Senegalese Stagecraft
This series publishes books in theater and performance studies, focused in particular on the material conditions in which performance acts are staged, and to which performance itself might contribute. We define “performance” in the broadest sense, including traditional theatrical productions and performance art, but also cultural ritual, political demonstration, social practice, and other forms of interpersonal, social, and political interaction that may fruitfully be understood in terms of performance.
Senegalese Stagecraft

Decolonizing Theater-Making
in Francophone Africa

Brian Valente-Quinn
For Rita
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Writing a book on Senegal in English poses a particular spelling conundrum. For Wolof terms and names, one must choose between a colonial orthography based on French phonetics and an academic Wolof orthography. For cities and names, including their own, most people in Senegal use French spelling, and so do I in this book. However, when citing Wolof sources or terms, I opt for Wolof spelling and follow Jean-Léopold Diouf’s French-Wolof dictionary. I also take the liberty of using Wolof spelling when discussing certain historical figures and places such as those connected to the Murid Sufi brotherhood.
In Senegal, the word “theater” applies to a wide range of cultural and performance practices. The term recalls a series of historical moments when theater-making, or the work of crafting the stage space through the use of text, place, and embodied performance, offered an opportunity for creators to respond to and act upon the political forces of the day. The first major experiment with original works of Western-style stage performance took place in dialogue with the demands of life under French colonialism. In the interwar context of the 1930s, on the picturesque island of Gorée, just off the coast of Dakar, students at the École Normale William Ponty, French West Africa’s elite training ground for indigenous teachers, doctors, and clerks, took the stage to enact African myths and customs and to tell the stories of local rulers and their confrontations with colonial forces. These original creations, which became known as théâtre indigène (indigenous theater), combined French-style dramaturgy with African forms of music, ritual, and dance. They enjoyed an enthusiastic reception among colonial educators, administrators, and visiting dignitaries, who saw the staged works as heralding a new Franco-African creative spirit. The performances also offered the young students a means of writing and performing their way into the cosmopolitan cultural spheres of the colonies. Buzz around the students’ work even earned them a trip to Paris, where they performed as living demonstrations of the supposed benefits of France’s civilizing mission in West Africa. In the Ponty stage, students saw more than a simple tool for colonial interests. They used the stage to project themselves beyond the limited roles assigned to them as colonial intermediaries. The practice of staged enactment inherent to the theatrical space offered a means of actively defining their place and identity under French colonialism rather than figuring as passive objects of colonial policy.

From the “Ponty” experience onward, theater served as a privileged space of negotiation between colonial authorities and a group of Africans who were deeply invested in the promises of a French education. A rising French-educated elite called (in the colonial terminology of the day) the évolutés, or the “evolved,” stood out for their commitment to French culture, their mastery of the French language, and their eagerness to envision political enfranchisement in an African context through the lens of French republicanism. Since they lacked the authority to make their voice heard in the political sphere, these African intellectuals turned to culture. This was notably the case
in the French *centres culturels* (cultural centers) of West Africa in the 1950s, where theater provided a platform for contemplating the potential benefits of a region-wide Francophone African identity. Writers and creators in search of a deeper connection with the globalized postwar world turned their gaze toward new forms of citizenship as the model of a French Empire shifted to that of an ill-defined and ultimately short-lived “French Union.” Culturally, their performances evoked discourses of both the traditional and the avant-garde, delving into precolonial performance forms and, in so doing, inspiring major figures of European experimental theater who applauded the rise of indigenous theater from as far away as the international Theater of Nations festival in Paris.

The first generation of Ponty performers came of age in time to become the most prominent politicians and intellectuals of their respective West African countries in the era of independence that began in 1958. In Senegal, as elsewhere in the former colonies of French West Africa, the seasoned stage performers put culture at the heart of their political projects. With the establishment of robust national cultural institutions, African directors and performers sought to employ stage performance as a means of direct encounter with the African world. The stage served as a site from which the Western outsider and African artist could come together to reimagine Africa, its culture and its history, as an integral and constitutive part of a shared human heritage. Theater artists proved eager to situate new African stage works within a global theatrical canon. The large-scale productions of Senegal’s new national theater, Le Théâtre National Daniel Sorano, inaugurated in 1965, included original creations employing dramaturgical techniques developed by the students of the Ponty School, along with “Africanized” adaptations of such Western classics as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid*. Always an outward-looking institution of international focus and scope, the Sorano Theater placed Dakar at the forefront of global experimentation in performance forms coming from Africa and the African diaspora. It also facilitated sustained cultural engagement with France as the country’s first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, sought to forge a close relationship between national cultural institutions and the state, much as his friend André Malraux had begun to do in France as that country’s first minister of cultural affairs.

