

Migrant Travel Writing / Aedín Ní Loinsigh

Mis/trusting Migrants: Travel Writing, Lies, and Undocumented Migrancy

Whatever the motivations and consequences of lies in travel writing, critics must first identify them. Their priority, argues Percy G. Adams, is ‘to ferret them out and determine their extent’.¹ This is precisely the approach French journalist Benoît Hopquin appears to adopt when he exposes the ‘bogus’ nature of *Soif d’Europe*, a first-hand description of illegal travel to Europe by Senegalese author and essayist Omar Ba.² In his account, Ba describes leaving Senegal by boat in September 2000 and landing in the Moroccan coastal town of Dakhla following a failed attempt to reach the Canary Islands.³ Following months of low-paid work in Morocco, he takes a trans-Saharan route to Chad via Maritania, Mali and Niger and then onwards to the North African coast. His journey, however, is never straightforward, and rather than progressing in any geographically logical fashion, arrest and deportation by border police in Chad, Morocco and Italy mean Ba moves back and forth across the Sahara and North African coast as he unsuccessfully attempts to penetrate fortress Europe. Eventually he returns to Dakhla where, in November 2002, he makes it to the Canary Islands following a traumatic crossing in an over-crowded boat. Unable to repatriate this undocumented traveller, the Spanish border agency transfers him to Barcelona. The text ends with a description of Ba’s illegal entry into France and his ignominious deportation to Senegal by the French authorities.

By the time the ‘truth’ behind this journey is revealed by Hopquin, Ba was becoming an outspoken critic of immigration policy in France and Senegal and had just published a successful essay on this topic.⁴ At the outset of his article, Hopquin notes with some irritation the increasing media ‘visibility’ of this ‘irregular migrant’ [‘un clandestin très visible’] before outlining the ‘inconsistencies and chronological errors’ that prove Ba’s narrative to be a fabrication. The *Le Monde* reporter also reveals the fact that Ba had been registered as a student in Africa and France during much of the period of travel described in the book. He then further undermines the African’s credibility by alluding to more serious criminal accusations that were pending investigation at the time.

How are readers to respond to the content of *Soif d’Europe* once Hopquin identifies its ‘lies’? One reaction is to see the text’s fabricated content as invalidating the account of irregular travel and divesting its author of the authority normally associated with the

1 Percy G. Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars 1660–1800* (New York: Dover, 1980), 14.

2 Hopquin, Benoît, ‘Contre-enquête sur un fabulateur,’ *Le Monde*, 8 July, 2009. Accessed 14 March, 2015. http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2009/07/07/contre-enquete-sur-un-affabulateur_1216190_3224.html.

3 Omar Ba, *Soif d’Europe: Témoignage d’un clandestin* (Paris: Editions du Cygne, 2008). All further references to this work will be given parenthetically.

4 Omar Ba, *Je suis venu, j’ai vu, je n’y crois plus* (Paris: Max Milo editions, 2009). A year later he published a further essay, *N’émigrez pas! L’Europe est un mythe* (Paris: JC Gawsewitch, 2010).

empirically-minded western travel writer. The search for a more reliable method for documenting the irregular migrant's journey might then lead to the 2012 text, *Dem ak xabaar/Partir et raconter*.⁵ In this instance, the Wolof title and its French translation is the first indicator of the particular form of collaboration that sees the French author and journalist Bruno Le Dantec co-author with the unknown Senegalese migrant Mahmoud Traoré a detailed account of the latter's three-and-a-half-year clandestine journey to Europe. Like his compatriot Omar Ba, Traoré's overland travel is along the beaten tracks established by trans-Saharan traders in earlier centuries. However, prior to departure, Traoré fixes a clear route to which he sticks, even when arrest and abandonment force him to double back significant distances. A sickle-shaped trajectory thus takes him east from Senegal to Mali and Niger, then curves gently north-eastwards through the Sahara to Libya before heading westwards across North Africa to Morocco. There, Traoré participates in the infamous October 2005 collective attempt to scale the border fence of the Spanish territory of Ceuta when a number of migrants were shot dead by police.⁶

In his preface to the co-authored account of illegal travel, Le Dantec insists that *Dem ak xabaar* 'is not a tale, but an authentic personal account that has been scrupulously compiled' ['N'est pourtant pas un conte, mais un témoignage authentique, scrupuleusement établi'] (14). This suggests a desire to influence the reception of the text by reassuring readers of its legitimacy. The near absence of a critical reception to *Dem ak xabaar* could then suggest that its content did not arouse the type of suspicion prompted by *Soif d'Europe* and that the nature of Le Dantec and Traoré's partnership succeeds in restoring credibility to the migrant narrative. It would be a mistake, however, to read the later publication as forming a corrective to the perceived failings of Ba's text. For all their very different narrative strategies and critical fates, *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* can be read alongside each other in order to examine the ways in which each calls attention to the place of mis/trust in narratives of migrant journeys and their reception. For his harshest critics, mistrust in Ba the messenger appears to have undermined the value of the message of *Soif d'Europe*. However, this instantly dismissive approach ignores the manner in which strategic invention shapes *all* discourse. More importantly, condemnation of Ba's act of fabrication obscures the complex logic of mis/trust in the context of undocumented migrant journeys where moral and legal boundaries are frequently ignored or non-existent.

