

In and Out in Senegal: Unearthing Queer Roots in Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *De purs hommes*

Devin Bryson 

Abstract: Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's 2018 novel *De purs hommes* fictionalizes recent incidents of homophobia in Senegal to interrogate the relationship between queer men and social dynamics in the country. This article demonstrates that the novel deploys multidirectional critical discourse and oblique narrative tactics to highlight the foundational role in Senegalese culture and society of the fraught dichotomy between private and public life. Bryson contends that the novel unearths these queer roots in order to incorporate all normative identities into queer existence, conceptually blurring the social barriers to LGBTQ+ agency in the country.

Résumé: Le roman de 2018 de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, *De purs hommes*, fictionalise les récents incidents d'homophobie au Sénégal pour interroger la relation entre les hommes homosexuel et les dynamiques sociales dans le pays. Cet article démontre que le roman déploie un discours critique multidirectionnel et des tactiques narratives obliques pour mettre en évidence le rôle fondamental, dans la culture et la société sénégalaises, de la dichotomie pesante entre vie privée et vie publique. Bryson soutient que le roman déterre ces racines queer afin d'incorporer toutes les identités normatives dans l'existence queer, brouillant conceptuellement les barrières sociales à l'agence LGBTQ+ dans le pays.

Resumo: *De purs hommes*, o romance de Mohamed Mbougar Sarr publicado em 2018, ficciona os recentes incidentes homofóbicos que ocorreram no Senegal, de modo a questionar a relação entre a homossexualidade masculina e as dinâmicas sociais no

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Devin Bryson is Associate Professor of Global Studies, French at Illinois College (USA). Dr. Bryson has published on the Senegalese social movement *Y'en a Marre* and contemporary Senegalese filmmaker Adams Sie and is currently at work on a manuscript about urban Senegalese cinema of the twenty-first century.
E-mail: devin.bryson@ic.edu

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país. Este artigo demonstra que o romance utiliza um discurso crítico multidirecional, bem como táticas narrativas dissimuladas para sublinhar o papel fundacional, na cultura e na sociedade senegaleses, da problemática dicotomia entre a vida pública e a vida privada. Bryson sustenta que o romance desvenda estas raízes homossexuais com o objetivo de incorporar todas as identidades normativas na existência homossexual, assim dissipando conceptualmente as barreiras sociais à agencialidade LGBTQ+ no país.

Keywords: Senegal; LGBTQ; queer theory; politics; cultural norms; fiction; francophone literature

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Introduction

In February 2008, five Senegalese men were arrested following the report in a local magazine of gay marriages having taken place in the greater Dakar area. This incident marked the beginning of a two-year period of intensified sexual accusation and denunciation in Senegal, during which a number of men were arrested and imprisoned, while mobs attacked others also suspected of homosexual behavior. Perhaps the most viscerally public event occurred in May 2009 in the city of Thiès, when a mob exhumed the body of a recently deceased young man. Rumors had begun circulating around the supposed cause of his death, which led to the popular belief that the young man was gay and had contracted HIV. After the exhumation, the mob carried the body across town to the house of the deceased's parents, leaving them with the unwelcome task of figuring out where to lay the body of their dead son. All of this, of course, was recorded on cell phone cameras, and the videos were heatedly passed around on social media.

Not all of the men who were attacked, arrested, or denounced were proven to have had sex with men or self-identified as gay. Instead, their bodies, their demeanors, and their public presence became sites onto which Senegalese society projected its complicated beliefs about LGBTQ+ identities. These projections took precedence over the men's subjectivities and private lives, putting them at risk in public spaces and implying a right for the public to surveil their privacy. This article examines Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's recent novel *De purs hommes* (2018), which fictionalizes this period in Senegal. In Sarr's narrative, a nominally straight university professor, Ndéné Gueye, is caught up in the current of gay panic after watching an exhumation video similar to the real life one from 2009. After Ndéné has viewed the video, he proceeds to seek answers to the questions it raises about the deceased, the social factors surrounding the incident, and his own identity and social position. Sarr's novel foregrounds the dynamics between private and public

spaces, intimate relations, and social institutions that were at work not only in the incidents that occurred from 2008 to 2010 but also throughout postcolonial Senegal. The novel conceives of these sites as inherently queer, even as they are locations for the policing and exclusion of queer men, which renders all of the subjectivities that occupy them as essentially queer themselves.¹ This ultimately destabilizes the grounds for the material exclusion and differentiation of LGBTQ+ individuals within the country.

Understandably, due to the underrepresentation of LGBTQ+ lives and experiences in African cultural productions, much has been made of Sarr's sharp-eyed depictions of gay men and the representational social engagement in *De purs hommes* (Repinecz 2018).² Aminata Cécile Mbaye provides the most attentive and thoughtful reading of the novel to date, as she demonstrates how *De purs hommes* foregrounds the imaginative articulation of the gay man in Senegal through political, religious, and social discourses, and then rewrites and deconstructs those discourses to offer up localized forms of queer resistance (2020a). For Mbaye, the novel articulates strategic queer positions against Western homonormativity and those public discourses in Senegal that ostracize and attack masculine same-sex sexuality. This article builds on Mbaye's argument but takes it one step further, demonstrating that the deconstruction of global and local discourses around queer Senegalese men in the novel is bolstered by a more fundamental interrogation of Senegalese society and subjectivities. Of course, the delineation of society through hegemonic masculinity has particular consequences for queer individuals, and *De purs hommes* does not shy away from those horrific outcomes. However, the novel's primary critical objective is to demonstrate the inherent instability that undergirds all masculine identities in this fictional representation of contemporary Senegal, whether the men in question are having sex with men or not. It does this through foregrounding the foundational binary of private and public spaces and states of being that pervades all of Senegalese society.

Sarr's novel critically reproduces the interplay between private and public selves in Senegalese society, not only through the literary obfuscation of its masculine characters, and especially their sexuality, but also through the social violence and exclusion that is enacted against them; the queer men in the novel are never depicted as actively gay or even having sex with men, and the attacks they face are never straightforwardly represented. Much of their private subjecthood is presented opaquely, even as it is coopted by the Senegalese public, similar to the situation of the men implicated in the actual incidents of anti-queer violence. *De purs hommes* forces its readers to endlessly question the relationship between each man's identity and his social position, imbuing even the most seemingly normatively masculine characters, relations, and social institutions with fluidity and illegibility. The true, pure men evoked by the title of the novel do not exist; they are simply illusions. This analysis then reinforces Naminata Diabaté's identification of a "pervasiveness of oblique narrative strategies" in francophone African literature that depicts

queer existences (2016:48). However, the present argument also engages with her concept of “radical queerness,” which characterizes a narrative tactic of proliferating nonnormative sexual, relational, and social practices. I expand her definition of radical queerness in relation to *De purs hommes* to include its representations of the society, culture, and the population broadly. They are initially and perpetually in queer states of uncertainty and slippage in the novel, never narratively set, fixed, or incorporated into normative literary conceptualizations. The political stakes of such representational strategies in the novel are significant, unlike the previously deflective approaches in francophone African literature as identified by Diabaté.

