopp 2008), or a special edition of the journal *Alternation* entitled "Coastline and Littoral Zones in South African Ecocritical Writing" (Wittenberg 2013). Further 'blue' literary research, although not always labelled ecocritical, has been conducted in the realm of the Indian Ocean, published for instance in special issues of the journals *Wasafiri* (Jones/Lavery 2021) and *English Studies in Africa* (Hofmeyr 2019).

¹ I am using the English term ocean here, since the novels deal with the Atlantic Ocean, Senegal's Western border of a length of approximately 550 km. Both authors use the terms "océan" [ocean] and "mer" [sea] interchangeably.

In this wealth of ‘blue’ literary approaches, my reading aligns closely with Christine Gerhardt’s (2008) analysis of sea poetry of the 19th century United States, Teresa Shewry’s (2011) approach to artistic and literary work “related to the sea” in New Zealand, and Meg Samuelson’s (2013) survey of ocean and coast representations in post-apartheid South Africa. These three authors acknowledge the ocean in literary work as an autonomous actor, a material and non-material entity, bearing metaphoric and non-metaphoric value. I refer to this literary approach as ocean-centred reading. An emphasis of the materiality of the ocean is crucial in a literary and philosophical context of postmodernism, in which the ocean is used merely metaphorically as an unlimited, unreal nonplace (Dillon 2021: 356; Clarke 2019: 156; Connery 2006: 496-497). However, a naïve understanding of the ocean as “prediscursive” would fall short of acknowledging literature as art and means of conveying social constructions (Devine/Grewe-Vopp: 1).

From my ocean-centred reading of the novels *Celles qui attendent*, *Le pagne léger*, and *Patera*, I deduce four interrelated depictions of the ocean from character’s engagement with the ocean. Namely, the characters need to overcome the ideas of combatting the ocean as an adversary or reducing the ocean to a source of income. Instead, the novels show how looking at the ocean from the shore enables to imagine and dream beyond societal constraints at land. Finally, the acknowledgment of the powerful presence of the ocean may open new paths to navigate towards self-determination and rebirth.

2 Combatting the ocean: the ocean as an adversary

In *Celles qui attendent*, *Le pagne léger* and *Patera*, the characters face the ocean as an adversary. On the one hand, the ocean is conceptualised as a dangerous materiality, endangering the characters in various ways. On the other hand, the currents of the ocean refer metaphorically to life, love, and destiny in the novels.

In *Celles qui attendent*, the friendship of the mothers Arame and Bougna manifests itself in ocean-related activities. They jointly cut mangrove wood that they use for their cooking fires (CQA 13, 155)² and search for seafood, primarily for their own use in supplementing missing fish, but also to sell it (CQA 63, 149). Hence, Fatou Diome draws the reader’s attention to the “material reality experienced by those who derive their living from the sea” (Steinberg 2001: 207), namely the material oceanic reality as experienced by women in capturing invertebrates, often overlooked in discussions of fisheries in Senegal (Harper et al. 2017). When introducing the friendship of Arame and Bougna, Fatou Diome uses the concept of defying the ocean in “elles bravaient les courants de la marée haute” (CQA 13) [they defied the currents of the high tide].

While Arame and Bougna hence defy the ocean physically, in *Le pagne léger*, Soukeyna and Babacar combat or confront the ocean metaphorically. When Soukeyna learns about her boyfriend Babacar’s betrayal and his marriage in France in the first chapter of the novel, the sensation of melancholy and loneliness is compared to “le désespoir du marin qui combat la tempête, seul dans son navire de fortune. Seul à lutter de manière incessante avec les ailes de l’océan. Seul à braver les dents de la mer!” (LPL 8) [the despair of a sailor fighting the storm,

² In in-text references *Celles qui attendent* will be abbreviated CQA and *Le pagne léger* LPL.

alone in his vessel of fortune. Alone to fight incessantly with the wings of the ocean. Alone to brave the teeth of the sea!]. While the loneliness of Soukeyna is emphasised through the repetition of “seul” [alone] as head of phrases, the ocean is here depicted as a non-human actor equipped with wings and teeth, a dangerous adversary with natural weapons. Alone, Soukeyna is emotionally at the mercy of her adversary, the ocean.