For Senghor, as for the stage artists of the Ponty generation, theatrical creation in Senegal went hand-in-hand with the conceptual configuration of a transnational *Francophonie*, or a community of nations united by their attachment to the French language and French culture. Senghor and his fellow “men of culture,” the elite French-educated writers and bureaucrats now charged with running the country, saw Francophonie as a means of deepening Senegal’s cultural and political connections with European powers under a model that placed the formerly colonized on an equal footing with the colonizers. For the notion’s defenders in Senegal and elsewhere in
Africa, Francophonie was an indelible aspect of their respective countries’ histories. It was what had been co-created via sites of exchange such as the Ponty stage. Yet, the theatrical stage also hosted the work of artists and intellectuals who were far less sanguine about the promises of a purportedly shared Francophone identity. Chief among these was Senegal’s first theater scholar, Bakary Traoré, whose work reminded the spectators and performers of “indigenous theater” that theatrical forms and practices had existed in Africa long before the arrival of European colonizers. In his 1958 study *Le Théâtre négro-africain et ses fonctions sociales* (*Black African Theater and Its Social Functions*), Traoré ardently defended the theatrical status of what French observers considered precolonial rituals, pointing out that many such performance practices had very little to do with ritual or religious beliefs but rather responded, like all theater and art, to a number of fundamental societal needs. Traoré underscored how the continent’s Francophone theater resulted from the particular historical conditions of colonialism and did not reflect the introduction of theater to cultures in which no such practice had existed beforehand.

Today, the theatrical stage in Senegal reflects its history as a site of exchange for both partisans and detractors of the notion of Francophonie. However, it has also hosted forms of performance heritage rooted in alternative temporalities, ontologies, and expressive cultures. One illustrative example of this is the stage’s use to recount the Sufi histories of this Muslim-majority country, most notably in the reenactment of the life of Shaykh Amadu Bamba (written as Cheikh Amadou Bamba in the French orthography), founder of the Senegalese Sufi order of the Murids. The dissemination of Sufi narratives via the stage required a reworking of theatrical convention in order to accommodate the performed embodiment of a religious figure whose very image is considered sacred. By introducing an element of performed religious fervor to the national stage heritage, director Tamsir Ndiaye and his troupe crafted a new and profoundly Senegalese theatrical experience which they called *Bamba Mos Xam* (*Wolof for “to taste Bamba is to know”*). The production had such an impact on popular audiences as to contribute, up until its closure in the 1980s, to the spread of today’s most visible Sufi order in Senegal. Drawing primarily from the canon of nineteenth-century Wolof-language religious poetry in Ajami, the term for African-language writing in Arabic script, *Bamba Mos Xam* offered a new Senegalese vision of stage performance that relegated to the periphery debates around the cultural heritage of Francophonie.

In the contemporary Senegalese context, theater is used as a vital tool in processes of community formation, as well as in grassroots initiatives connected to forms of Global South activism. Popular theater organizations offer the primary means of contact for most Senegalese with the performance stage. Yet the creative work of such organizations is rarely the focus of scholarly or critical attention either from Senegalese critics or foreign researchers.
The diversity of post-independence stage sites, while emerging from a shared Senegalese performance heritage, is often lost as the study of performance practices is parsed out among academic disciplines. Thus, disciplinary boundaries separating scholarly approaches and methods can pose a considerable challenge to the study of theater-making and its specificities as a craft. In the field of Francophone studies, scholarly appreciations of theatrical production in Francophone Africa tend to limit themselves to published plays. Yet recent studies of contemporary African playwrights often omit Senegalese creators altogether, since the most active stage artists today have taken a largely collective approach to crafting informal and untranscribed theatrical texts. The field’s blind spot to alter-textual practices risks giving the erroneous impression that theater has ceased to play an important role in the national cultural imaginary of Senegal.

This book explores the craft of theater-making in Senegal through a focus on the stage spaces that have allowed performers to engage with the social, political, and cultural spheres of their day. Theater’s diverse contemporary landscape here attests to a history of context-specific efforts of stagecraft that address local concerns while also taking part in broader theoretical discussions of theater within a global and experimental framework. Throughout this book, I use the term “stagecraft” in order to focus on the contextual work of stage artists as they contend with, respond to, and reconfigure the implicit rules and expectations of the theatrical stage. Working through a range of historical performance contexts, I explore how Senegalese theatermakers have transformed and deployed the theatrical stage as a variety of decolonizing stage spaces capable of producing real-life, functional criticism of and responses to the realities of colonialism and its aftermath. These decolonizing stage spaces make full use of their interaction with audiences to reimagine and rehearse new forms of social, economic, and intercommunal relations among performers and audience members. I describe the stage space as decolonizing rather than as decolonized because visions of what, precisely, decolonizing entails vary with each newly crafted stage space. However, a decolonizing effort is central to each of the stage histories presented here.