This is not to say that questions of mis/trust have been absent from critical considerations of migration. From the 1990s, an extensive scholarly literature began to elaborate on the significance of migrant mobility and geographical displacement. This was particularly evident in postcolonial studies, the theoretical field that has done more than any other to shape critical approaches to travel writing. Indeed, as Andrew Smith argues, the very legitimacy of postcolonial studies is centred on 'the idea that the

5 Bruno Le Dantec and Mahmoud Traoré, *Dem ak xabaar (Partir et raconter)* (Fécamp: Nouvelles Editions Lignes, 2012). All further references to this work will be given parenthetically.

6 The 2007 documentary *Victimes de nos richesses*, directed by Malian Kal Touré, provides an insight into the 2005 Ceuta crossing, as well as that at Melilla some weeks earlier, from the perspective of survivors. For more on deadly border crossings in this area, see Tabea Alexa Linhard, 'At Europe's end: Geographies of Mediterranean Crossings', *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 22.1 (2016), 1-14.

relationship between narrative and movement takes on a new and qualitatively different significance in the context and aftermath of colonialism'.⁷ Much of this 'newness', particularly in the postcolonial era of mass migrations, has been associated with the cultural accommodations of various travelling figures and groups – migrants, exiles, nomads, diasporas. These emerging processes of identity formation have in turn been theorised via terms that invariably evoke mobility-related spaces and behaviours – rootlessness, restlessness, hospitality, borders, contact zones.⁸ And whether or not they are explicitly referenced, notions of mis/trust have necessarily been at the centre of 'the negotiation of incommensurable differences' that for Homi K. Bhabha characterise the 'new transnational world and its hybrid names'.⁹

However, at the same time as 'migration' has come to be increasingly deployed as a trusted trope for explaining postcolonial writing of cultural difference, other critics have signalled disquiet at increasing metaphorical uses of the term.¹⁰ Particularly vexing for materialist critics has been the development of a poetics of relocation that can 'entail forgetfulness about that other, economically enforced dispersal of the poor from Africa, Asia, Latin America'.¹¹ This has prompted concern regarding the persistence of dematerialised readings of borders and border crossings, and disapproval of the neglect of undocumented migration within cultural criticism more generally. To be sure, much of this emerging work has focused on asylum rather than on the position of irregular economic migrants. Nonetheless, it has insisted on the need 'to retain a nuanced conception of forced migration' whilst at the same time highlighting the key issue for this chapter of European 'anxieties over authenticity' and the way in which these are used to adjudicate truth claims.¹²

Both *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* devote sections of their narratives to describing the travails of the economic migrant who must negotiate an inhospitable Europe in order to find work and accommodation. In this respect, aspects of what they describe accord with an earlier and substantial body of textual and cinematic representations of economic migrants who 'arrived' legitimately and in many cases 'settled' – however uncertainly – and subsequently saw their children inherit the tensions between homeland and host land. In the Francophone context that is the main focus here,

7 Andrew Smith, 'Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Literary Studies,' in *Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 242.

8 See Edward Said, 'Reflections on Exile', *Granta* 13 (1984), 159–72; Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Oakland, University of California Press, 1999); Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993); Mireille Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001).

9 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 218.

10 For one of the best-known critiques of this tendency, see Janet Wolff, 'On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism,' *Cultural Studies* 7.2 (1993): 224–39.

11 Benita Parry, 'Directions and Dead Ends in Postcolonial Studies,' in *Relocating Postcolonialism*, ed. David Theo Goldberg and Ato Quayson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 72.

12 Agnes Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 11. For a related study, see David Farrier, *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary before the Law* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).

it would be inaccurate to say that critics have forgotten the material circumstances that shape these diasporic groups' negotiation of difference.¹³ However, it is also fair to say that despite a growing body of literary and filmic work exploring the singular journeys of irregular migrants *on the move* from West Africa to Europe, critical attention has been cursory.¹⁴ This is as true of travel writing scholarship as it is of critical commentary on other areas of cultural production.

Consequently, this chapter concentrates on the substantial sections of both *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* that are encoded as travel narratives in the more conventional western understanding of the term. I return below to the value of regarding such texts as integral to travel writing's critical project. For the moment, however, suffice to say that these texts' self-description as non-fictional prose accounts of journeys that were actually undertaken by their narrators fully justifies their inclusion under the generic understanding of travel writing. It should also be made clear that like many readings of travel writing, this chapter's initial discussion of trust and mistrust as tropes and themes of undocumented migrancy willingly tolerates any 'lies' or traveller's 'tales'. It does so on the understanding that the selective view of these retrospective accounts of journeying inevitably results in suppressions and distortions. The final section on authorship and trust, however, returns in particular to the question of Ba's alleged impropriety and explores more critically the implications of his 'lies' on the reception of *Soif d'Europe*. It also asks what questions Ba's actions raise about the dual authorship of *Dem ak xabaar* and the factors, if any, that might suggest this account to be more trustworthy than *Soif d'Europe*.