By analyzing *De purs hommes* as a critical portrait of the queer depths of Senegalese culture, social institutions, and personal relations, and not just as an articulation of queer resistance in heteronormative contemporary Senegal, as Mbaye does, I hold the novel up as fundamentally inclusive and empowering, not only for queer individuals, but also for all nonnormative subject positions. This component of my argument draws significantly on Jarrod Hayes’ concept of “queer roots,” which opens space for alternative narratives of the homeland and indigenous cultures; these narratives not only implicate LGBTQ+ identities, but also have “political implications (roots that queer also resist the normative, homogenizing imperatives of rooted identity)” (2016:2). In revealing the queer workings of postcolonial Senegal, the novel emphasizes that, while the roots of homophobia are firmly planted within Senegalese culture and society, so are the origins of its undoing. The novel creates a precise, layered, multidimensional portrait of postcolonial Senegal, articulating Senegalese roots while simultaneously setting that society as always already unmoored, thereby queering those roots. This, then, embeds the potential of queer empowerment not in Western criticism of Senegalese homophobia, global conceptualizations of queer identities, or even in queer resistance from the margins of Senegalese society, but instead in the queer roots of Senegalese society and culture as formulated by the novel. Its decidedly unstable depictions of queer Senegalese men deflect any argument that Senegal is an essentialized homophobic country, remove the disproportionate responsibility on queer people to combat, avoid, resist, or queer normative society, and center forms of personal queer agency.

Ultimately, Sarr’s novel simultaneously asserts and questions Senegalese cultural identity and the social body. This article shows that *De purs hommes* is a deeply queer text, perpetually unstable; fraught with limitations as well as potential and marked by the influence of other identities and cultures, it strongly delineates the queer dynamics of contemporary Senegal. Viewed in this way, the novel is an attempt to conceptualize Senegalese subjectivities, social equity, and national liberation, both queer and heteronormative, beyond the binary of resistance and complicity, outside of indigeneity and globalization, and influenced by both imperialism and local forms of power.

In the first section, I contextualize *De purs hommes* within recent formulations of cultural engagement in Senegal and in francophone African literary studies, as well as within globalized forms of queer discourse. This

contextualization emphasizes the novel's multimodal representational strategies, intended to provoke social change, as products of postcolonial Senegal, even as it depicts queer subjects who might be marginalized within that society; it suggests queer connections within global networks, reinforcing the critical framework of queer roots. I show that the novel counteracts forms of queer erasure, exclusion, and violence that can come from both African societies and global LGBTQ+ discourse. Yet the novel also clearly engages with the realities of queer existence in Africa as well as with concepts from U.S.-based queer theory. A large part of the narrative's instability is due to the way Sarr refuses to limit the discursive interlocutors to one culture or country or even continent, while still acknowledging the global disparities in terms of power and self-determination. This transnationally fluid, multivalent approach to the depiction of queer life in contemporary Senegal opens up further imaginative possibilities for same-sex desire, relations, and communities in Africa.

Next, I move on to close readings of *De purs hommes*, first in a section that details the foundational instability of all masculine characters and their experiences, whether gay or even sexual. Then, in a section that carefully examines the development of Ndéné Gueye as the narrator-protagonist, I show that he, like the other masculine figures in the novel, is determinedly queer in his identity and social context from the beginning of the narrative. This queer narrative rooting of his subjectivity has social and cultural ramifications for the primordial binary of private and public spheres. I conclude that *De purs hommes* is a uniquely provocative text that sits comfortably within African, Senegalese, and global literary and queer contexts, yet significantly engages all three domains in specific ways that imagine greater Senegalese queer agency.

Senegalese Literary Social Engagement and Global Queer Discourse

De purs hommes undertakes its literary engagement with LGBTQ+ rights in Senegal by decentering globalized discourse and interrogating localized specificities, which leads to productive friction between the two. This approach reflects trends within recent francophone African literature and, more particularly, within Senegalese cultural fields. Early twenty-first century francophone African literature has demonstrated the "exhaustion of the concept of engagement," as it is understood by late colonial and early postcolonial African authors (Cazenave & Célérier 2011:6). Sarr and others have pushed contemporary African writing into new forms of literary engagement with distinct political objectives and literary conceptualizations, including the notion that African writers are "cultural practitioners who affirm their world citizenship...rather than as people from a specific national, cultural, or geographic origin" (Cazenave & Célérier 2011:5). Contemporary African writers such as Sarr articulate their literary social engagement specifically from a stance displaced from their supposed roots, which elides the historical boundaries between the African writer and the world.³

Such recent literary practices have particular import within Senegal. Sarr's novels are one component of the recent aesthetic and intellectual projects taking place in Senegal that aim to reformulate the historical binary relationship between Africa and the world, particularly in regard to pressing social issues. Scholar and author Felwine Sarr has been especially prominent in such cultural interventions.⁴ Sarr (2016) envisions a gesture he calls writing Africa-the-World—*écrire l'Afrique-Monde*—that destabilizes global dichotomies privileging Western thought and societies while shunting aside African contributions to global problems.⁵ Sarr's articulation of the conceptual reformulations that must occur in order to adequately address global social issues—melting dichotomies, blending binaries, decentered thought, pluralized perspectives—has strong echoes of queer critical frameworks and terminology, speaking to the foundational role of queerness in recent conceptualizations of African societies from within Senegal.

De purs hommes makes a significant contribution to this intellectual, artistic, and political current within contemporary Senegalese culture by laying bare its queer roots. The novel demarcates, denounces, and protects the various social, legal, and cultural specificities of non-binary queer individuals in Senegal; it resists the impetus to contextualize such individuals within Western conceptualizations and categories of gender and sexuality in order to achieve social legibility and satisfy some essentialized notion of human rights. In this way, the novel extends the call for a “de-homogenization” of queer studies and its Western conceptualizations of queer existence and identities (Osinubi 2016). It advocates for greater inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals within Senegalese society, while also resisting a progressive view of the advancement of gay visibility, even gay rights, in Senegal from “the globalizing tendencies of Western homosexuality” (Hayes 2020:180).

