



Bush, R. (2017). 'Mesdames, il faut lire!' ['Ladies, you must read!']: Material contexts and representational strategies in the first francophone African women's magazine. *Francosphères*, 5(2), 213-236. <https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2016.15>

Peer reviewed version

License (if available):
Unspecified

Link to published version (if available):
[10.3828/franc.2016.15](https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2016.15)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)
PDF-document

This is the accepted author manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Liverpool University Press at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/franc.2016.15>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

'Mesdames, il faut lire!' ['Ladies, you must read!']: material contexts and representational strategies in early francophone African women's magazines.

ABSTRACT:

This article provides the first extended analysis of the earliest francophone African women's magazine, *AWA: La revue de la femme noire*, founded in Dakar in 1964 by a network of African women. This material pre-dates what is often seen as the 'first generation' of francophone African women writers, harnessing the tropes of glossy magazine culture to test out plural ideas of African femininity. Through this experimentation, and with reference to the practical and symbolic roles of women in post-independence West African nation-states (especially Senegal), *AWA* casts new light on the contribution of women's reading matter and 'popular' print cultures to the production of African modernity in the early post-colonial world. The magazine fuses the dominant gendered tropes of *négritude* with 1960s consumer culture, new career aspirations, and the everyday lived experience of women from a range of social backgrounds. By restoring this magazine to the global feminist archive, this article situates *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* as a long over-looked source for tracing the polemical debates concerning the (un)translatability of feminist thought between the global North and global South, post-independence nationalism, and representations of the female body in African and diasporic cultural production.

KEYWORDS: Senegal, Africa, reading cultures, gender, nationalism, race, magazine, print culture, popular culture, work, leisure

RESUME:

Cet article propose la première analyse approfondie d'*AWA: La revue de la femme noire*, un magazine fondé à Dakar en 1964 par un réseau de femmes africaines. Précédant la 'première génération' d'écrivaines africaines, cette revue a permis d'expérimenter différentes conceptions d'une féminité africaine, en investissant le modèle des magazines 'glossy' pour créer un espace de débat et de diffusion transnationale. Tout en se référant aux rôles pratiques et symboliques des femmes en Afrique de l'Ouest (et surtout au Sénégal) à la suite des Indépendances, *AWA* met en évidence l'importance de

la lecture féminine et des métiers de l'écrit pour la production de la modernité africaine au début de la période 'post-coloniale'. Ainsi, la revue mêle les images dominantes de la femme, issues du mouvement de la négritude, à une culture de consommation propre aux années 1960, à de nouvelles filières professionnelles, et à l'expérience vécue quotidienne de femmes issues de différents milieux sociaux. Cet article situe *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* comme une source longtemps négligée au sein des archives féministes mondiales. Elle nous permet de tracer les débats polémiques à propos du caractère (in)traduisible de la pensée féministe entre le Nord et le Sud, du nationalisme qui suit les Indépendances, et de la représentation du corps féminin dans les productions culturelles en Afrique et dans la diaspora (africaine).

MOTS CLES: Sénégal, Afrique, féminisme, nationalisme, race, revue, magazine, culture populaire, travail, loisir, lecture

Francophone African women's voices have long been present in global feminist debate. Though they remain at times under-recognized or over-particularized, literary texts have played an important role, given the transnational circulation of novels by Mariama Bâ, Ken Bugul and Aminata Sow Fall, among others. These writers are widely studied on the African continent and beyond, have received extensive critical analysis, and feature regularly on university reading lists in French and in translation.¹ One, perhaps inadvertent, effect of this canonisation of powerful literary representations of female experience is a generalised assumption that African women were 'silent' or did not

¹ Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* in particular has been canonized via its reception in North America, while its recent translation into Wolof (first published in Senegal in 2007, and in a new 2016 edition in the Célytu collection) advocates new, translingual, ways of reading the text. Bugul and Fall have both sought publication by African publishing houses (Nouvelles Editions Africaines, Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes). Fall's cultural advocacy (as founder of Editions Khoudia and President of the Senegalese Writers' Association) has made her a prominent public intellectual figure in Senegal.

publish before the 1970s.² Christopher Miller, for example, argues that, ‘only in 1979, with the publication of Mariama Bâ’s *Une Si Longue Lettre*, do we see an explicit, self-conscious meditation on gender difference written by a woman in francophone sub-Saharan Africa’.³ This argument raises necessary questions regarding the material contexts in which women’s voices are published, circulated, and read. It remains, in part, testament to the dominant place of the novel in scholarship on twentieth century francophone African print cultures, and a critical concern with the fashioning of individual subjectivity. A number of francophone African women, such as Virginie Camara, Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, and Annette Mbaye d’Erneville, did publish poetry and contribute to newspapers or journals before this date. Indeed, the broader archive of print culture and its networks in the post-independence period reveals the active, practical involvement of women writers in that activity. *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* appeared five years before the publication of what is now generally accepted to be the first female-authored francophone African novel: Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury’s *Rencontres Essentielles* [‘Essential encounters’].⁴ Scholarship on African women’s writing has mapped a recurrent tension between voice and silence. It has also rightly problematised the assumed benefits of the former, asserting that an absence of published voices does not correlate to an absence of female agency. This article contributed to a fuller account of women’s reading and writing cultures, by shifting this discussion from its central focus on the novel to more ephemeral forms of print.