Trusting travellers

Although feelings of suspicion and uncertainty frequently threaten to overwhelm the narrative in *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar*, they do not mark the journey experience exclusively. Like any travelling figure embarking on an international journey as uncertain as that undertaken by irregular migrants, the decision to travel must rest to some degree on trust. For without trust the migrant is immobilised. It should come as no surprise, then, that both texts begin with a strong sense that the decision to opt for an alternative life in Europe has been undertaken precisely in a spirit of confidence. The self-assurance (or trust in themselves) both travelers exhibit, and their related ability to reciprocate trust in the context of some of their travelling encounters, never fully dissipates and is evident most clearly in the unwavering determination to make it to Europe. Both narrators understand that this journey is a gamble: they know they are likely to be tricked, abused and arrested and that they may even die. Nonetheless they are clearly willing to wager

13 See for example, Rosello, *Postcolonial Hospitality*; and Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

14 For an exception to this, see Alessandro Triulzi and Robert L. McKenzie (eds), *Long Journeys: African Migrants on the Road*, Leiden: Brill, 2013. For a fuller account of this literature in the Francophone context, see Hakim Abderrezah, 'Burning the Sea: Clandestine Migration and the Strait of Gibraltar in Francophone Moroccan "Illiterature",' *Contemporary French & Francophone Literature*, 13.4 (2009): 461-69 and Carla Calargé, 'Clandestine or Conquistadores? Beyond Sensational Headlines, or a Literature of Urgency,' *Research in African Literatures*, 46.2 (2015): 1-14. There is also an important body of French-language cinematic representations of irregular migrant journeys that includes Abderrahmane Sissako, *En attendant le Bonheur* (2002) and Moussa Touré's *La Pirogue* (2012).

against these odds. Where do this confidence and self-belief come from and how far do they actually sustain the clandestine migrant traveller?

Although in both cases the complex push and pull factors of economic realities unquestionably influence decisions to leave home, there is arguably a critical myopia in seeing them as the only explanation. In other words, if the journeys in these texts, and those of many irregular migrants (as opposed to refugees), are made for economic reasons, they are also prompted by a desire for adventure and the opportunity to test strength and courage. For example, it is possible to interpret the undeniable impulse of self-confidence informing attitudes to travel in *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* as evidence of a connection to a recognised literary tradition of adventure travel that frames the figure of the self-assured, self-abnegating male traveller. This is certainly a thread in Le Dantec's introduction to *Dem ak xabaar*, where he insists on associations between the migrant's heroic 'odyssey' and established characters and motifs of classical Greek adventure narratives. Of course, this comparison can just as easily be extended to an historically more recent context that allows us to see the migrant as globalisation's equivalent of the 'heroic' explorer or adventurer of so much western travel writing.

Needless to say there are important **critical** advantages to using the **critical** frame of travel writing in order to draw parallels between the journeying of more established western traditions of travel and the so-called 'displacement' of the modern-day irregular migrant: it can secure his/her place in a broader history of travel; it can highlight the specific ways in which migrant narratives impose their own form of the recognised basics of travel writing; it can underscore the way in which the former's choice to experience travel is affirmation of a self-assured travelling identity rather than evidence of powerless victimhood. However, such comparisons, because they risk being decontextualised, are also capable of undermining our ability to grasp fully the complexity and anxieties of migrant mobility. Needless to say, such concerns fit into the above-mentioned mistrust of dematerialised critical approaches to travel. Thus, it is important to remember that although the traveller may demonstrate confidence and an ability to trust when travelling, these are not necessarily qualities acquired for the first time when on the move. Social and cultural interactions at home also play their part. This means that any openness to adventure detected in *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar*, and any resilience and resourcefulness displayed en route, must be understood by looking more closely at the specific cultural origins of the migrant travellers.

Ba's initial determination to overcome fear and 'to leave no matter what might happen' [Je veux partir quoi qu'il advienne'] (5) and Traoré's confident dismissal of the 'pessimism of those who are too tired to embark on an adventure' ['Le pessimisme de ceux qui sont trop fatigués pour faire l'aventure'] (20) certainly echo the adventurous spirit of established travelling precursors. However, certain forms of social interaction that create a sense of predictability, stability and solidarity also shape their approach to setting out on their journeys. In this regard it is significant that the respective departures of *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* are set against what could be described as ritualised send-offs organised by close friends and family. These certainly share the symbolic significance that Barbara A. Misztal attributes more generally to 'rites of transition and other group rituals [that] can be seen as contributing to members' self-confidence and

mutual trust within the group as well as to mapping out whom to trust outside the group'.¹⁵

In Traoré's case, the ritual marking his departure involves the preparation by his cousin of a 'sacrificial' dish of bread. Once they have eaten it together, the family members wash their hands in water which is then thrown outside the threshold to ensure a safe journey. It is noteworthy, too, that as Traoré's journey progresses, and as the ability to trust is continuously challenged, italicised passages in the text indicate breaks in a narrative structure that is otherwise faithful to the chronological and spatial progress of the journey. Many of these interruptions are reflections on routinised practices relating to childhood play, work and interpersonal relationships. For example, during a particularly arduous section of his journey between Niger and Libya when he and a group of fellow migrants are abandoned in the desert and forced to follow an untrustworthy guide on foot, we learn that from the age of six Traoré and his friends were taken to the fields to divide their days between work and fun. This routine, he suggests, prepared them to be flexible in their expectations and to savour the pleasures that inevitably followed tough physical exertion. Later, in an illegal immigrant camp on the North African Mediterranean coast the narrative digresses to describe the solidarity of village life in the face of poor harvests. Recalling how any surplus produce was shared with the most badly affected families, Traoré explains that this practice provided assurance of mutual assistance should it be subsequently required.