Nevertheless, like other recent literary and intellectual works in francophone Africa, *De purs hommes* lobbies for direct change and empowerment within Senegal by engaging in multidirectional, global discourse. Instead of setting itself apart from the world on queer issues, the novel demands that it be included in the dialogue. It does this by engaging with key intertexts from canonical American queer studies and deploying loaded queer imagery from the West. In highlighting this dimension of the novel, I claim the text as a site for cross-cultural dialogue with queer theory. This theoretical dialogue opens up discursive possibilities for Senegalese LGBTQ+ specificities to intersect and to intermingle with others from around the world, rendering global queer solidarity complexly heterogeneous. There are, admittedly, potential pitfalls to this approach (Tamale 2011a). Nevertheless, this narrative openness to globalized discourses and cross-cultural exchanges is part of recently-adopted Senegalese cultural ideology, as well as socially-engaged approaches within francophone African literature, especially with regard to queer representation. The novel attentively balances these often conflicting discourses on queer subjectivities and liberation in a way that accesses and integrates them equitably, with African empowerment as the ultimate goal (Tamale 2011b).

In its refusal to submit Senegalese queer identities to narrative transparency, global legibility, and essentializing local rhetoric, *De purs hommes* retains and strategically deploys the queer potentialities of those identities. One of the foundational conceptualizations of American queer theory was that “explicit exposure of the subject would manifest how thoroughly he has been inscribed within a socially given totality” (Miller 1985:27). *De purs hommes* counters the reification of heteronormative and imperialistically Western social and aesthetic discourses inherent in any attempt to “out” Senegalese gay identities and experiences in literature. It is neither an unmitigated denunciation of Senegalese homophobia nor a celebration of homosexuality. Instead, the novel obliquely and queerly evokes the unstable centrality of the private/public binary, and all attendant binaries within normative Senegalese society.

In this regard, *De purs hommes* clearly references Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's intellectual project in her landmark text of queer theory, *Epistemology of the Closet*, where she points to “the distinctly indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public, that were and are critically problematic for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large” (1990:12). *De purs hommes* traces the mappings of homosexuality with the more general social dimensions of gender, social class, and national identity, among other social markers, for the construction of normative contemporary Senegalese society. Wayne Koestenbaum views the construction of homosexuality in the West similarly to Sedgwick, as a question of private vs. public space, but he expands his view from the concept of the epistemological closet proposed by Sedgwick to the home; he describes the category of homosexuality as a discourse “of home's shattering: what bodies do when they disobey, what bodies do when they are private” (1993:47). Sarr's novel attends particularly to this intimate and visible divide, the structuring power of the binary between private and public on bodies that desire and are desired.

An additional queer intertext from the American academy may be found in “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” in which Leo Bersani argues that heteronormative society's erasure of the “disturbing, socially abrasive, violent, less respectful” aspects of sex has had particular implications for gay male identities, particularly in their physical acts of sex (1987:215). He advocates for the power of gay male sex in “lucidly laying out for us, the inestimable value of sex as—at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects—anticommunal, antiegalian, antinurturing, antiloving” (Bersani 1987:215). These dimensions can corrode and reconfigure normative social values and institutions that oppress and marginalize certain communities and identities, since, in Bersani's estimation, social structures are derivations of the seizure and/or loss of power in sexual relations. To this end, the rectum, the large intestine in gay anal sex acts, becomes a figure for the essential shattering of the subject and its potential reconfiguration, as well as its attendant social structures. *De purs hommes* pulls images and words seemingly directly from Bersani's text, even as it demurs from explicit representations of gay sex, imbuing its protagonist's

queer trajectory with the potential of subjective shattering as articulated by Bersani, but within a Senegalese context.

Ultimately, in its exchanges with the realities and theories of queer existence in Senegal, both empowered and oppressive, as well as with Western conceptualizations of African homophobia, *De purs hommes* situates its representations and social engagement on decidedly fluid and tense conceptual ground. The novel is not just the latest contribution to the lineage of Senegalese cultural productions that have presented depictions of gay, queer, and non-gender binary conforming individuals (M'Baye 2019). Instead, *De purs hommes* transcends that pedagogical impulse, foregrounding the inherently unstable, denaturalized dimensions of postcolonial Senegal within global contexts. In this way, the novel assumes a generalized critical posture against all iterations of normative society. For this, the novel is much richer and more meaningful in its engagement with LGBTQ+ identities on the continent, and specifically in Senegalese society, as well as internationally. This sets the stage for a discussion of the literary and discursive strategies employed in *De purs hommes*, situating its social context and characters within a liminal, indeterminate, yet purposefully destabilizing position to the predominant rhetoric and representation of normative and queer subjectivities, local as well as global.

The Senegalese Closet

De purs hommes clearly demonstrates the extent of the threat of violence to men who have sex with men in Senegal. Besides the desecration of the dead young man's body in the video, Ndéné's colleague Coly is caught in a compromising position with another man and beaten into a coma. Ndéné himself is treated as a social pariah, being put on probation at his job, as he implicates himself in queer existence. This type of violence and exclusion toward sexually nonconforming men is shown in the novel to be a product of political, social, and religious discourse, as the minister of education forbids literature professors at the university, of which Ndéné is one, to teach the texts of known homosexual authors, while imams decry the threat of imperialistic gay identities to Senegalese religious and cultural values. The novel does not shy away from cataloguing the currents of hatred and violence toward same-sex sexuality that exist in Senegal, drawing details of these narrative moments from recent current events.

Yet the novel never takes those material realities as inevitable, yet tragic, consequences of being a member of the LGBTQ+ community in Senegal. Instead, it focuses on the discursive construction and projection of the figure of the queer man in contemporary Senegalese society. It reveals that this construction is a product of and a tool for the reinforcement of normative society. A number of scholars and activists of queer existences in Senegal have identified the marginalization and violence toward queer identities generally, but especially during the historical setting of the novel, as manifestations of the complex intersections between various social, political, religious,

media, and cultural discourses that encompass all members of the body politic (Niang et al. 2003; Human Rights Watch 2010; Gning 2013; Mbaye 2018, 2020b; Broqua 2019; Coly 2019). The refusal of social institutions to recognize, or their inclination to violently reject, gender and sexual non-conforming men in contemporary Senegal in order to be socially, politically, and religiously legible, autonomous, or even authoritative has produced a more generalized cultural atmosphere of gay panic.

Furthermore, the novel expansively depicts the subjective experience of living within such a discursive context. It avoids assigning the consequences of these processes to “only” members of the LGBTQ+ community, as many of the characters are not participating in same-sex intimacies; none of the men is obviously gay in a narrow application of that term. Instead, the masculine characters in *De purs hommes* remain queer, in the most inclusive understanding of the category, unsettling any discursive fixing of gay men, even as they face the consequences of constructed homophobia. Gay identities and experiences are only tangentially evoked through rumors, hearsay, misperceptions, and superficial adherence to social mores. Even the most horrifically violent acts of homophobia toward the suspected characters in the novel are recounted after the fact or secondhand. All supposed markers of gay masculine identities and experiences in *De purs hommes* are unsubstantiated. The young man named Amadou, who is yanked from his grave in the video that provokes the narrative, is already dead, exhumed, and returned to a resting place by the time the novel begins. The only lasting remnant of his gay identity is the video that documents society’s posthumous reaction, displacing his queerness onto the wider social forces that compelled the incidents that were captured in the video. When Ndéné does track down Amadou’s mother and speaks to her about his story prior to the events in the video, he learns that the mother doesn’t know if Amadou was gay or not, saying that it doesn’t even matter; he was simply her son.