In *Patera* the reader learns that Babacar’s emotional state was comparable to Soukeyna’s and resembled “un marin qui a perdu sa femme en mer, et dont il ne pourrait jamais faire le deuil” (Patera 184) [a sailor who has lost his wife at sea and can never mourn her loss]. Thus, the sensation of a separation from the beloved is in both cases compared to being a sailor at sea. Importantly, these passages constitute a feminist rewriting of the status quo of men departing on the ocean and women staying behind. In Diamanka-Besland’s writing, women depart and brave the ocean in a metaphorical manner and the novels focus on Soukeyna’s physical journey as a means to liberate herself from the expectations of Senegalese society. Hence, the ocean is a metaphorical place of loneliness and stands for the danger of losing oneself in a love-relationship.

But also, the women of the island Niodior confront the ocean metaphorically. In *Celles qui attendent* Fatou Diome writes that Arame and Daba “[c]omme toutes les femmes de l’île, [...] savaient qu’affronter la houle faisait partie de leur sort” (CQA 250) [like all the women of the island, [...] knew that facing the swell was part of their fate]. The women of the island confront the “océan de la vie” [ocean of life] and “les courants du destin” [currents of destiny] in their own manner, with their strength and their restricted possibilities (CQA 287). In this context, the ocean is depicted as an invincible and untamable adversary against whom the women could never win. The ocean metaphorically stands for the female characters’ hardship in life and life in hardship and their struggles are referred to in terms of confronting and fighting.

But what about the men? Are they also confronting the ocean as an adversary? As mentioned above, in *Le pagne léger* the end of a relationship is compared to “combat la tempête” (LPL 8) [fighting the storm] and “braver les dents de la mer” (LPL 8) [brave the teeth of the sea]. While the formulation “braver la mer” [to brave the sea] is also used by Diamanka-Besland in *Patera*, it is always employed in the context of boat migration from Africa to Europe. Thus, instead of a metaphorical fight against the ocean it depicts again a physical effort, namely the effort of fighting with the ocean during these journeys (Patera 81, 159).

In *Patera*, Soukeyna wants to use her writing voice to raise awareness towards the dangers of migration, especially boat migration from Senegal to France. “Patera” is a Spanish word designating a certain type of boat, today used metaphorically for boat-migration from African countries to Spain and other European countries (Patera 213). Soukeyna set herself the herculean task to “[a]rrêter ces morts, [...] arrêter ces noyades, arrêter cette passion du départ [...] arrêter ces “pateras”, c’est arrêter la mer avec les bras!” (Patera 174) [stop these deaths, [...] stop these drownings, to stop this passion of leaving [...] to stop these “pateras”, this means to stop the sea with the hands!]. In this passage, the ocean is equalled to the death through drowning. To stop the boats leaving Senegal for Europe means to stop the sea, to stop it from flowing or even existing. Thus, in this passage there is a certain awareness that as long as the

injustices of the world remain, the young men will continue to search for their fate elsewhere. This reminds of Anna-Leena Toivanen's (2011: 69) analysis regarding *Celles qui attendent*: "L'Europe représente la vie, le continent africain la mort" [Europe represents life, the African continent death]. For the young men Europe represents a possibility for life, a source of life. Stopping the ocean or the quest for life is clearly something beyond human reach and capacity. Hence, the ocean is here a more-than-human actor surpassing possibilities of human control, causing death in the physical quest for life.

Celles qui attendent follows the fates and emotions of women having lost their husbands and sons at sea. Since Arame lost her oldest son, a fisherman, at sea, she hesitates to push her second son Lamine towards a similar fate (CQA 15, 62, 85). After Lamine's departure in a boat directed towards Spain, Arame suffers even more severely, also from a lack of words and a shortage of traditions helping to cope with the situation of waiting. Hence, mothers of emigrants grief in silence (CQA 10-11, 39, 129). The narrator in CQA comments that "depuis la nuit des temps, les hommes, poussés par les courants marins, s'en vont tandis que les femmes attendent" (CQA 169) [since the dawn of time, men, pushed by the sea currents, leave while women wait]. Thus, the ocean is more than the means for a journey, but an actor inciting departure, here emphasised by the passive construction. For those staying, waiting means to anticipate the worst – death of a beloved one. But which role plays the ocean in these deaths?

In *Celles qui attendent* the perishing of a boat is depicted as the "tribut que la mer prélève" (CQA 100) [the toll the sea takes]. Similarly, in *Patera* is an agent which "emporte les sans-voix par milliers" (Patera 207) [carries away the voiceless by the thousands] and vomits ripped bodies (Patera 159). While I pointed to the communities encouraging, financing, and organising the journeys of migrants in my MA thesis and analysed dreams and postcolonial power dependencies, I overlooked the ocean as an agent in migration. In the novels the ocean as a material entity decides on life and death of the boat migrants.