Such habits or 'patterning' of social life, as Misztal describes it, 'can be seen as playing the same role as trust'.¹⁶ Routine and a spiritual faith that, as Traoré explains, trusts in a 'God who will provide' ['Dieu y pourvoira'] (24), allow the unpredictable to be managed, and, crucially, 'facilit[ate] the taking of a risk'.¹⁷ In Traoré's case, the stoicism that this patterning encourages appears more durable than in the case of Ba. Unlike the latter, who largely travels alone, Traoré begins his journey with a close friend, Bambo. Although the pair subsequently separate, Traoré continues to establish important friendships – and in Algiers a potentially romantic relationship – that sustain him through some of the most uncertain moments. His seemingly ineradicable optimism can also be explained by the many instances where his predisposition to trust in others is repaid by the arbitrary expressions of kindness he benefits from en route. Arguably this ability to trust to the end is most forcefully expressed by the cooperative exchange with Le Dantec and the resulting textualisation of his own story.

Ba's departure is also marked in what could be described as a ritualised manner. He is sent on his way with symbolic gifts from his parents that include a copy of the *Koran* and two talismans intended to ensure courage and protection. One caustic online commentator of *Soif d'Europe* sees this as a blatant example of exoticisation designed to appeal to a western readership and, consequently, yet more reason to mistrust Ba's motives.¹⁸

15 Barbara A. Misztal, *Trust in Modern Societies: The Search for the Bases of Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 117.

16 Misztal, *Trust*, 105.

17 Misztal, *Trust*, 106.

18 See Bathie Ngoye Thiam, 'Soif d'Europe: l'imposture d'un immigré,' *Wal Fadjiiri*, 16 July, 2009.

Nonetheless, as in *Dem ak xabaar*, the emphasis on such a ritual is striking. It serves as another reminder of how a secure sense of personal and cultural identity – and the related ability to trust in oneself and others – is strengthened by strong positive personal and cultural bonds. The importance of solidarity with fellow migrants is also underlined by Ba, who notes very early on in his journey how a commonality of purpose can unite these travellers and provide protection. As with Traoré, family, as well as wider networks of trust based on shared national and cultural affiliations, can also provide important sources of material and psychological support to the migrant on the move. Key here are the many migrants who have already made it to Europe and whose stories of success, seemingly supported by generous remittances, help to establish the pathways used by subsequent migrants.

Ultimately, however, although *Soif d'Europe* presents notable overlaps with *Dem ak xabaar* in terms of its representation of the material conditions of the migrant's journey, the psychological trajectory described does not map so easily on to Traoré's more stoic attitude. In this respect, Ba's ultimate spiralling into cynicism and suspicion cautions against the naïve suggestion that close personal relationships and strong cultural ties guarantee the continued preservation of trust. As his journey becomes a series of failures and disappointments, Ba becomes increasingly critical of the societal and familial pressure on migrants to leave for Europe as a matter of course. Rather than celebrate, as Traoré's narrative digressions do, a durable ability to trust in himself and others, he becomes more resentful and critical of his country for failing to provide an alternative to emigration. Ba's growing difficulty to reciprocate trust with those he encounters en route is also explained by the complex realisation that if migration is a 'family affair', it is one defined by betrayal rather than solidarity. This development is underlined during a phone call home to his aunt, who praises him profusely as she reminds him of the hope (clearly financial and status-related) he represents for his family. This time, however, his family's apparent faith in him does not embolden him but causes him to mistrust their intentions as well as his own. Their belief in his ability to complete the journey then says little positive about him but rather indicates how the 'notions of failure and success have been displaced from them to me' ['Les notions d'échec et de réussite se sont déplacées d'eux vers moi'] (70). If Ba does not express that he has been lied to, his anxieties about his future and his critical attitude to 'home' point to a crucial distinction between the ultimately fragile confidence of the clandestine migrant and what Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan identify as the 'assertive individualism' of western travel writers whose 'experiences of travel are predicated on the possibility of return'.¹⁹

Mistrusting Travellers

Mistrust is a near permanent factor shaping travel in *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar*. Frequently, when the migrant narrators of the texts are not being seen to mistrust, they are themselves mistrusted. For example, in Libya, a country where Traoré feels others' mistrust of him more acutely than elsewhere, a shared religious identity does nothing to counter what he sees as a fundamental dismissal of black Africans as spiritually damned

19 Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan, *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 5.

and sexually threatening. Indeed, throughout the journey, Traoré is made increasingly aware of how his migrant identity can often subsume others (national, ethnic, religious) and provoke the suspicions and animosity of ‘hosts’. He learns to ‘guess people’s intentions from their opening gestures. If they avoid your gaze or start to gesticulate at your approach, it’s a bad sign’ [‘Tu en viens à deviner les intentions des gens dès leurs premiers gestes’] (149). The automatic suspicion towards the migrant described here signals a much wider public perception in Europe, but also in transit countries, that sees noncitizens invariably ‘treated as potential offenders without regard to their personal situation’.²⁰ This pervasive mistrust also risks shifting emphasis onto the ‘criminality’ of the irregular migrant. The fear that they can be betrayed at any moment means the narrators of *Soif d’Europe* and *Dem ak xaabar* travel in a state of constant tension because, as Thomas Nail observes, ‘all of society increasingly functions “like a border”, where surveillance is a constant.’²¹