Coly is another character in the novel who embodies a culturally-specific form of gay male identity that is obscure but imbued with potential. As Ndéné undertakes his informal investigation into queer identities in Senegal, Coly tells him that gay people have always been a part of the culture, but that they have always kept their intimate feelings, personal relations, and sexual behavior private. Coly even denounces queer Senegalese who have broken that cultural tradition and who clamor for queer visibility in Senegal. Coly’s own sexual or romantic acts with another man that provoke violence are never directly portrayed in the novel; Ndéné simply hears about the horrific results third-hand before visiting his friend in the hospital. Coly lies lifelessly in a coma as Ndéné watches over him, another example, similar to Amadou’s, of the violated queer masculine body being a subsequent site for oblique, subjective queer witness. An earlier scene during which Ndéné visits Coly at his home ends with the arrival of another man, one of the known religious devotees at Ndéné’s mosque. Ndéné decides to leave, sensing that the men want to be alone. As Ndéné lingers at the doorway, that threshold between

private and public space, he watches Coly turn back into his house, noting the moment is heavy with meaning, even as he cannot fully articulate it.

Ndéné himself becomes a victim of queer marginalization due to his progressive interest in the exhumation video and its larger context, even though he never engages in intimacy or expresses clear desire for another man. His identity is queered simply by rumors and fearful projections which, nevertheless, have real consequences. His parents express their worry that he is living a sinful life and the university puts him on administrative leave. The representation of Senegalese same-sex identities and experiences in the novel is always mediated through misdirection and obscurity. At its most superficial level, *De purs hommes* is clearly invested in representing the reality of homosexuality in Senegal. However, it never does this through a straightforward depiction of gay behavior and interiority. The novel catalogues various ways of being a queer man in Senegal, concluding that most men are inevitably queer in their failure to meet normative Senegalese discursive standards.

The figure in *De purs hommes* who is seemingly the most straightforwardly nonbinary in his gender and sexual identities is identified in the text as a *góor-jigéen*, a Wolof word that literally means “man-woman”; this term has taken on a range of connotations, pejorative, neutral, or even positive, for gay and non-conforming gender binary individuals in Senegal (Gning 2013; Broqua 2017). Even with this definitional slippage in terminology, the *góor-jigéen* maintains a historical presence in public social events in Senegal (Coly 2019). The inclusion of the *góor-jigéen* in the novel demonstrates the specific forms of nonconforming gender and sexual expressions in Senegal that contradict the localized forms of homophobia that claim queer individuals are Westernized aberrations of “pure” Senegalese culture. It also “highlights the limitation of certain Western categories” for Senegalese conceptualizations of gender and sexuality (Mbaye 2020a:906). Yet even the *góor-jigéen* character proves to be far more fluid and illegible in his already nonconforming identity and his Senegalese social position than is initially apparent, suggesting a more fundamental disconnect within postcolonial Senegal between subjectivity and social status.

As Ndéné searches for answers to his questions about homosexuality after watching the exhumation video, he is put in touch with Samba Awa Niang, the well-known master of ceremonies of local celebrations, called *sabar*, whom everyone believes is gay. Earlier in the novel, before Ndéné has begun his real pursuit of the underlying social role of homosexuality in Senegal, Ndéné observes Samba Awa’s *sabar* and the local community’s perception and inclusion of him. Unable to sleep one night, Ndéné takes to the streets to wander, eventually coming upon a *sabar* that Samba Awa is leading. Ndéné takes in the crowd, the dancers, the drummers, and, as the crowd opens up to reveal him, Samba Awa:

his divine smile, his coquettish glance, outrageously made-up, shadowed with long lashes and highlighted with the thin line from a pencil ... a long

black dress, sparkling and skin-tight, without sleeves, which revealed his shoulders that grazed the tassels of large earrings ... his long hair tumbled down his back like a black waterfall. Samba Awa Niang was superb. One could have called him a star, a diva, a pagan goddess. (31–32)⁶

Besides Samba Awa's feminized splendor, Ndéné notes the sexualized frenzy that the master of ceremony provokes among the women dancers in the *sabar*, many of whom are "respectable women of the neighborhood who had up until now respected the modest reserve that was expected of any honest lady in public" (32).⁷ Samba Awa clearly presents himself as feminine in this scene, and Ndéné and others, including men and women, respond with admiration and even desire to that gender expression. Ndéné overhears an exchange between two of the male onlookers: "This homosexual! He has such success with women!' 'He's the one who spices up the *sabar* of the country! What talent this bastard has!'" (34–35).⁸ The first man uses the term *góor-jigéen*. The novel clearly documents the cultural specificities of the *sabar* in this passage as a traditionally Senegalese public site where a non-binary individual such as Samba Awa can be included, and even be accorded power and authority; where gender norms and limitations on women can be temporarily disregarded; and where heteronormative trajectories of desire and sexuality are altered and redirected. Queerness resides diffusely in the public dynamics of the *sabar*, cultivating LGBTQ+ cultural inclusion and acknowledgement, but also destabilizing all normative identities and relations within this practice.

The next time Ndéné meets Samba Awa, during his inquiries subsequent to the exhumation video, everything that Ndéné has initially understood about the sexual and gender identity of the master of ceremonies based on his previous public encounter with him is destabilized and questioned. Before going to the bar where they will meet, Ndéné acknowledges that no one actually knows the "true" sexual identity of Samba Awa, since he has never made a statement about it one way or the other. Instead, he has allowed rumors and public perception to shape his supposed identity: "If he acted as a homosexual in the eyes of everyone, it was without a doubt that he was a homosexual in private" (113).⁹ This social construction of identity, Ndéné reflects, is true not just for the LGBTQ+ community in Senegal: "here, a man only does what he is" (113).¹⁰ Private actions and behavior, instead of serving as the foundation for public, social identity, are dictated by the construction of one's public persona.