The contextual approach of this book serves at least three interconnected purposes. First, it approaches theater as an inherently sited expressive practice. This study emerges from the field of Francophone studies, which favors techniques of literary analysis. Within that field, discussions of cosmopolitan and transnational texts and performances originating from Francophone Africa often come at the expense of an exploration of local uses of theater in Francophone African contexts. A focus on sites of performance will re-situate the function of the playwright as one tool of stagecraft among many others. Second, a sustained focus on theater as a sited expressive practice will underscore the political, social, and economic stakes involved in any form of innovative stagecraft. Such stakes highlight the stage’s role in facilitating rehearsals of, and innovative responses to, emerging discursive, relational, and
embodied scripts taking shape in the social context of a given performance. At the heart of this project lies the conviction, eloquently expressed by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o in response to Peter Brook’s book *The Empty Space*, that the performance space is never empty. “Bare, yes, open, yes, but never empty. It is always the site of physical, social and psychic forces in society.” Ngũgĩ points out the role of such wide-ranging forms of discourse in creating the performance space, or what he calls “a magnetic field of tensions and conflicts” and considers a crucial piece of any theorizing of theater, particularly in a post-colonial context. In my approach, I conceptualize these magnetic fields as generative sites of exploration for new forms of social critique and activism. Lastly, my focus on sites of performance seeks to build on the scholarship, most notably in anthropological discussions of African expressive cultures, challenging assumptions that, while local customs and conditions may vary, culture and performance, in their essence, remain constant across contexts. Rather than analyzing theater as a self-evident form of expressive practice, this study will focus on how and why certain expressive practices are made into theater—thus the emphasis on “theater-making”—and are used to craft or recraft stage spaces that willfully occasion new configurations of the role and essence of culture and performance.

**Theater in Francophone Africa: Approaching the Field**

The theater of Francophone Africa, whether in French or in African languages, has received little scholarly attention compared to the continent’s French-language literature. This imbalance largely reflects the inevitably sited and contextual nature of theatrical performance, and is compounded by the specific challenges of conducting site-focused research in a country of the Global South. Literary scholars focusing on Francophone African contexts frequently find themselves limited to addressing the role of playwrights in the craft of theater-making. The difficulties and cost of long-distance travel and extended research stays hinder Western scholars’ ability to explore the local lives and uses of the texts they study. Meanwhile, persistent inequalities in resources and access to scholarly publishing have limited scholarly output on theatrical production by researchers based in universities in Francophone Africa. As a result, a disproportionate share of the scholarly writing on this theater originates from European or North American institutions. These studies tend to focus on published plays that have garnered international attention and which receive stage productions among the limited number of European performance platforms dedicated to French-language work from Africa—leaving unanswered the question of whether such works also represent theatrical culture *in* Africa.

North American and European studies of Francophone African theater have productively explored the emergence of a cosmopolitan and
experimental trend among Francophone African playwrights. Focusing on the work of authors like Koffi Kwahulé, Kossi Efoui, and Caya Makhélé, among others, Sylvie Chalaye has identified a dramaturgical movement beginning in the 1990s characterized by a certain experimental aesthetic. Through a poetic hybridization of African and Western mythologies and rituals (most notably by Kossi Efoui in plays such as *Le Carrefour* or *Io*), or through an intrinsically musical approach to the French language as characterized most notably by the work of Koffi Kwahulé (as in *Jaz* or *Misterioso*—119), these playwrights have developed what Chalaye calls “an avant-garde chimerical theater of collage where forms and ideas are borrowed and transplanted to reflect postcolonial hybridization; what one may call a form of ‘Frankenstein’ theater.” Proposing the terms “Frankenstein syndrome” and “alien generation,” Chalaye describes the aesthetic approach of a group of playwrights who assume fully the “profoundly monstrous nature” of a dramaturgy which unapologetically splices cultural references and traditions together without any regard for where such traditions should “naturally” occur. The theater Chalaye describes proves every bit as site-specific as any performance form, with key historical and geographical touchstones such as Radio France Internationale’s African radio play competition, which once shed light on an innovative generation of post-independence playwrights that included Sony Labou Tansi and Sénouvo Zinsou. A similarly generative site can be found in the annual theater festival “Les Francophonies en Limousin,” which focuses on the work of non-European French-language playwrights and has provided an important breakout venue for a number of innovative theater-makers from Africa.

Notwithstanding the value of such a hybrid theater and its impact on the global theatrical landscape, from a critical standpoint it proves a problematic entry point to theatrical production in Francophone Africa. Its main sites of cultural production such as the RFI radio play contest and Les Francophonies en Limousin maintain, despite their best efforts, France and the West as the authoritative center of discussions around theatrical performance. In terms of reception, Judith Miller, in her work on Francophone African theater, has observed: “We can ask rightly just how ‘African’ . . . this theater [is] when performed before a non-African audience—a question which itself occludes the obvious existence of several different kinds of African publics.” Miller’s observation puts the reader on guard against conceiving of African, or Senegalese, theater audiences as monolithic. She also indicates the processes of production and cross-cultural translation that are necessary to bring such stage works to European venues.