The migrant’s mistrust of others arises almost immediately after departure and is frequently related to financial transactions. In Ba’s case, for example, the initial decision to take the shortest route to Europe by sea means travelling by pirogue from Senegal to the Canary Islands. Departure is from a nondescript beach under cover of darkness in a craft that seems barely seaworthy. Despite this, the boat continues its course north along the coast, increasing its passenger numbers from a recommended thirty to over eighty individuals. All the while, an unconcerned ‘captain’ accepts this overloading in return, the reader deduces, for the high sums of money his passengers willingly hand over. Concerned about his safety and his chances of reaching his destination, Ba finally opts to disembark in Dakhla. (Despite this interruption to the journey, he receives no refund and subsequently spends an unforeseen and lengthy period of time working to finance his costly overland route.)

This is the first of repeated instances in *Soif d’Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* where the unscrupulous ‘business’ practices of smugglers undermine the trusted system of exchange on which financial transactions normally depend. In stable societies, and also in the secure travel conditions we associate with first world travellers, ‘money is “a promise” that exchange will be honoured’.²² In certain respects, the ‘business’ practices that profit from clandestine migration do appear to mirror those of legitimate travel agencies that are trusted to deal with the practical arrangements of travel and, crucially, to provide the traveller with security. Thus, for example, the providers of counterfeit travel documents, the drivers and guides who promise to deliver migrants to the next stage of the journey, and the ‘chairmen’ who welcome migrants into the unofficial ‘foyers’ and camps that exist along key routes, seem to offer the type of reassurance and comfort that a western traveller expects in return for payment. Time and again, however, trust in the ‘promise’ thought to be provided by such payment is abused by drivers, guides and ‘officials’ who

20 Nora V. Demleitner, ‘The Law at a Crossroads: The Construction of Migrant Women Trafficked into Prostitution,’ in *Global Human Smuggling: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Kyle David and Rey Koslowski (Baltimore, ML: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 262.

21 Thomas Nail, ‘Violence at the Borders: Nomadic Solidarity and Non-Status Migrant Resistance,’ *Radical Philosophy Review*, 15.1 (2012): 242.

22 Misztal, *Trust*, 51

twist the ‘trusted’ principles of the law to profit from the alternative economy of irregular migration.

Any hope that the highly organised camps, ghettos and ‘foyers’ might function as substitute spaces of sovereignty for vulnerable noncitizens is also proved false. Migrants may well be received into these spaces on the basis of national and cultural identity. However, despite their own forms of ‘parliamentary’ rule and ‘justice’, these alternative embassies have no desire to protect the interests of migrants. Like the corrupt officials ‘protecting’ borders with whom they collude, their interest is in controlling and perpetuating the circulation of migrants across borders whilst at the same time extracting a profit. Traoré’s description of the notorious Maghnia migrant ghetto on the Algerian-Moroccan border makes this racketeering ethos patently clear:

Here you don’t pay for the right to enter, but the right to leave. Once you are in the ghetto, you are fleeced in order to pay for passage over the border. If you have the means, you can go to Rabat in a truck. If you are poor, you go on foot, guided by a smuggler. But whatever you do, you’ve got to ‘pay up.’

[Ici, tu ne payes pas un droit d’entrée, mais un droit de sortie! Une fois dans le ghetto, on te rançonne pour financer le passage de la frontière. Si tu as les moyens, tu vas jusqu’à Rabat en camion. Si tu es pauvre, tu traverses à pied, guidé par un passeur. Mais quoi que tu fasses, tu dois ‘dépocher’.] (131).’

Where notions of mistrust and insecurity are concerned, a final word on the conditions endured by female migrants is necessary. Although Ba’s text only fleetingly mentions encounters with female migrants, Traoré devotes a relatively lengthy passage to the particular challenges faced by them. This is prompted by an encounter with four women who all claim to be Cameroonian ‘so they won’t be separated during identity checks or border crossings’ [‘pour ne pas être séparées lors des contrôles ou des passages de frontière’] (104). On the one hand, this serves as an important reminder of the recent feminisation of global patterns of undocumented migration. More disturbingly, however, this brief reference points to the particular vulnerabilities of women travelling unaccompanied and without recourse to legal protection. Earlier, in the Nigerien transit hub of Agadez, Traoré is exposed to this reality when a female migrant from Ghana is sexually assaulted by a police officer (36). Traoré’s retrospective narrative allows him to conclude that whatever the violence faced by male migrants (and neither he nor Ba shirk from describing it), their female counterparts have even less protection from physical and psychological abuse.²³

Authorship and mis/trust

In an interview with Mathieu Leonard in *Article 11*, 21 November 2012, Bruno Le Dantec notes the frustrating efforts to have *Dem ak xabaar* published. Just as noteworthy, however, is the way in which his description of the reception of migrant journey narratives reveals the literary establishment’s mistrust of migrants:

²³ For more on female experiences of undocumented travel, see Demleitner, ‘The Law at a Crossroads’ and Woolley, *Contemporary Asylum Narratives*.