It is important to reiterate at this point that feminism has rarely been a neutral term in African contexts, while overtly feminist scholarship remains vulnerable in francophone

² D’Almeida, Irène Assiba, *Francophone African women writers: destroying the emptiness of silence* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994); Jack, Belinda, *Francophone Literatures: an introductory survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 262.

³ Miller, Christopher L., *Theories of Africans: francophone literature and anthropology in Africa* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 250.

⁴ Kuoh-Moukoury, Thérèse, *Rencontres Essentielles*, ed. Cheryl Toman (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2002; 1969).

African academic institutions.⁵ Where some writers and scholars view gender as a vital frame of reference for scientific analysis and for implementing social change on the African continent, the term has also been interrogated critically in disputes over the universal validity of gender categories theorised in the global North.⁶ The hostile Senegalese reception of Awa Thiam's influential book, *La Parole aux négresses* (1978) illustrates these tensions in the francophone sub-Saharan African context. Thiam's book contains interviews with Senegalese women describing their experiences of excision, polygamy, sexual initiation and skin whitening, framed by the author's own feminist critique of African patriarchy. This pathbreaking contribution to the intersectional discussion of race, gender and class invited readers across the world to form horizontal feminist solidarity and resist the 'threefold oppression' of 'Black women of Africa'.⁷ Following its translation into English, the book was welcomed by European and American feminists sympathetic to Thiam's claim to be enabling her subjects to speak out. However the book was also criticised by those who accused Thiam of catering to Western feminist agendas, in particular a preoccupation with the body as the basis for social organization.⁸ These debates have bridged both the material circumstances of women's lived experience and the representational strategies via which women's bodies and minds are silenced or recorded.

⁵ Mama, Amina, 'Postscript: Moving from Analysis to Practice?', in *Engendering African Social Sciences*, eds. Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow (Dakar: Codesria, 1997), 413–24 (p. 423–24); Locoh, Thérère and Isabelle Puech, 'Fatou Sow. Les défis d'une féministe en Afrique'. *Travaux, genre et sociétés*, 20 (2008), 5–22.

⁶ Imam, Ayesha, 'Engendering African Social Sciences: An Introductory Essay', in *Engendering African Social Sciences* eds. Ayesha Imam, Amina Mama and Fatou Sow (Dakar: Codesria, 1997), 1–30; Oyěwùmí, Oyèrónké, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 176.

⁷ Awa Thiam, *Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*. Trans. by Dorothy S. Blair (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 118.

⁸ Gertrude Mianda, 'Reading Awa Thiam's *La parole aux Négresses* through the Lens of Feminisms and English Language Hegemony', *Atlantis* 36.2 (2014), 8–19 (pp. 9–10).

In the current article, I seek to contribute to these polarizing debates by restoring a key early African women's magazine to the global feminist archive.⁹ My analysis pays heed to Ayesha Imam's warning against 'enshrin[ing] [...] false essentialisations of Africinity', through attention to the specific context of post-independence Senegal, and by pointing to the collective and contestatory transnational context in which this magazine was produced and read.¹⁰ These contexts together shaped the commitment of *AWA*'s pioneering female editors to increasing the visibility of women in print media. Though it contained numerous articles on international women's conventions, *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* was not primarily a vehicle for militant action surrounding reproductive rights, excision, polygamy, or the division of labour however. As will be shown below, this magazine acted as a catalyst for women's writing and reading, and a forum for dialogue between men and women regarding women's role in newly independent post-colonial African nations, beyond the symbolic tropes of négritude poetry. Alongside analysis of its material contexts of production and editorial line, explicit attention will be paid to the many male voices present in the magazine, which remain particularly useful for tracing the complex interplay of femininity and African modernity in this period.

Contexts of production: the birth of an independent glossy magazine in Dakar

AWA: La revue de la femme noire was the creation of a relatively autonomous network of educated African women. After an initial baptism as 'Femmes de Soleil' in 1957, the first issue appeared in January 1964 under its new name (from the Arabic name Hawa, meaning Eve). Nineteen issues were published between 1964 and 1974 (initially monthly, but with a six-year hiatus from 1966) with a print-run of between 5000 and 7000 copies per issue. The magazine's founding editor was the poet and journalist Annette Mbaye d'Erneville. D'Erneville was born in 1926 in Sokane, and raised from the age of nine in Saint-Louis, former capital of French West Africa. She attended school in

⁹ The complete run of these magazines is held between the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the National Archives of Senegal, and the home of Annette Mbaye d'Erneville in Dakar. Due to these scattered holdings, I have provided longer quotations than is usual in this article to give a fuller sense of the language and tone used by contributors.