Once Ndéné meets and begins speaking with Samba Awa, he quickly realizes the full extent of these dynamics between the binaries of public and private, gender and sexuality. Over the course of their conversation, Samba Awa, while coy at first, eventually admits to Ndéné that he is not gay, that he was married at one point and has children. Samba Awa points out that his cross-dressing, compounded by the lack of a variety of language and categories for sexuality and gender in Senegalese society, has led everyone to assume that he is gay. When Ndéné wonders why Samba Awa is so beloved, even as he is classified as a *góor-jigéen*, Samba Awa points to the public

performativity of his gender and sexual identity: “The audience believes that I’m playing, which makes them forget that I’m a *góor-jigéen*. They think that maybe I’m exaggerating the character ... I never appear as a *góor-jigéen*, but as the character of a *góor-jigéen*” (119).¹¹ The layering of queer personal expressions, social expectations, and cultural projections onto the figure of Samba Awa in his public role as a *góor-jigéen* obviates any inquiries into subjective authenticity. Ndéné’s interactions with Samba Awa, from the *sabar* he witnesses early on in the novel to their later conversation, emphasize the queer, fluid dynamics in Senegalese society between personal actions, public perception, social categories, and private beliefs in the construction of gender and sexuality, which can incorporate not only state and individual regulation of sexual and gender norms, but also the performative transgression of those same norms.

In this regard, *De purs hommes* is not an eye-opening depiction of homosexuality in Senegal. While it includes culturally specific categories of masculine gender and sexual expressions, it consistently depicts these characters, their relations, and their positions within society through narrative ambiguity and uncertainty. Without any direct representation of gay characters, interiority, or experiences, the novel only portrays Senegalese queer male identities through displacement and refraction. The novel refuses to articulate queer male experiences, even those violent, abusive ones linked to homophobia, directly, choosing instead to rely on the perceptions and beliefs of outsiders about men who have sex with men or nonbinary conforming men to make them legible. In this way, the novel reproduces the closeted existence of many same-sex desiring men in Senegal within readers’ experiences of recognizing and empathizing with queer identities: It does so using furtive communication, inference and innuendos, hyperaware visibility, and obscured interiority. Yet the novel also opens up that encompassing articulation of the Senegalese closet to include all identities and experiences in Senegalese society. Even as the novel outs the realities and specificities of men who have sex with men and non-normative masculine individuals in Senegal, it reconstitutes the normative values and actions that comprise the closet that is imposed on queer male identities in Senegal for its readers’ own attempts to parse the place of homosexuality within Senegalese society. This implicates all subjectivities and social contexts in the foundational divide between private selves and public personas, of which the heterosexual/homosexual binary is just one manifestation.

Queer Trajectories

As *De purs hommes* constructs an oblique, unstable depiction of queer male life in Senegal, it aligns the homosexual/heterosexual binary with questions about the wider social dynamics and values that structure and restrict every area of public and private life. The novel especially emphasizes these dynamics through Ndéné’s personal trajectory as the character explores Senegalese homosexuality. Through this exploration, the novel blurs the distinction of

homosexuality from general Senegalese heteronormativity. Instead, it places the private/public binary at the center of supposedly non-sexual social structures and relations, evoking Sedgwick's theoretical move. The instability of Ndéné's personal and social identities in *De purs hommes* is only tangentially about his sexual identity, yet it is clearly compounded by the questioning of the dichotomy of straight and gay sexualities. As the novel interrogates the gay/straight divide in Senegal, the general normative order of all of Senegalese society and the possibilities for inclusion and exclusion within that order come under question. This requires a careful analysis of Ndéné's development through the entire novel in order to show that his progression is not one of coming out and accepting his authentic sexual/gender identity, nor even of articulating queer tactics of resistance. Ndéné's trajectory is in line with the other displaced depictions of queer male identities in the novel; it is a confirmation of the dialectical power of queer subjectivities to destabilize and reconfigure normative Senegalese power relations of all types along the lines of private and public. This power is emphasized and extended through the novel's intertextual engagement with American works of queer theory, especially those of Sedgwick and Bersani.

The novel begins with the simple question, "Have you seen the video that's been going around the past two days?" (7).¹² Rama, who is Ndéné Guèye's lover, asks this question of the narrator-protagonist within his bedroom, where the two characters have just had sex, evoking Koestenbaum's emphasis on the privacy of the bedroom, the intimacy of desiring bodies, and their power to construct and corrode the social institutions of relationships and family. Ndéné simply wants to drift off to sleep, but Rama's question brings him back to the reality of the room. Rama is about to show Ndéné the viral video of the exhumation, which will alter the course of his life, causing him to question the entire social structure in Dakar. Just as Sedgwick's study of the European closet and the construction of homosexuality across questions of private and public destabilizes widespread social constructions based on binarisms, Sarr's novel depicts Ndéné's inquiries into homosexuality in Senegal as leading to more general social deconstruction. *De purs hommes* further queers this model to show that centering queer identities in Senegalese society can actually provoke a productive restructuring of social subjectivities and their place within the normative social order.

For this reason, it is important that Ndéné's initial viewing of the video occurs within the context of a private, domestic, intimate space. The novel begins with a view into what Ndéné's body does in the privacy of his own home, emphasizing the corporeality of the scene as Ndéné returns from his postcoital reveries to the presence of the room through, first, the smells of underarms, cigarettes, and sex, and then the sounds of people outside his bedroom window on the streets. As these sounds drift into his home, he thinks, "listen to the diffuse choir of a tired people ... Speaking. No, decidedly, no. They belched up phrases like overly rich sauces; and they flowed, without attention to any meaning ... With each sentence, each gesture, they engaged the entire weight of their existence, which was nothing" (7–8).¹³

The opening heteronormative domestic scene is shattered by Rama's question about the queer video. It pulls Ndéné back to corporeal and social reality as it makes the queer man visible to him. Sarr's novel begins with an emphasis on the dichotomy of private and public, its import for all social categories, and the destabilizing presence of queer identities within these dynamics.

Sarr sustains the preponderance of this binary and elaborates its particular focus on the figure of the homosexual throughout the remainder of the opening chapter, as Ndéné views and responds to the video. The literary depiction of the video and Ndéné's viewing of it reinforce the play between various spaces of being and social relations, and the number of possible positions for subjects within those spaces. Throughout the passage, Ndéné is a figure being observed by Rama as she gauges his reaction to the provocative video that she is showing him. Furthermore, Ndéné is split between being a passive viewer of the video, reacting to the form and content of the clip, and an active narrator of the video and his responses to it. First, he details the aesthetics of the video, emphasizing the videographer as an additional observer of the exhumation scene as well as the author of the video. The narration returns occasionally throughout the remainder of the passage to the authorial presence of the person who is making the video. Yet this authorial presence also seems to disappear at times, as Ndéné enters fully into the events of the exhumation and becomes a presence himself within the scene. The crowd in the video, including the videographer, eventually makes its way to a cemetery. There the exhumation scene fully opens up to the cell phone operator, Ndéné, and to the readers as "the hand of the videographer appeared to turn to stone, it no longer trembled, the image was precise, without embellishments" (12).¹⁴ Once the construct of the video falls away, Ndéné's narration becomes more literary, focused on details of the scene that would not come across in a grainy, hurried cell phone video, no matter how sure the hand holding the phone might be. The details he focuses on are particularly drawn from the physical features of the men digging up the body and the exposed penis of the dead man. The unstable, queer aesthetics of the narrative slippage between the cell phone video, Ndéné's viewing, and his narration, as well as Ndéné's literary depiction of the physicality, even the desire of the homosocial scene, all imbue this passage with queer potential and curiosity, for Ndéné, as well as for the readers. What could have been a straightforward representation of the brutality of the real-life exhumation incident becomes instead a locus of queer aesthetics and erotics in the narrative, queering the Senegalese connection that extends from the novel to the current events of the recent past.