Certainly, the challenges of a decontextualized theater present themselves with any play or production that attains transnational status. Yet, within scholarly discussions of Francophone African theater, one must consider the degree to which Western venues contribute to framings of what Valentin Mudimbe has identified as a discursive and Western “invention of
Africa,” or an image of the continent that forever determines and distorts understandings of its peoples and cultures. Judith Miller raises a similar concern when she addresses Kofi Kwahulé’s worry that the work of African playwrights, despite their experimental and dynamic contributions to what Miller describes as an emerging Francophone African stage textuality, may serve simply to reinforce received ideas and stereotypes. In order to address what John Conteh-Morgan has called the need to develop a “fuller picture of theatrical activity in Francophone Africa,” literary scholars must seek out the role of place and context in the emergence and success of African stage practices.

Beyond concerns of access and cost, literary studies’ disciplinary lacunae are also reminders of the field’s former tendency to declare, from a position of institutional authority, what constitutes “real” dramaturgical writing, “good” stage performance, or even “authentic” African theater. The patriarchal tone that pervades much of the foundational European writing on theater in Francophone African contexts reflects the status of the European cultural expert sent to Africa to consult with local artists on the development of their craft. The Martinican poet and playwright Aimé Césaire thoroughly lampoons the character of a clownish master of ceremonies, whom Césaire describes in a footnote as a white man sent by the “Technical Educational Scientific Cooperation Organization (TESCO) as a technical consultant to under-developed regions.” The character busies himself with the rigorous instruction of frivolous courtly manners. Vastey, the secretary to Christopher, the Haitian King and title character of Césaire’s tragedy, remarks bitterly: “Have you seen who Europe sends us when we ask for help from international aid organizations? Not an engineer, a soldier or a professor, but a master of ceremonies! That’s civilization, my friend. All a matter of form.”

Here, Césaire broadly mocks European arrogance, but also refers to a specific French initiative by which France once professed to assist the continent in its cultural development. With African independence looming, the French government found itself eager to maintain its influence through soft power and diplomacy. The French Ministry of Cooperation, created in 1959, deployed a number of French coopérants, or foreign consultants; these were usually young men, sent on mission to assist their African counterparts in a variety of domains. Some of these coopérants arrived to work in the cultural field. Eager and willing, though sometimes with limited training in their assigned fields, these consultants helped to train a new generation of cultural professionals and made a lasting impression on their Senegalese counterparts in a number of artistic fields, including theater.

One result of the coopérant model was the conferral of a special status, that of exceptionally qualified experts, on French teachers and performers. This status extended to scholars sent to Senegal to observe and write about the state of African theatrical performance. Coming from fields still attached
to Eurocentric literary canons and hierarchies, these scholars applied the same comparative and hierarchical lens to the performances they observed.\textsuperscript{21} Their site-based studies of African theater conclude with sets of recommendations pointing toward the possible “evolution” of African theater toward the standards of European stage traditions. Such a result to what was nonetheless a locally situated approach indicates that the sited perspective, while offering many advantages, does not eliminate the risk of falling into a certain paternalism that runs through much early scholarship on African cultural forms. Such paternalism is rare in writing on Francophone African theater today, since scholars no longer see their role as that of a consultant to the theater professionals whose work they study. However, a satisfactory method of engagement with theater-making in African contexts has yet to step in to replace the scholar-consultant model. A silence persists when scholars are faced with theatrical performances in African contexts that do not correspond with their own localized notions of what stage performance is supposed to look like and accomplish.

This book highlights the need to meet stage performances in African contexts on their own ground through a multidisciplinary approach that includes field methods to complement more familiar textual ones. My integration of experiences in the field, or what James Clifford described as “embodied activities pursued in historically and politically defined places,” situates this project within an emerging trend whereby literary scholars adopt fieldwork methodologies in order to approach objects of study pertinent to their disciplines, though slightly beyond the scope of their conventional methodological toolkit.\textsuperscript{22} Acknowledging the considerable challenges this move presents for literary scholars without specific training in field methods, Shalini Puri highlights how the use of fieldwork can, at the very least, help indicate which media are available to literary approaches and which lie outside of their scope. Moreover, without fieldwork, scholarship simply cannot address manifestations of theater, dance, or performance that deeply inform the novels and published texts that are more apt to arrive at the shores of foreign researchers. Drawing on the text-as-migrant metaphor, Puri states that, in the absence of fieldwork, “drama and performance are the stay-at-home country cousins of the novel or cinema; they are unable to cross borders with the same ease.”\textsuperscript{23} Not only does fieldwork take the trouble to meet theater and performance on its own ground, but sustained fieldwork also invites a broader interrogation of the cultural categories and criteria foreign researchers inevitably bring to their research encounters.\textsuperscript{24} What is gained when expressive forms are explored through their own local frameworks justifies, in my estimation, the methodological discomfort caused by attempts to render the processes of creating scholarly knowledge more collaborative and dialogical.