In summary, the characters of the novels, on the one hand, defy the ocean as a metaphorical adversary when being separated from their loved ones. On the other hand, they defy the ocean as a material entity in physical oceans. Hereby, the ocean is conceptualised as a death-bringing agent.

3 Facing the ocean: the ocean as a source of income

While the ocean pushes men to migration and thereby possibly causes their death, Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland do not limit themselves to a one-dimensional critique of boat migration. Both authors contextualise migration within the tradition of fishing. Hence, the ocean is a source of life for the young men in multiple ways, and due to overfishing by foreign companies they needed to change their profession and engage in the business of migration.

In *Celles qui attendent*, the ocean defines and has always been setting the rhythm of life. The narrative is set on the island of Niodior, and "[d]ans ce village, quand on n'est pas marin, on est descendant de marin" (CQA 285) [in this village, when one is not a sailor, one descends from a sailor]. In Niodior, the ocean is the primary source of income and sustaining life by providing the

inhabitants with fish. However, to be a fisherman, or also a wife or a child of a fisher, is much more than a profession, it is an identity (CQA 22).

The ocean is the fishermen's school, their place of learning. For the older generation, represented through Abdou the shopkeeper, "la mer avait été sa seule école" (CQA 22) [the sea had been his only school]. While the younger generation went to a public school, the knowledge obtained on the ocean is nonetheless more useful to them, since it enables them to gain a living and support their families. This contrast is emphasised in the character Lamine, Arame's second son. While he spent years at school, he failed at obtaining the university entrance diploma. The only employment he was able to find in Dakar had been as an unskilled worker at the harbour. He returns to the island after his companion has died due to lacking security measures when unloading toxic material. But since Lamine never went through the formation of a fisherman, the primary source of income and life of the island is inaccessible to him: "Pendant que ses camarades, élevés à la campagne, tissaient des filets et s'exerçaient à aquérir le pied marin, lui récitait des poèmes, rédigeait des dissertations et rêvait d'un destin de col blanc" (CQA 65-66) [When his peers, raised in the countryside, were weaving nets and practising their sailor's feet, he was reciting poems, writing essays and dreaming of a white-collar destiny]. Hence, the passage emphasises the need for an informal, local education enabling the man of the island for hands-on, bodily work with the ocean and on the island, over a formal, Western education enabling for abstract, mental work in the city. The ocean as a materiality providing income requires of the fishermen embodied knowledge and continuous practice.

In *Le pagne léger*, fishing is romanticised in a passage in which the fish market of Soumbédioune is the destination of a stroll for Babacar and Soukeyna. The middle-class couple observes the "époustouffant, attachant" [breathtaking, endearing] (LPL 53) spectacle, distant and different from their studies. However, the magnificent place of Soumbédioune changes from *Le pagne léger* to *Patera*. Artisanal fishing suffers from a crisis and "[l]es pêcheurs se plaignaient du fait qu'il n'y ait plus assez de poissons en mer et que les parties productives aient été vendues à des sociétés étrangères." (Patera 85) [[t]he fishermen complained that there were not enough fish in the sea and that the productive parts had been sold to foreign companies.] Since fishing became unprofitable, the younger generation of fishermen is not only trying to reach Europe to find decent employment, but also turned boat migration into a source of income (Patera 85, 112).

In *Celles qui attendent*, a similar reality is depicted: While the former generation had in the Atlantic Ocean a reliable source of income, since "chalutiers occidentaux se mirent à piller les ressources halieutiques locales." (CQA 23) [Western trawlers began to plunder local fishery resources], today boats remain on shore and fishing is unprofitable (CQA 52, 98). But some businesswomen came up with other means to make a living. They facilitate boat migration by 1) buying large boats from fishermen, 2) equipping them with two motors, and 3) finding a skilled captain amongst the fishermen who hardly make a living in their profession (CQA 98-100).

Thus, for both Franco-Senegalese authors, fishing and boat migration share important features. The similarities between both activities range from a) "pirogues" being used as the main tool, b) in fishing ports, moorings, and beaches being the places of departure, to c) representing a source of income and life. However, fishing and boat migration are not only comparable activities, but

entangled. The overfishing through foreign (European) trawlers caused unemployment and poverty in the local fishermen. These hence put their navigational skills to work at reaching a different destination, Europe. In this sense, the ocean continues to represent a source of income and source of life for artisanal fishers. It continues to be necessary to face the ocean to gain a living. Hence, next to being an adversary to be defeated, the ocean is a challenge to live with or live through.