Ndéné navigates the play between his interior and exterior selves as he reacts to the video, unveiling some emotions for the readers, masking them from Rama, cataloguing his physical responses, and hiding them from his lover. The naked body of the dead man becomes for Ndéné a "pure mental image that was glued to my neurons, that my imagination exaggerated and accorded a horrific clarity" (13).¹⁵ Yet when the video ends and Rama asks him what he thought, he only shrugs his shoulders, feeling the unbearable

weight of the “catastrophe” of any possible response. Within this narrative slippage between private and public—the mediated viewing/reading of the exhumation juxtaposed with the exhumation itself—the body of the imagined gay man seizes Ndéné’s attention, and he must navigate his personal, interior responses to the image and his social, outward reaction with Rama. As he performs this feat, Ndéné’s actions and behavior unmask the central role of the private/public binary and the power of the figure of the homosexual within Senegalese society to destabilize the normative power relations built from that binary. The opening chapter of *De purs hommes* thus evokes the complex interplay between social subjects within spaces of social exchanges, with the presumed homosexual body lying lifeless, yet imaginatively active at the heart of it.

After shrugging his shoulders and feigning indifference, Ndéné is finally able to verbalize that the exhumed was just a *góor-jigéen*. Rama doesn’t appreciate this dismissive response, and Ndéné himself recognizes how contrived his statement was:

I was certain that, pronouncing this sentence, I was no longer myself. I had spoken from a communal mouth—almost a grave—in which was buried, but from which was often resurrected, national opinions. I was the mouth of ancient forces that contained the power of life and death over me. I no longer knew my private truth ... So I had exaggerated my coldness as if I had feared that the eye of my society had caught me in a moment of weakness. In the tribunal of my bedroom, alone with Rama, I had once again pledged loyalty to my culture, its invisible and weighing presence, its heavy centuries, its billions of gazes. (18)¹⁶

In passing judgment on the disruptive figure of the (allegedly) queer Senegalese man, in enacting the normatively expected rebuke of homosexual masculinity, Ndéné is made hyperconscious of the tension between his private self and his public construction, even as he is in an intimate exchange with his sexual partner which takes place in his domestic space. The novel renders the question of the gay man as inexorably linked to the rooted negotiation of subjecthood within public discourse, even as it occurs in private space.

This public vs. private binary shapes every social sphere in which Ndéné circulates. In the narration, he denounces the system in place in his department at the university, where each professor is interested simply in maintaining control over his individual domain. When Ndéné attends the mosque, he notes the number of non-believers who nonetheless play the public role of practicing, faithful Muslim. When his students are outraged that he has lectured on Verlaine, a known homosexual, after the minister of education had banned the teaching of gay authors, Ndéné thinks of Proust’s distinction between the poetic self and the social self, sadly concluding that such differentiation doesn’t exist in Senegal: “For them, for their parents, for so many people in this country, this distinction was absurd: a man is only what he

does. A strong part of our culture was founded on this principle of non-distinction" (76–77).¹⁷ In this way, most Senegalese, whether gay or not, live a closeted life, subsuming their interior, private selves to their social identities, since those are the only ones that are recognized and valued. As Sedgwick provocatively argues, "The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people" (1990:68). *De purs hommes* is an overarching interrogation of the superficiality and hollowness of the binary social values and practices prevalent in urban life in Dakar. Homosexuality can be a source of panic, exclusion, and violence within these binaries, but it can also serve as a deconstructive force to those normative dynamics. To this end, the novel is a transgressively generalized exploration of the queer nature of Senegalese society.

Eventually, Ndéné's inquiries and investigations into gay male identities and experiences lead to his being the object of rumors and suspicion; the public actions of his investigations into masculine sexualities have ramifications for his private self. When Ndéné first senses that others are starting to view him either as gay or as a pro-gay activist, he responds by prodding the binaries of knowledge and ignorance, of secrecy and disclosure that construct the entire social apparatus of rumor mongering and social ostracization: "What is a rumor? The illusion of a collective secret. It is a public toilet that everyone uses, but of which each person believes they're the only one who knows the location. There is no secret at the heart of a rumor ... I don't believe in a shared secret. Once told, once shaped into a sentence, a confession, a story, a secret is no longer" (153–54).¹⁸ In this passage, Sarr draws out the queer binaries—the epistemology of the closet, to use Sedgwick's concept—that interface with normative Senegalese identities and society. His use of the image of the public toilet is especially significant here, as it evokes a space that is private within public space, a site that blurs and destabilizes the structuring binary of private and public. Of course, public toilets have also served as cruising sites for gay encounters, lending Ndéné's metaphor particular significance for the type of rumors that he is facing, as well as for the particular negotiation between secrecy and disclosure that he is undertaking.

In order to have some reprieve from the rumors swirling around him, Ndéné and Rama depart for a small fishing village. There, they initially find respite, but when Rama notices that the photos Ndéné has been taking throughout their stay have all included a particular male member of the village community, she asks Ndéné why that is, and Ndéné is thrown into a state of uncertainty and contingency. Rama prods him to be honest with himself, to accept, in her words, "lucidity," the term that Bersani uses to emphasize the insight that can be provided by conceptualizing gay male sex outside of hetero norms. Ndéné rejects this teleological reading of his life and identity: "You think that life resides in the obligation to discover a secret, a revelation that gives meaning to our existence ... But it's possible that there is nothing at the end of the tunnel, that what we believe to be the light of salvation is only the pale glimmer from the cold foyer of the other end" (179).¹⁹ He embraces the fraught position he is in, choosing contingent and

inchoate identity over superficially whole, contiguous normative identity. The dilemma for Ndéné is not to accept or to admit whether he is gay or not. Instead, the question is how he might retain a provisional identity position against the normalizing, homogenizing impetus within Senegalese society. Again, the novel uses weighty gay male iconography and figurative language, as well as intertextual references to Bersani's work in this passage, to signal the queer potentialities that Ndéné is trying to tap into. Ndéné continues on, saying,

Maybe we're in a tube, a sort of large intestine, some going in one direction, others going in the opposite, everyone believing that they have discovered the light where others only saw a purgatorial gray ... What would you do ... if all of this was only a gigantic suite of randomness without a hidden message? What would you do if the intestine were real? (180)²⁰

In evoking the large intestine as the site of social existence that everyone denies, *De purs hommes* echoes Bersani's titular question of the potential of the rectum to be a regenerative grave. In this articulation, Ndéné recognizes the fundamental potential within himself and within Senegalese society of ambiguity, contingency, and provisionality, all of which are distilled powerfully in the figure of the queer man and his sexual practices.