The field of performance studies has fostered a rich theorization of at least two aspects of critical engagement with performance and fieldwork that tend
to fall outside the scope of a literary approach. First, scholars of performance concern themselves deeply with embodiment and its role not only in performance and social relations, but also in approaches to critical fieldwork. In his writing on methodological approaches in performance studies, Dwight Conquergood foregrounds the many advantages of performance as a theoretical paradigm, since it “privileges particular, participatory, dynamic, intimate, precarious, embodied experience grounded in historical process, contingency and ideology.”

The lens of performance and its integration of embodiment and the particular do not supplant the study of texts but rather complement it. “The Performance Paradigm,” as Conquergood argues, “will be most useful if it decenters, without discarding, texts.” In the framework of Francophone African theater-making, therefore, Conquergood’s methodological approach, along with that of performance studies in general, presents less an alternative to textual analysis than an adjustment of critical framing. The undergirding critical objective, between the textual and performative paradigms, remains “the excavation of the political underpinnings of all modes of representation, even the scientific.”

The second way performance studies can help fill in the lacunae of text-centered approaches is through the field’s consideration of the researcher’s place within the theoretical framework being applied. In this, theorists of fieldwork have pointed out that academic writing, the end result of field research, has the secondary effect of denying coevalness to its object of study. In other words, fieldwork may grant the advantage of placing the researcher and the researched in a coeval and perhaps dialogical and collaborative relationship. However, the writing-up of research is not only done in solitude, but is also framed in an anthropological discourse that places the other in an eternal, timeless realm. For Margaret Drewal, field methodologies in the domain of performance must account for the fact that, in the process of creating knowledge, “performers and scholars alike are engaged in representation.” The scholar leaves an indelible mark on the knowledge being produced irrespective of any attempt at objective scholarly distance. “Neutrality,” Drewal insists, “is an impossibility.”

Although Drewal’s remarks refer specifically to research resulting from field methodologies, they also lay out a challenge to any scholarship on an expressive cultural form in which performance plays a central role. If scholarly approaches determine the limits of knowledge produced by research, a purely textual approach to theatrical performance disembodies the scholar’s analytical outlook on a profoundly embodied art form, therefore reproducing the very text/body dichotomy that the field of performance studies has sought to deconstruct. A focus on literary writings, anthologies of published plays, and their performance within the context of European-sponsored venues or festivals highlights the work of a select group of authors and creators operating within a specific transnational framework. Such an approach often fails to examine its own role in the creation of its object of study, and tends,
furthermore, to overlook the multiple variations and uses of the stage in local African contexts. This point is highlighted by Catherine Cole in her groundbreaking work on the history of the concert party form in Ghana, wherein she points out that, despite the ample theorizing employed in studies of post-colonial theater: “What has not yet been fully accounted for in scholarship on West African popular theatre is historical change, both within particular traveling theatre traditions and in the theatre’s relationship to transformations in society at large and to the audiences it serves.”

More recently, Maëline Le Lay has echoed the call for a focus on African performance contexts in her field-based study of theatrical production in the Katanga region of Congo. She underscores the limitations of literary approaches that fail to integrate field methods. For Le Lay, this scholarship “has the effect of focusing the public’s attention on writing by diasporic Africans.” The result is that “today’s average readers will believe they know about ‘African literature,’ even though they know nearly nothing about the real literary activity taking place on the African continent.” Such an observation does not necessarily imply or impose a stark division between a diasporic realm of literary or theatrical production and a local one. The two indeed intersect and influence each other at strategic convergence points. A Francophone author is rendered no less local or, to employ an even more treacherous term, less “authentic” for successfully exporting work abroad. Nor do local uses of the stage cut themselves off from global and cosmopolitan views on performance. The anthropologist Hélène Neveu Kringelbach points out in her study of Senegalese dance and self-fashioning the adeptness with which Senegalese performers engage their audiences in a double perspective, with one eye fixed on local concerns, and the other “turned to the wider world . . . concerned with individual success and participation in global cultural production on equal terms with artists from other parts of the world.”