4 Looking out at the ocean: the shore as a source of imagination

In the introduction, I stated that the characters need to overcome ideas of combatting and using the ocean to reconceptualising it as an ally. This change of perspective is linked in the novels *Celles qui attendent*, *Le pagne léger*, and *Patera* to a specific place: the shore or beach. By conceptualising the Senegalese coast as a place of change, possibilities, and connection of local and global, Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland align with literary and artistic works across the African continent (Samuelson 2013: 10; Ndlovu 2013: 109-110; Kosgei 2020).

In this sense, Soukeyna goes to the beach in order to “*rafraîchir les idées*” (LPL 122) [refresh the ideas]. She wants to gain a certain distance from her haunting thoughts, but also from judgemental society. Thus, the beach is located at the periphery of society and communal constraints are less tangible. In a similar vein, Lamine hides at the beach to cry in *Celles qui attendent* (CQA 90). Devastated that the woman he loves got engaged to another man, Lamine finds solitude in the dunes, the only place “*assez larges pour accueillir sa détresse*” (CQA 94) [vast enough to accommodate his misery]. While in these passages Soukeyna and Lamine search for solitude at the shore, in *Le pagne léger*, *Celles qui attendent*, and *Patera* the beach is primarily a space for secret love relations.

Soukeyna’s friend Ramatoulaye desperately tries to get married to a migrant on holidays. With one of these, a Senegalese living in Belgium, she spends time in Mbour, known for its beautiful beaches. While looking out at the ocean towards the horizon, “[e]lle construirait des projets qui pourraient s’étaler le long de l’océan” (Patera 72) [she would construct projects that could stretch along the ocean]. Thus, the ocean shore is depicted as the place enabling dreams and imagination. Similarly, walks at the beach are an occasion for Soukeyna and Babacar to think of future projects and imagine a life together (LPL 33-34, 71). As above, the characters experience a certain liberty at the beach, these walks and precious moment were “*l’occasion d’être libres dans nos gestes et nos mouvements*” (LPL 43) [the occasion to be free in our gestures and movements]. Hence, here the ocean can be understood, in line with postmodern approaches, as a backdrop of free thinking and radical critique (Dillon 2021: 365; Clarke 2019: 156). However, the ability to think and critique is linked to the physical presence in a concrete place, the shore or beach.

In *Celles qui attendent*, it is Issa who decides to invite his beloved Coumba to the beach and asks her to marry him before his departure to Europe. After taking a long look at the ocean, he finds the courage to profess his love, and this time the beach is a place of tears of joy. However, as in the example of Ramatoulaye, the hope is tightly linked to the idea of emigration and success in Europe. Thus, the future imaginaries are tightly entangled with a future in Europe. Again, facing the ocean means to envisage the possibility of a life elsewhere.

In these examples, the land limits with societal constraints while the ocean is a non-judging participant or even a confidant. The shore is representing the edge or boundary of both Dakar and the island Niodior. In a metaphorical sense, the beach is located at the edge of the society, thereby enabling solitude, love relationships, dreams and imagination. Lamine and Soukeyna physically withdraw from society on the beach; the shore gives couples the opportunity to meet and show their affection, whereas 'on land' that is forbidden and relationship before marriage are a taboo. The ocean perspective allows the different characters to think ahead, to imagine, and to dream – of a different life and a different kind of society, of liberty.

This possibility to imagine reveals another oceanic dimension of boat migration. In Diome's and Diamanka-Besland's writing, the ocean is not just a source of livelihood, it's a vast, tantalizing symbol of dreams unfulfilled. The harsh realities of the characters' economic situation, defying the sea to survive, is intimately connected with the ambition for a better life. Hence, the desire to migrate stems from both economic necessity and a yearning for a broader horizon, from material and sociocultural conditions.

5 Navigating the ocean towards self-determination

Finally, with a new vision gained by looking out on the ocean, the characters can learn to navigate with the ocean and take their fate in their own hands. Hereby, only by cooperating with the ocean as a material and metaphorical entity, the characters mature and liberate themselves from societal constraints.