Ndéné's comprehension of normative Senegalese society and his own identity within it culminates in a shattering moment like the one articulated by Bersani. Significantly, however, this shattering is only lightly connected with sex. At the end of a long night of discussion with Rama after she has noticed the male figure at the center of Ndéné's photographic gaze, he is left, first of all, to resist looking closely at his photos, and then to consider deeply what he is afraid of and what this fear means for his identity and his social standing. Finally, he stuffs the photos that include the man from the village into his pants pockets and heads toward the beach. As he walks, he feels the photos against his legs and he begins to become sexually aroused, even as he also starts to sob. When he arrives at the beach, he takes out the photos, tears them into pieces, and lets the wind scatter them along the shore. Nevertheless, he is still fixated on the man's look in the photos: "The look ... It still lives. Obviously, it was still alive. How could I have believed for a single moment that I could have blinded it by gouging out the eyes from which it came? I had lied to myself again. It was living in me" (176).²¹ The sexualized male gaze has been interiorized by Ndéné, and he recognizes the way he has been lying to himself through his futile attempts to disperse the gaze by ripping up the photos. Yet, once again, this isn't a moment of self-realization and self-acceptance. Instead, Ndéné becomes desperate for one more glimpse of "those eyes in front of which I was naked and weak" (176).²² He unsuccessfully pursues the torn remnants of the photos, grabbing a few pieces that do not contain the man's eyes. Still, even in this moment when Ndéné has come the closest he has throughout the entire novel to accepting and interiorizing a gay sexual identity, he is compelled to chase the exterior, diffuse symbols

that might stabilize his identity. Ndéné is in a perpetually queer state in which objects of desire, social markers, and identity traits are always mediated and dispersed throughout communal space. Finally, Ndéné admits that he can't recapture the man's look and so, "in a mix of tears, shame, pleasure," he masturbates until his orgasm leaves him "as if he were dead on the deserted shore. It was over" (177).²³

However, it is unclear what exactly is over for Ndéné. He doesn't expiate the possibility of male attraction and return to a normative heterosexual relationship with Rama. Nor does he unequivocally embrace his desire for men and self-identify as gay. This moment on the beach which ostensibly resolves the tension between gay and straight within Ndéné is instead a culminating point that forecloses any possible summative endpoint for the sexual binary within the character and, through him, within Senegalese society. Ndéné returns to Dakar from his get-away with Rama to visit Coly at the hospital. There, as he watches his friend lost in the coma, he decides to embrace, to embody society's assignations:

I am going to leave and become their worst nightmare as well as what they dream of seeing so they can better kill it: a *góor-jigéen*. I am going to go out and cause them the most unbearable suffering and offer them the most priceless gift in a single gesture: transform myself into a faggot, a faggot that they will be able simultaneously to fear with visceral repulsion and to desire in a dark compulsion for murder. (188)²⁴

Yet his adoption of the term *góor-jigéen* means very little, as the category is limited and ambiguous for the range of gender and sexual identities and expressions in Senegal. Instead, it seems that Ndéné's use of the term "faggot"—*pédé* in the original French—is more telling, as it has a clearly pejorative connotation. With that identity, he wants to be subjected to scorn and violence, hoping that he will be killed in a viral video. Ndéné's journey throughout the novel leads him to fully occupy the disreputable, excluded, marginalized position in the sexual binary that resides at the heart of normative society. This position is completely disentangled from questions of truth, authenticity, and personal desire for Ndéné, as he has come to recognize that any social category is always structured within and by normalizing discourse and the ultimately false binary of private and public: "Am I one? Yes ... No ... What does it matter. The rumor said it so, decided, decreed that, yes. I will thus be one of them. I must be one" (190).²⁵

The only viable strategy for Ndéné is to occupy the negative position within the sexual binary that has been assigned to him, which allows him to explode from within the structuring dichotomy of the private and public selves. If he *chooses* to become what society expects him to be, even if he is not *truly* that, what power remains for the private/public binary to structure his identity and life? This subjugated position is not one simply of self-abnegation. Instead, it contains shattering, reconfiguring potential for self as well as for society at large. From within that marginalized position, Ndéné imagines

that he will eventually explode from society's invective and abuse so that they will all die. Given the rest of the novel's focus on the construction of normative Senegalese social relations around the sexual binary, this communal death shouldn't be read as literal, as a fantasy on the part of Ndéné to commit a murder-suicide massacre, or even, as Mbaye does, as a destructive posture of queer resistance. Instead, Ndéné feels "strong, filled with an immense and dark power that denigrates all reasons to live," because from that purposeful position of social exclusion, he has the power to undermine and destabilize the systems of knowledge and identity formation that function within normative Senegalese society (188).²⁶ It is possible within the narrative for Ndéné to choose to continue his life in Dakar, even as a destructive yet abjured figure, because of the novel's emphasis on the queer roots of Senegalese society. There is nothing for Ndéné to flee or to truly destroy at the end of *De purs hommes* since he is, as this explosive queer figure, a direct product of Senegalese culture's queerness.

Queer Conclusions

De purs hommes advocates for queer visibility, agency, and inclusion by centering the foundational structuring binary of private and public within Senegalese society. It pitches that binary between the international and local currents of discourse on sexuality, literary engagement, and subjectivity. As the novel forecloses any clear definition of Ndéné's sexuality and continually displaces gay male identities, Senegalese society itself is unmoored and becomes a fluid field of personal agency. Even as the novel archives the homophobia and violence that can bear down on LGBTQ+ identities in Senegal, it aligns seemingly normative identities and social institutions with queer ones to further expand the bounds of social inclusion. The novel suggests the primacy of self-determination for all subjectivities in the face of normalizing forces. This fundamental social action can personally, socially, and literarily contribute to the transformation of Senegalese social structures, to ultimately produce more livable material conditions for queer Senegalese citizens.