A study of decolonizing performance stages in a postcolonial context need not erroneously pit the local against the global or seek truly African performance traditions in contrast with Europeanized cultural products for export. Scholarship in both literary and field-based disciplines has illustrated the complex and hybrid processes that belie such rigid and simplistic categories. From a methodological standpoint, it is also possible to integrate fieldwork into a study of theatrical performance without entirely surrendering the analytical lens offered by literary studies as a discipline. As a response to tendencies in performance studies to associate theater with ritual in a manner that framed the two practices as manifesting the same performative essence, Alain Ricard described the place of theater as situated primarily within a system of poiesis. Ricard outlines his argument in contrast to the more anthropological approach to performance pioneered by Richard Schechner, which extends the domain of theater to forms of ritual, ceremony, and folklore. Ricard’s approach, which nonetheless defends the importance of observing the lives and work of performers through fieldwork, does not frame itself as
fundamentally anthropological, but rather conceptualizes the stage as a space of composition, writing, and poetic construction where, through a series of conventions, art reflects on itself and on the world around it, resulting in a sophisticated and compositional form of dramaturgical expression.35

Within this broader theoretical perspective, my own approach represents an attempt to bridge the apparent divide between literary studies and fieldwork-based disciplines. In committing to a sited approach—that is, one that focuses specifically on theatrical practices as they emerge, innovate, and thrive in a Senegalese context—I look to explore the processes of production, performance, and reception which define a given performance space and frame that space’s ability to host a certain kind of embodied, performed behavior. I employ the term “stagecraft” to refer to the nuts-and-bolts work that goes into the craft of theater-making from conception to reception. I also stretch the term to highlight, on a more theoretical level, the intangible and dynamic processes forever attached to these “magnetic fields of tensions and conflicts,” to return to Ngũgĩ’s definition, or to highlight how historical memory, politics, and local social structures come to inform their creation and parameters. These processes involve the active participation of performers and audience; they engage deeply with the social and political and make do with multiple restrictions of space, customs, and resources while occasionally positing innovative new ways of being together as an audience-community.

On Reading Decolonizing Stages

In Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama, Christopher Balme explores the strategies of what he calls “syncretic theater,” an approach which uses indigenous performance elements within the framework of Western theatrical and dramaturgical conventions in order to respond to the legacies of imperialism, colonization, and decolonization.36 Acknowledging the wide range of scholarship on performance iconographies of “the East” in the work of European stage directors (Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine are among the most frequently cited in this regard), Balme points out how syncretic models have also served playwrights, directors, and theorists from throughout the formerly colonized world. In light of this observation, Balme explores, in one of his chapters, the presence of Yoruba ritual in the dramaturgy of Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka, which, he argues, exemplifies the potential of such a syncretic approach by suspending at strategic moments conventional Western and Aristotelian rules of drama. Through his reading of Soyinka’s writing for the stage, Balme underscores how “syncretic theatre often attempts to reinvest theatre with a communal religious spirit, the long-cherished desire of several generations of Western theatre-reformers, which they very seldom achieved in practice.”37 This study adopts a similar outlook on stage artists’ ability to appropriate and
deconstruct performance forms through syncretic means and also seeks to place these achievements in dialogue with the ambitions of Western theater-makers. However, rather than framing such stage innovations within a global dialogue held largely between the former colonized and colonizers, I focus on a single national context in order to address theater practitioners’ engagement with specific and locally situated debates for which the West, or a broader transnational audience, is not always the primary interlocutor. I also emphasize the nonetheless undeniably syncretic nature of the forms studied by granting that once stage spaces and practices emerge in Senegalese performance contexts, they become sites of African or Senegalese stagecraft, and no less so for originating from an encounter with French colonial discourses.

Throughout this book, I adopt an approach that conceptualizes the work of stagecraft at the convergence of three deeply imbricated elements of performance: text, embodiment, and place, each of which takes on a literal meaning along with a more theoretically construed level of interpretation. “Text” can, of course, include written texts in the form of plays but need not refer to plays, literature, or any form of writing at all. Such a view of text as it relates to performance resonates with attempts, most notably in France, to establish what Anne Ubersfeld called in her 1977 book *Lire le théâtre* (*Reading Theater*) a theater semiotics. This movement took root in a reconsideration of the concept of dialogism developed by the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin. In her use of dialogism as a critical approach to theater and performance, Ubersfeld departs somewhat from Bakhtin’s own understanding of the concept, since the Russian critic argued that the dialogical effect emerged by way of a narrative voice—present in the novel though unavailable to embodied stage performance—that is able to absorb and reflect the framing social reality, or the multi-vocality of discourse, in which any utterance arises. While theater indeed seems to lack such a framing narrative voice, Ubersfeld counters Bakhtin’s exclusion of the stage by exploring how the interplay of text and performance generates a semiotic relationship and multiplicity of voices similar to those Bakhtin identified in the novel. If theater lacks the discursive foundation offered by the narrative voice, the very nature of the stage space is to absorb the social heteroglossia that is central to Bakhtin’s model.