The first impression I had when I submitted the manuscript [of *Dem ak xabaar*] was that it didn't tick the right box. Some publishers told me they would have published it had it been literature, a novel inspired by this story. Others would have been more comfortable had it been a political essay on the theme of irregular immigration. [...]

The second reason for publishers' misgivings is surely due to previous attempts at autobiographical accounts by clandestine migrants. In 2008, there was the case of a fake, *Soif d'Europe*: the Senegalese author, Omar Ba, admitted to having appropriated firsthand accounts of experiences he had not lived himself. This bogus example cast a shadow of doubt over everything that followed, as if one case was enough to disqualify all the rest. [...]

After this fake **account**, there was *Migrant au pied du mur* in 2010 by Cameroonian Fabien Didier Yene who decided on a fictionalised form even though he had experienced what he described. It's the opposite of Omar Ba: Yene had to disguise the narrative form even though his story was true. [...] In the end, his book went unnoticed.

[La première impression que j'ai ressentie en présentant le manuscrit, c'est qu'il n'entrait pas dans les cases. Certains éditeurs me disaient qu'ils l'auraient publié si ça avait été de littérature, un roman inspiré de cette histoire. D'autres, au contraire, auraient été plus à l'aise s'il s'était agi d'un essai politique sur le thème de l'immigration clandestine. [...]

Cela dit, la seconde raison de cette méfiance des éditeurs est sûrement due aux antécédents de tentatives de récits autobiographiques de clandestins. Il y a eu le cas d'un faux, *Soif d'Europe*, en 2008 : l'auteur, Omar Ba, un Sénégalais, a reconnu avoir usurpé des témoignages qui n'étaient pas de sa propre expérience. Ce cas de bidonnage a jeté l'ombre du doute sur tout ce qui a suivi. Comme si un cas avait suffi à disqualifier le reste. [...]

Après ce faux, il y a eu *Migrant au pied du mur*, en 2010, du Camerounais Fabien Didier Yene, qui a fait, lui, le choix d'une forme romancée alors qu'il avait réellement vécu ce qu'il décrivait. C'est l'inverse d'Omar Ba : Yene a dû déguiser la forme de son récit alors que son histoire est authentique. [...] Son bouquin est finalement passé inaperçu.]²⁴

Le Dantec's explicit reference to *Soif d'Europe* appears initially to concur with Benoît Hopquin's assessment of Ba's literary misconduct and the dismissal of his travel account as bogus. Closer examination, however, reveals that the situation is more nuanced than the outright assertion of the Senegalese author's 'guilt' suggests. In the first instance, an unnamed publisher is also guilty of double standards. It uses the apparent infraction committed by the literary 'pretender' Ba as the basis for establishing borders and deciding whether and how migrant narratives of travel are to be admitted. Whilst 'the shadow of doubt' cast by Ba's text may offer some explanation for the paucity of published accounts of '*bona fide*' migrant travel, Le Dantec suggests that the arbitrary application of generic criteria plays an equally significant role. In some cases, the truth of

24 Mathieu Leonard, 'Clandestins: l'odyssée invisible. Entretien avec Bruno Le Dantec,' *Article 11*, 21 November, 2012. Accessed 24 May, 2015. <http://www.article11.info/?Clandestins-l-Odysee-invisible>

migrant narratives is required to be fictionalised in the novel form. However, this strategy is no guarantee that the migrant's travel 'tale' will be heard, as the reference to Fabien Didier Yene's already out-of-print 2010 novel underlines. In other situations, publishers expressly seek fact, yet this 'truth' must not be framed by the supposedly 'authentic' experience of autobiography or travel writing but by a discursive form that depends on detached, objective analysis. This of itself would not be such an issue were it not clear that the genres of writing characterised by such an approach (in particular the essay form) are frequently the domain of those with power and influence rather than those who can claim genuine 'ownership' of the migrant's story, i.e. the status-less migrants themselves. (In this respect it is interesting that Ba adopts the essay form only after he has attempted entry into French literary circles via *Soif d'Europe*.)

Returning, then, to Hopquin's disapprobation in respect of Ba's behaviour, the question of literary borders and their policing emerges more clearly. To be clear, there is no suggestion here that the 'inaccuracies' in Ba's text revealed by Hopquin should be suppressed. However, they are hardly sanctionable literary crimes. **More** interesting is the general anxiety over authenticity that weighs upon the French journalist's investigation and the way in which his sleuthing recalls certain legal practices used to question migrant credibility. As Shahram Khoshravi explains, the 'illegal traveller' who wishes to cross the border must be able to master 'Eurocentric juridical language' because 'in seeking the "truth", the hearing system checks and rechecks facts to find contradictions and inconsistencies in the applicant's narrative'.²⁵ **More** significant for the present context is Khoshravi's contention that the need to protect their own and others' safety means 'asylum seekers usually do not reveal all the details of their journey, Accordingly, the part of any asylum seeker's story in which it is easiest to find discrepancies is the story of his or her journey'.²⁶