While the idea of confronting, debating or defying the ocean is shared among the three novels, Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland offer to different sets of vocabulary for an emancipated relation with the ocean. While Diome opens the path for navigating with the ocean, Diamanka-Besland's character Soukeyna experiences rebirth.

Fatou Diome in *Celles qui attendent* evokes the metaphoric possibility of navigating the ocean. Images and expressions linked to steering or navigating are employed to depict the younger generation's life choices and challenges. For instance, Issa's lonely wife Coumba reflects on the question of betraying her husband in a metaphor of navigating the ocean. Since one's boat journey will only be as good as one's tools and manpower, "quand on a déjà connu un bon rameur, on ne négocie pas ces choses-là" (CQA 187) [when one already encountered a good rower, one does not negotiate those things]. Thus, Coumba decides to remain faithful to her husband Issa and therefore to her empty room. On the contrary, Issa marries a Spanish woman without Coumba's knowledge and starts a family in Europe.

Daba, Lamine's wife, took other life choices and had a child with another man of the village, Ansou, during the years of absence of her husband. Therefore, she fears her husband Lamine's rejection upon his return to Niodior. But her mother-in-law, Arame, calms Daba by stating: "Continue à mener ta barque du mieux que tu peux, et n'aie pas peur de l'avenir. Aucun banc de sable ne t'attend à l'horizon, mais deux bras de mer" (CQA 248) [Keep on steering your boat at your best, and don't be afraid of the future. No sandbank is waiting for you on the horizon, but two estuaries]. Thus, Arame compares the young men and the possible relationships with them

to estuaries, or ‘arms [body parts] of the sea’. And the young woman may continue to steer or navigate her boat as best as she can through whatever fate life presents.

These metaphoric currents of love and life are even presented as being more difficult to navigate than the open ocean. Individual characters take, at different times of life, different decisions in how far they search for confrontation or negotiation with their fate, in how far they align with the currents of life. But either way, the ocean and its currents are active in that they “se lèvent” [get up], “éloignent” [move away], “rapprochent” [move closer], and “surprennent toujours les marins” [always surprise the sailors] (CQA 283). So, the ocean is again an active agent, metaphorically depicting changes in human lives, especially through the notion of currents. Thereby the most fundamental changes in the novels are the changes of perspective.

Ansou, a sailor familiar with the currents of the ocean, struggles with the navigation of life, when he learns that his rival Lamine is indeed his half-brother (CQA 282-283). Instead of an open confrontation, Ansou decides to congratulate Daba and Lamine on their wedding day. Reconciliation between Ansou, Daba, and Lamine is depicted as “leur première grande traversée de l’âge adulte” (CQA 284) [their first great crossing of adulthood] by the narrator. Thus again, the challenges life/the ocean presents can be overcome by a wise navigation and by learning from experiences gained in life.

Another dimension of the ocean as an agent of change is introduced in the last chapter of *Le pagne léger*. Soukeyna decides to commit suicide and “de me confier ainsi à l’océan” (LPL 122) [to entrust myself to the ocean]. The ocean here is compared to an acquaintance, a friend, and further anthropomorphised by being Soukeyna’s “épaule où poser ma tête” (LPL 122) [shoulder to rest her head on]. However, while the ocean is first depicted as a possible location for death and seems an active initiator of death “prêt à me dévorer” (LPL 123) [ready to devour me], it finally becomes the location and means by which Soukeyna is born anew. Also in this life-giving capacity, the ocean is an agent: Soukeyna listens to “les ondes des vagues me murmurer à l’oreille que je ne devais pas!” (LPL 123) [the waves whispering at my ear that I should not!]. Leaving the water opens the path for Soukeyna’s physical departure from Senegal, thereby escaping the patriarchal structures of her home-society.

Soukeyna’s attempt to suicide which turns into rebirth in the final sequence of *Le pagne léger* is developed further in *Patera*. Here it becomes explicit that the power of renewal and rebirth is connected to the ability of the ocean to wash away “chagrin” [sorrow] and “impuretés” [impurities] (Patera 8). The ability of the ocean to cleanse metaphorically is not limited to Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland’s imagination and story world but is rather a shared cultural practice of Senegal.³ In a focus group discussion in Wolof and French in April 2021 (for my PhD), a participant gave two examples where a bath in the ocean can be used to purify oneself or wash-off misfortune. First, a person experiencing hardship in life, as for example lasting lack of money, may “dem géej sangu foofu [...] li nekkoon ci tilim-tilim yépp ci sa yaram dina ko indi” [wash in the sea [...] so that all the dirt of his body is taken away by it]. Thus, a purifying bath in the ocean is seen as a remedy against bad luck. Second, a bath in the ocean will allow someone

³ But not limited to Senegal: Jauquelyne Kosgei (2021: 72) describes seawater cleansing on the Kenyan coast.

who had been imprisoned for a crime lengthily to “recommencer une nouvelle vie” [start a new life]. In these examples, the ocean has the power to give new life.