Among the processes of stagecraft which constitute the theatrical stage, the textual element also includes what in literature one might call the “paratext.” These are utterances and ephemera leading up to or framing an event, as well as the artists’ or audience members’ personal narration prior, during, or after the event. In their essay bringing theater studies into dialogue with the genetic criticism of literary texts, Almuth Grésillon and Jean-Marie Thomasseau call for the analysis of “peritexts” (*péritextes*), or the ensemble of documentation produced by a performance, including programs, reviews, interviews, and so on. The genetic approach indeed relies on a semiotic reading of performance that goes beyond the written text, underscoring how, in performance, “everything hinges on the in-between of the text and the
stage, on the complex and delicate movement between the space of the page and that of the stage, on a continuous and reversible back-and-forth between that which can be read, heard and seen.”\textsuperscript{42} Although this study integrates a discussion of such peritexts, my view of text and its place in performance aligns more closely with Karin Barber’s notion of “entextualization,” which displaces writing as the sole means of conferring textuality on discourse. Barber’s definition of text includes forms of language, action, and speech acts, casting a wider net in order to conceptualize as text that which “is created when instances of discourse, by being rendered detachable from their immediate context of emission, are made available for repetition or recreation in other contexts.”\textsuperscript{43} This more “neutral” view of text lends itself more freely to cross-cultural analyses, as Barber argues: “Instead of trying to export a culturally-loaded category (‘literature’), we can use an entextualisation perspective to develop a more neutral comparative sociology and history of textuality, oral and written.”\textsuperscript{44} Barber could very well have included “theater” as another example of such a culturally loaded category, a fact that makes her model of textuality particularly well-suited for a study of stage performance in African contexts.\textsuperscript{45}

The second element, embodiment, encompasses many different concerns, recognizing, first and foremost, the degree to which performative analysis benefits from an embodied approach that does not limit an understanding of knowledge and heritage transmission to questions of rhetoric, trope, and conceit. Highly instructive in this regard is Diana Taylor’s concept of the “scenario,” which she describes as “a paradigmatic setup that relies on supposedly live participants, structured around a schematic plot, with an intended (though adaptable) end.”\textsuperscript{46} Embodiment includes the semiotic value of the body on stage as a signifier at the same level as the text, the set, costumes, and so on.\textsuperscript{47} However, embodiment in performance may also produce, as well as reflect, social relations, on stage as in social life. In her study of African performance and audiences, Barber draws out the role of performances in constituting their own audiences through the performative act of convening them: “Performances do not just play to ready-made congregations of spectators which are out there awaiting address; they convene those congregations and by their mode of address assign them a certain position from which to receive the address. Thus performances, in the act of addressing audiences, constitute those audiences as a particular form of collectivity.”\textsuperscript{48} Part of performance’s strength thus lies in its use of embodiment as a means of rehearsing new and innovative social models, or reinforcing existing ones. Such embodied interventions employ inherited scenarios to interact with the limits and discourses governing their stage space, potentially remolding the space into something new.

Socially situated forms of discourse through performance left a profound mark on the early years of theatrical creation in Senegal, and continue to influence the ways in which contemporary performance spaces are perceived.
and crafted. As the early performers of this theater sought out rhetorical and performative space on the stage of the William Ponty School to respond to the demands of colonial pedagogy, they also employed their embodied enactment as a meaningful dodge of racial discourse, stepping out of their own role and into that of another. The stakes of embodiment also rise with the decision to don a role or to embody a character in a manner that runs counter to the socially or culturally acceptable, a central issue in chapter 4’s discussion of Sufi stage performances. Contemporary performers on the Senegalese stage contend with the functions of a performance space left behind by the elite of a previous generation and employ embodied performances to trouble old narratives in ways that text cannot. Lastly, my own role as a foreign researcher bringing attention to these performance practices is not neutral within the processes of fieldwork and knowledge formation, a fact I attempt to foreground particularly in areas where fieldwork has played a prominent role in my research methods.

Place, the third element of this study’s analytical approach, refers on the most obvious level to the place where a performance occurs. Whether a staged piece will be presented in the streets of a popular neighborhood in plain view of public onlookers or on the stage of the Daniel Sorano National Theater for ticket-holding spectators clearly has an effect on the piece’s creation and reception. Moreover, place is of primary concern to directors and performers who craft their work with the implications, limitations, and potentialities of place at the forefront of their minds. Discussions of place can also take into account stage artists’ ability to appropriate or evoke sites of memory connected to a collective remembering of the past or an imagining of the future, and often both simultaneously. “Place” therefore can refer to both a physical location and its weight within social discourses of cultural memory. Place plays a prominent role in my examination, in chapter 1, of the special status of the William Ponty School in narratives of Senegalese cultural history. It also informs the function of the French centres culturels in instantiating new Franco-African identities during the late colonial period.