Ultimately, however, Hopquin's approach to text-based evidence of unethical behaviour lacks the kind of rigorous 'ferreting out' one might expect from journalism in the scandal-breaking mould. Just as relevant in this context is Hopquin's failure to reveal that the mistrust of Ba's narrative and intentions does not originate with his investigation but was being widely discussed online since *Soif d'Europe* was first published. Indeed, in the comments posted in response to an article by Eric Mettout in *L'Express* on 10 July 2009, this fact is brought to the attention of French readers by one Senegalese commentator who claims that

like most of my compatriots we knew from the beginning that [Ba's] story was untrue [...]. We didn't stop ourselves from saying it was untrue online. [...]. That was last

25 Shahram Khoshravi, *'Illegal' Traveller: An Auto-Ethnography of Borders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 33. See also Catherine Farrell's identification of what she terms a 'culture of disbelief' in relation to asylum claimants amongst certain Glasgow-based solicitors, *Asylum Narratives and Credibility Assessments: An Ethnographic Study of the Asylum Appeal Process in Scotland*, PhD Thesis, Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 2012.

26 Khoshravi, *'Illegal' Traveller*, 112.

year. So *Le Monde* has uncovered nothing. It has reported an investigation conducted by the Senegalese diaspora.²⁷

Perusing these online reactions it would seem that ‘ferreting out’ the fabricated content of *Soif d’Europe* was in fact no more difficult than identifying the many explicit admissions in the narrative itself of lying for practical reasons (for example, to smugglers in order to travel more cheaply, and to family and friends to hide the truth of the migrant’s situation). Consequently, the response of commentators who are supportive of Ba points to a much more complex understanding of the latter’s actions. In the final analysis, they see Ba’s political message as taking priority over his means of communicating it.

As for Ba himself, an open letter published in *Le Parisien* on 11 July 2009 offers a brief and unrepentant response to Hopquin’s accusations. He explains that in addition to personal experience, his account is also based on ‘incidents experienced by others, anonymous individuals whose voice is too often silenced. I rearranged my life story because I felt it would have more impact’ [‘des drames vécus par d’autres, des anonymes dont la voix est souvent tue. J’ai arrangé ma biographie parce que je pensais que cela aurait plus d’impact’].²⁸ Moreover, by quoting the epigraph from Pablo Neruda’s memoir – ‘perhaps I didn’t live just in myself; perhaps I lived the lives of others’ – Ba reminds us of the space between fiction and truth where all supposed factual writing, including travel writing, is situated. His emphasis on ‘impact’ and his desire to have the voiceless, subaltern migrants heard by the greatest possible number, also suggests, ironically, that he may well have identified a *succès à scandale* as a tactical manoeuvre to overcome the interests of those who police the borders of genre.²⁹

Whatever Ba’s intentions – and his answer fails to satisfy fully – his methods raise important questions about the legal and literary operations that strive to silence undocumented migrants. This, in turn, invites us to take a closer look at *Dem ak xabaar* and Le Dantec’s role in the written record of Traoré’s clandestine journey. It is important to emphasise that there is no impugning the former’s motivations here: his sympathies with the marginalised and silenced are unambiguously demonstrated in his introduction and afterword, and research also reveals him to be an outspoken critic of immigrant policy.³⁰ Consequently, what interests me here is the context within which Le Dantec’s

27 Eric Mettout, ‘Omar Ba nous a tous bernés, ou pourquoi il faut être sceptique.’ *L’Express*, 10 July, 2009. Accessed 24 May 2015. http://blogs.lexpress.fr/nouvelleformule/2009/07/10/djeuner_avec_ma_copine_anne/.

28 Omar Ba. ‘Lettre Ouverte d’Omar Ba à ses Lecteurs, à la Presse et à tous ses détracteurs.’ *Le Parisien*, 11 July, 2009. Accessed 24 May, 2015. <http://etoile.toutleurope.eu/index.php/post/2009/07/20/Omar-Ba-%3A-je-persiste-et-signe>

29 It is interesting to compare such a strategy with the aims of the Latin American *testimonio*, another form that has seen its credibility questioned. See John Beverly, ‘*Testimonio*, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority,’ in *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Castro-Klaren (Oxford: Wiley Blackell, 2013), 571-83.

30 See for example the articles Le Dantec has published with the publication *CQFD*, <http://cqfd-journal.org/Bruno-Le-Dantec>) and also a radio interview recorded after the publication of the co-authored text with Traoré where the French journalist’s sympathies are very clear: <http://www.radiogrenouille.com/antenne/partir-et-raconter-mahmoud-traore-et-bruno-le-dantec/>

collaborative role can be examined and what it reveals about any perception of the trustworthiness of *Dem ak xabaar*.

The text's title page credits Le Dantec with the translation and rewriting of Traoré's story. However, there is no mention in the text of how interviews were conducted, how the inevitable challenges of translation were dealt with, and what the nature of any re-writing or re-ordering of the journey narrative entailed. In other words, the text assumes that the reader will trust in the accuracy and truthfulness of Le Dantec's translation and re-writing of a journey he has not undertaken. Yet to the extent that translation and re-writing, and indeed collaboration are no longer seen as neutral practices, it is worth looking more closely at a fuller description given by Le Dantec in the above-mentioned interview with Mathieu Leonard regarding the precise nature of his collaboration with Traoré:

Given the power of this story [...], we decided that it had to be told in a way that would mean it would be heard by a maximum number of people. Consequently, we both reached an agreement. He trusted me to write his story, to make it accessible whilst avoiding any temptations to embellish. And I trusted what he told me whilst verifying wherever possible, facts, dates, places.