Thus, to navigate with the ocean opens the path for reconciliation, negotiation of societal constraints, and for self-determination. Only once the characters overcome the urge to combat or dominate the ocean, they mature and are able to take their own life choices. Thus, an ocean perspective here means to accept the decentring of humanity and thereby open new means of cooperation with the natural world in its physical and metaphorical properties.

6 Towards ocean-centred humanities?

This paper engaged in an ocean-centred reading of the novels *Celles qui attendent*, *Le pagne léger*, and *Patera*. Thereby, I deduced and interrelated four depictions of the ocean from the novels. I showed how the liminal space of the coast, hence looking at the ocean, enabled the characters to think and imagine beyond restrictions on land, but also to overcome notions of the ocean as an adversary or a source of income. In the novels, the acknowledgment of the powerful presence of the ocean opens new paths to navigate towards self-determination and rebirth. Throughout the text, the ocean was read as a material and non-material entity, bearing metaphoric and non-metaphoric value.

A human-centred reading of these novels may allow to identify “didactic intentions” (Beer 2011: 47) of Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland and Fatou Diome, namely the authors’ critique of postcolonial dominance, overfishing, and the worthlessness of African diplomas and passports. Hence, it allows to attribute clear responsibilities for boat migration and deaths at sea. However, an ocean-centred reading complicates simple cause and effect explanations. By highlighting depictions of the ocean challenging oppositions and contradictions appear. While I began by sketching the ocean as an adversary of the human characters, I concluded with the idea of the ocean as a confidant, enabling rebirth and imagination. While throughout the novels, various characters fear the death of a beloved one on the ocean, the ocean holds the capacity of life. And finally, it seems rather impossible to distinguish between the ocean as a physical and a metaphorical place – the characters have to learn to navigate both. In this sense, an ocean-centred reader is a necessity. It unravels further dimensions of the novels otherwise disregarded.

These contradictions and uncertainties present a challenge of ocean-centred approaches. I am, however, not the only one encountering the challenging of binaries when centring the ocean. While Meg Samuelson (2013: 24-25) advocates for a “bifocal lens” that enables capturing all dimensions of the ocean, Christine Gerhardt (2008: 144) describes how poets turn “inherent paradox into complex meditations on human-nature relations”, and Dan Brayton (2016: 178) concludes that the ocean’s “conceptual unavailability [...] undermine[s] epistemological certainty”. Regarding the three novels discussed above, I similarly observe the undermining of certainty and the appearance of inherent paradoxes.

To acknowledge the power of the ocean in *Celles qui attendent*, *Le pagne léger*, and *Patera* means to caution the reader to follow one (too) simple line of argumentation. Instead, the reader is invited to emotionally understand. Reading the novels is an emotional exercise of empathy, of

understanding the character's choices even if we may have decided differently. Thus, while the authors very clearly criticise the realities of postcolonial dependency and perishing at sea, their readership is invited to feel, learn, and come intimately close to the Senegalese characters (Beer 2011: 49-50), rather than judge, explain, and remain at a distance. In this sense, the novels might enable new, joint ways of understanding the ocean of life. But these new ways make a rethinking and centring of the ocean necessary.

The idea of the 'blue' ocean as 'other', which needs to be fought or domesticated, has been widely discussed and criticised (Earle 2009: 11; Brayton 2016: 176; Clarke 2020: 118). The novels *Celles qui attendent*, *Le pagne léger*, and *Patéra* invite the reader to overcome this comprehension of the sea. The characters show how overcoming an understanding of the ocean as adversary or resource opens up new paths of reconciliation and rebirth. Thus, I align with Dan Wylie (2013: 161), who points to the necessity of the Arts in 'drawing us' to the solutions suggested by natural sciences and climate activists. The novels can inspire us to acknowledge the powerful presence of the ocean in our academic work. Fatou Diome and Aïssatou Diamanka-Besland propose to navigate *with* the ocean, an ally and agent in drafting a 'blue' ecocriticism.

7 References

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8 10 Latest UBT African studies working papers

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