The three elements of performance described above do not fit neatly within discrete and mutually exclusive categories, and the creative processes I wish to examine operate within a fluid and interweaving dynamic. Yet, as creative notions, text, embodiment, and place are among the principal concerns and creative tools at the disposal of theater artists in Senegal as elsewhere. This study places a sustained focus on the act of putting these three elements into play with one another. In focusing on such acts of stagecraft, I aim to highlight the means by which theater artists in Senegal have recrafted the theatrical stage into a variety of decolonizing creative spaces that serve to articulate expectations of the political realm, constitute new social relationships, and re-narrate forms of historical and cultural heritage. The stage spaces and innovations that result from such processes do so in dialogue with what preceded or coexists with them. They comment simultaneously on the
past and present. Theater-makers imbue them with hopes and concerns for the future and craft them to propose, by performance, a certain vision for moving forward.

Exploring Histories of Senegalese Stagecraft

The goal of this book is not to provide a comprehensive history of theatrical performance in Senegal, but rather to focus on sites of stage innovation that fall into the blindspots of strictly literary or field-based approaches. The following chapters are loosely structured in two parts and, for the sake of clarity, follow a historical chronology; however, I do not wish to suggest the existence of rigid boundaries between the stage spaces and artistic movements I explore. The first part addresses sites of performance generally understood as being part of the “official” history of theatrical production in Senegal. In chapter 1, I revisit the use of the theatrical stage space at the French colonial school called the École Normale William Ponty. I read against previous critical assessments of this “teachers’ theater,” which has been frequently dismissed as the product of colonial pedagogy and discourse, in order to focus on the performances’ embodied function within a colonial social space. Chapter 2 explores a subsequent adaptation of the colonial, “Franco-African” stage space for the centres culturels of the 1950s. The cultural centers’ performance stage and theatrical competition, called “La Coupe Théâtrale,” led to a post-war and post-Ponty theatrical renewal allowing creators to reimagine their roles as potential citizens of the French Empire under the terms of the newly established “French Union.” Chapter 3 continues to explore the stage as a space of dialogue and engagement between the country’s political elite and an audience at once local and global by addressing the stakes of the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (or First World Festival of Negro Arts) in Dakar in 1966. I argue that the festival served as a key site for imagining a range of Pan-African approaches to culture and stagecraft, which the event framed as an integral part of the statecraft expected of the hommes de culture, or men of culture, who were tasked with leading the continent’s newly independent democracies.

The second half of the book adopts a more field-oriented approach, making greater use of oral histories and fieldwork to address underexplored or unexplored aspects of Senegal’s theatrical heritage. Chapter 4 delves into the hitherto unwritten history of a traveling Murid performance called Bamba Mos Xam which, from its opening in 1968 until its closure in the 1980s, chronicled the life and miracles of the Sufi order’s founding saint, Shaykh Amadu Bamba. I argue that Bamba Mos Xam laid the groundwork for de-secularizing what had been an inherently secular stage space in order to speak to the Sufi religious sensibilities and morality of a broader Senegalese public. Chapter 5, in its exploration of the widespread success of telefilms
and televised series beginning in the 1980s, continues an examination of Senegalese stage artists’ alternative means of interacting with large, popular audiences that were not likely to meet them in the confines of the country’s few professional performance venues. By teasing out the central themes and narrative techniques employed by the most in-demand television troupe of the time, Daaray Kocc, I underscore the medium’s ability to address, in the intimacy of domestic spaces, topics deemed inappropriate for public airing. Television proved particularly adept at giving voice to the disenchantment and grievances of an ever-emerging, though hardly thriving, Senegalese middle class in the era of post-independence neoliberal reform. My final chapter explores the emergence and use of the most widespread approach to stage performance in Senegal today, that of popular theater. I focus on the work of one prominent theater company of the Dakar region, Kàddu Yaraax, as it embraces, sometimes defies, and most often contends with its status as a leading “popular” troupe. I discuss popular theatrical approaches as a form of stagecraft that is adept at navigating the demands and interests of a limited range of funding sources while creating new spaces of contemporary social and political criticism addressed to the collectively imagined Senegalese masses.

The different stage sites addressed throughout this book call for varying and flexible research methodologies. They align themselves with a diverse range of performance traditions and historical temporalities, activating narratives rooted in the country’s multivalent heritage as a crucial player within African histories, the Muslim world, a transnational Francophonie, the Global South, and the cultural avant-garde. Each of these facets informs, to varying degrees and in a broad range of tonalities, the stage spaces addressed herein. The stage work I explore consists not only of the production of theatrical content, but also the crafting of stage spaces that recall, reinvent, and connect the above-listed facets through dynamic approaches to representation, activism, and embodiment. Therefore, to study stagecraft and theater-making is to focus not only on what theater says, but also on how theater artists turn the stage space into a platform for productive and participatory social dialogue.