[Étant donné la puissance de cette histoire [...] on s'est dit qu'il fallait la raconter de manière à ce qu'elle touche le maximum de gens. On a donc passé un accord tous les deux. Il me faisait confiance pour rédiger son récit, pour en faire quelque chose d'accessible, tout en évitant les pièges de l'embellissement. Et moi, je me fiais à ce qu'il me racontait, tout en vérifiant, autant que faire se peut, les faits, les dates, les lieux.]³¹

Le Dantec goes on to describe the role of Sonia Retamero Sánchez, Traoré's original interlocutor it would seem, who conducted and recorded interviews and is said to have brought her own curiosity and sensitivity to bear on aspects of the narrative. This description repeats what is already evident from Ba's explanation of his actions: in order for the story of irregular migrancy to penetrate the literary domain and to be widely read, consideration must be given to the way it is told. It also suggests that mistrust is as significant to understanding the narrative project of *Dem ak xabaar* as it is to reading the 'lies' of *Soif d'Europe*. The critical silence surrounding *Dem ak xabaar* is certainly in marked contrast to the high profile negative reception of Ba's text and might therefore suggest it is entirely trustworthy. Le Dantec's account of his collaboration with Traoré, however, implies something more complex. Even if it eventually gives way to trust, there is clearly some mistrust between both authors at the outset: Traoré fears his co-author may embellish the 'truth'; Le Dantec, for his part, admits to verifying the facts of what he is being told by his co-author. However, unlike *Soif d'Europe*, where lies and mistrust are arguably hidden in plain view of the narrative, in *Dem ak xabaar* they are absorbed, behind the text, by the transformational practices – interviewing, translation, rewriting – that make this story of irregular migrancy 'accessible'. Any residual doubts are likely to

31 With regard to translation and rewriting, see André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting & the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992). Questions of motive and legitimacy in collaborative writing projects have been discussed by scholars in a variety of contexts. See for example, Beverly, 'Testimonio, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority' and Jenny Siméus, 'Collaboratively Writing a Self: Textual Strategies in Margaret McCord's *The Calling of Katie Makanya: A Memoir of South Africa*,' *Research In African Literatures* 46.2 (2015): 70–84.

be dismissed subsequently by the confident, authoritative voice of an introduction and postface that reassures: in other words, Le Dantec provides a mediating voice that can be trusted.

Conclusion

This chapter's framing of *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* as travel writing allows light to be shed on the material and psychological conditions under which undocumented African economic migrants travel to Europe. Both texts reveal some of the 'push and pull' factors that underpin the decision to travel. Well established routes followed by undocumented migrants are traced, complex networks of transport and hospitality are described, and attention is drawn to the strategies necessary for negotiating hostile borders. Reading these narratives as travel writing also undermines understandings of migrant travellers as disempowered, passive movers focused entirely on their European destination and closed off to the contingent, salutary experiences that usually define western understandings of travel. Both Ba and Traoré demonstrate that an 'adventurous', open mind-set is required to embark on what are more often than not uncertain and arduous journeys. Some ability to trust themselves and others is therefore seen as essential to making progress along routes that stretch out over time and place.

However, as both *Soif d'Europe* and *Dem ak xabaar* reveal, a culture of lies and mutual mistrust invariably comes to dominate the travel experience of these texts' undocumented economic migrants. The pattern of these journeys highlights practices designed to exploit and criminalise the migrant narrators whether in the informal 'business' of people smuggling or in the official sphere of border control and law enforcement. This further accentuates elements of doubt and disparities of power inherent in a travel practice that is viewed as 'illegal'. This prevalence of mistrust also informs a view of migrants as lacking credibility.

This pattern of lies and mistrust also manifests itself in a literary context. As this chapter has shown, questions of trust and credibility translate themselves in concerning ways into the production, circulation and reception of the texts studied here. Ba's 'fabrication' of his migrant journey narrative was already acknowledged within the Senegalese diasporic community when a journalistic *exposé* in *Le Monde* transformed it into a literary scandal. In doing so, the article in the reputable, 'credible' French newspaper arguably silenced the political arguments of *Soif d'Europe*. It also appears to have wanted to transform its African author into an opportunist whose merging of fact and fiction, a long-established strategy of European travel writing, discredited him as a trustworthy author. In a troubling echo of the legal context in which undocumented migrants seek to have their stories heard, the *Le Monde* article might also be said to highlight a certain adversarial relationship between the would-be African author of a migrant narrative and a cultural/literary establishment that seeks to exclude him. This, then, might explain how a collaborative writing strategy, such as that employed by Bruno Le Dantec and Mahmoud Traoré in «*Dem ak xabaar*» (*Partir et raconteur*), could be used to reassure a distrusting readership. In this instance, doubts about the veracity of Traoré's version of events are arguably assuaged by the corroborating, mediating voice of his French co-author.

In the end, any discussion of the textualisation of undocumented migrant travel must not forget there are real lives at stake and real consequences when a culture of lies and mistrust is allowed to take hold. At the same time, if travel writing and its criticism are to continue to open up to divergent voices, experiences and forms, they must retain a sophisticated understanding of the history of lies in travel writing and the prejudices that can perpetuate a culture of mistrust.

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