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Notes

1. Here and throughout the article I use the term "queer" in line with Sokarie Ekine and Hakima Abbas's use of it: "to denote a political frame rather than a gender identity or sexual behaviour. We use queer to underscore a perspective that embraces gender and sexual plurality and seeks to transform, overhaul and revolutionise African order rather than seek to assimilate into oppressive hetero-patriarchal-capitalist frameworks" (2013:3).
2. The summary of the novel on websites such as Amazon and Fnac that sell the book states, "*Bouleversant, ce roman francophone africain est le premier à aborder de manière frontale la question explosive de l'homosexualité sur le continent*" / This disruptive francophone African novel is the first literary work to directly face the explosive question of homosexuality on the continent.
3. Sarr undertook similar approaches to Islamic extremism and terrorism in his debut novel *Terre ceinte* (2014), in which he displaced these very real African concerns by fictionalizing the Islamist takeover of Mali in 2008 and setting them in a fictional African country. He then addressed African migration in *Silence du chœur* (2017), which is set in a fictional Italian town and conveys the narration through multicultural polyphony.
4. Sarr and South African intellectual Achille Mbembe have organized regular public forums called *Les ateliers de la pensée* in Dakar since 2016, the objectives of which are to be a space for public debate organized around interventions by intellectuals and cultural figures from the continent and its diaspora. The first iteration, organized under the thematic *Écrire l'Afrique-Monde*, brought together a wide array of African thinkers, scholars, artists, and creators to discuss the dynamics between Africa and the world. Additionally, Sarr has published a number of literary works, including an extended essay, *Afrotopia*, that calls for the transformation of Africa and considers that process within a global context (2016).
5. "*toutes sortes de dichotomies inaugurales s'effondrent. Détériorisation et reterritorialisation vont de pair. Loin d'être antinomiques, sujet et objet font partie d'une seule et même trame. L'ici et l'ailleurs s'entrelacent. La nature est dans la culture et vice versa ... Dans ces conditions, décentrer la pensée, c'est avant toute chose revenir à une certaine idée du Tout*" / all sorts of initial dichotomies melt away. Deterritorialization and reterritorialization progress together. Far from being contradictory, subject and object are part of a single and equal framework. Here and elsewhere combine. Nature is in culture and vice versa ... In these conditions, decentering thought is above all else a return to a certain idea of the whole (Mbembe & Sarr 2017:10).
6. *son sourire divin, son regard coquin, outrancièrement fardé, ombré de longs cils et souligné du trait fin d'un crayon ... une longue robe noire pailletée et moulante, sans manches, qui découvrirait ses épaules qu'effleuraient les pompons d'imposantes boucles d'oreilles ... une longue chevelure qui coula dans son dos comme une cascade noire. Samba Awa Niang était superbe. On eût dit une vedette, une diva, une divinité païenne.*

7. *respectables femmes du quartier, qui avaient jusqu'alors gardé la pudique réserve qu'on attend de toute honnête dame en public.*
8. – *góor-jigéen bi, jigéen yëp a bardé si moom! Cet homosexuel, il a un succès fou avec les femmes! – Moy caŋka sabar u rew mi! Da fa ay, dom'ram ji! C'est lui qui pimente les sabar du pays! Quel talent, ce bâtard!*
9. *S'il se comportait en homosexuel aux yeux de tous, c'est sans doute qu'il était homosexuel en privé.*
10. *ici, un homme ne fait que ce qu'il est.*
11. *Les spectateurs croient que je joue, ce qui leur fait oublier que je suis un góor-jigéen. Ils pensent peut-être que j'exagère le personnage... . Je n'apparais jamais comme góor-jigéen, mais comme personnage de góor-jigéen.*
12. *- Tu as vu la vidéo qui circule depuis deux jours?*
13. *voici le chœur diffuse d'un peuple fatigué... . Parler. Non, décidément non, ils bavaient les phrases comme des sauces trop grasses ; et elles coulaient, sans égard, du reste, à quelques sens... . Dans chaque phrase, chaque geste, ils engageaient tout le poids de leur existence, qui ne pesait rien.*
14. *La main de l'auteur de la vidéo elle-même parut s'être pétrifiée, elle ne tremblait plus, l'image était précise, sans fioritures.*
15. *pure image mentale qui me colla aux neurones, que mon imagination exagéra et dota d'une horrible netteté.*
16. *J'eus la certitude que, prononçant cette phrase, je n'étais plus moi-même. J'avais parlé par une bouche commune – telle une fosse – où étaient enterrées – mais elles ressuscitaient souvent – les opinions nationales. J'étais la bouche de forces vieilles qui avaient droit de vie et de mort sur moi. Je ne connaissais plus ma vérité intime... . Alors j'avais exagéré ma froideur, comme si j'avais craint que l'œil de ma société ne me surprît en flagrant délit de faiblesse. Dans le tribunal de ma chambre, seul avec Rama, j'avais donc de nouveau prêté serment devant ma culture, son invisible et pesante présence, ses siècles lourds, ses milliards de regards.*
17. *Pour eux, pour leurs parents, pour tant de gens dans ce pays, cette distinction était absurde: un homme n'est que ce qu'il fait. Une part forte de notre culture était fondée sur ce principe de non-distinction.*
18. *Qu'est-ce au juste qu'une rumeur? L'illusion d'un secret collectif. Elle est une toilette publique que tout le monde utilise, mais dont chacun croit être le seul à connaître l'emplacement. Il n'y a aucun secret au cœur de la rumeur... . Je ne crois pas au secret partagé. Une fois dit, une fois coulé dans une phrase, une confession, un récit, un secret n'en est plus un.*
19. *Vous pensez tous que la vie réside dans l'obligation de trouver un secret, une révélation qui donne un sens à notre existence... . Mais il se peut qu'il n'y ait rien du tout au bout du tunnel, que ce que nous croyions être une lumière de salut ne soit que le pâle éclat du vestibule froid de l'autre entrée.*
20. *Nous sommes peut-être tous dans un tube, une sorte de gros intestin, les uns allant dans un sens, les autres dans la direction opposée, tous croyant trouver la lumière là où les autres n'ont laissé qu'un purgatoire gris... . Que ferais-tu... si tout cela n'était qu'une gigantesque suite de hasards sans message caché? Que ferais-tu si l'intestin était réel?*
21. *Le regard... Il vivait toujours. Évidemment qu'il vivait encore. Comment avais-je pu croire un seul instant que je l'aurais aveuglé en crevant les yeux d'où il émanait ? Je m'étais encore menti. Il vivait en moi.*
22. *ces yeux devant lesquels je n'étais plus que nudité et faiblesse.*
23. *dans un mélange de larmes, de honte, de plaisir... comme mort sur le rivage désert. C'était fini.*

24. *Je vais sortir et devenir leur pire cauchemar en même temps que ce qu'ils rêvent de voir pour mieux le tuer: un góor-jigéen. Je vais sortir, leur causer la plus insoutenable souffrance et leur offrir le plus inestimable cadeau en un seul geste: me métamorphoser en pédé, un pédé qu'ils pourront tout à la fois craindre dans une répulsion viscérale et désirer dans une obscure pulsion de meurtre.*
25. *En suis-je un? Oui ... Non ... Peu importe: la rumeur a dit, décidé, décrété que oui. Je serai donc un. Je dois en être un.*
26. *fort, dépositaire d'une puissance noire et immense qui rend dérisoires les quelques raisons de vivre.*