¹⁰ Imam, p. 17.

Senegal, including the Ecole Normale de Rufisque from 1942 to 1945, before marrying and studying journalism in Paris. She returned to Senegal in 1957 and qualified as a radio journalist, rising to become Director of Programming on the national radio. She remains a prominent elder in the Dakar cultural scene today. She has published poetry and children's books, and founded the Musée de la Femme-Henriette Bathily in 1987, formerly on the Ile de Gorée and recently relocated to Dakar. D'Erneville also supported the work of women novelists, sending the manuscripts of now-classic novels by Mariama Bâ and Ken Bugul to their first publishers.¹¹ Other members of *AWA*'s editorial team included Oulimata Bâ (a future UNESCO executive and wife of the first Senegalese prime minister, Mamadou Dia), Solange Faladé (a doctor and, later, Lacanian psychoanalyst), Virginie Camara (poet and former wife of négritude poet, David Diop) and Henriette Bathily (Director of the cultural department at the French Cultural Centre and cultural activist after whom D'Erneville would name the women's museum she founded in 1987).

AWA was launched shortly after the formal process of decolonization in francophone sub-Saharan Africa. Seventeen sub-Saharan African countries became independent nations in 1960, following a decade of political manoeuvring. Unlike the violent colonial wars in French Indochina and Algeria, the process of decolonization in francophone sub-Saharan Africa is sometimes perceived as being relatively peaceful. While there were key exceptions in Cameroon, Ivory Coast, and Madagascar, this is particularly the case in Senegal where the Four Communes (Saint Louis, Rufisque, Gorée, Dakar) had benefited from a privileged status in French West Africa since 1848. The male inhabitants of these areas were citizens with political rights of suffrage and property ownership, unlike the 'subjects' living across the vast territories of French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa.¹² For female citizens of the Four Communes, the vote

¹¹ Boyd, Debra (dir.), *Jigéen bu jambar! Annette Mbaye d'Erneville: championne des femmes et militante culturelle*. 2008. 18mn; Mbaye, Ousmane William (dir.), *Mère-bi*. 2008. 55mn. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/99562236> [Date consulted: 21 August 2015].

¹² This remained a majority Muslim population and citizens therefore also retained Islamic personal status. For a detailed discussion of the shifting definition of citizenship

came in 1945 following the extension of suffrage to women in France in 1944.¹³ The influential poet and political thinker, Léopold Sédar Senghor, became Senegal's first President in 1960. While revalorising the cultural production of black Africans as a fundamental part of 'universal civilization' under the banner of *négritude*, Senghor was also keen to curate ongoing co-operation with metropolitan France. Maligned by some contemporaries and seen as successful pragmatism by others, this commitment to a Franco-African *entente cordiale* was far from uniform across the francophone region. Sékou Touré, to cite an obvious example, led Guinea to early independence following a constitutional referendum in 1958 to make a definitive break with Gaullist France, spurred on by the robust trade union movement.¹⁴ Elsewhere, including within Senegal, radical nationalist groups called for a more definitive independence from France, while maintaining the federal relationship with other African nations. *AWA*'s editors remained open to these different political currents by including, for example, features on Guinean women, despite the political divergences between Senghor and Sékou Touré, and publicising links with Soviet women's organizations, while seeking to form a global network of black women.¹⁵ Senghor is virtually absent from the magazine's pages, a fact no doubt in part attributable to the imprisonment of his political rival Mamadou Dia (husband of *AWA* contributor Oulimata Bâ) in 1962. This brief historical sketch provides important background for considering the autonomy of *AWA* and its significance for the representation of gender and post-independence nationalism in the magazine.

in French West Africa, see: Cooper, Frederick, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 14–25.

¹³ Cooper, Frederick, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 45–50.

¹⁴ Chafer, Tony, *The End of Empire in French West Africa: France's Successful Decolonization?* (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2002), p. 196.

¹⁵ Guinean women had played a leading role in the independence campaign in that country, and continued to have a prominent role under Sékou Touré's presidency.

African glossy magazines such as *AWA*, and contemporary titles such as *Bingo* and *La Vie Africaine* (discussed below), form a relatively under-studied body of ephemeral printed material.¹⁶ *AWA*'s form and content tell us much about the readers its editors sought to convene, the social practices of their reading, and the questions, assumptions, or convictions they might have brought to bear on these printed texts and images. In doing so, it suggests ways in which women responded to dominant narratives of nationalism, pan-Africanism and *négritude* in counterpoint to ideas of modernity generated within Africa in this period. As I seek to show it what follows, the magazine formed a discrete laboratory for testing out gendered political and cultural subjectivities in a period of world historical change. The magazine's material format borrowed from French and American 'popular' glossy formats to meld commentary on 'high' culture, such as the theatre of Aimé Césaire, with photographic features including the 'Cauris de Mam'Awa' ['Cowries of Mama Awa'], a horoscope using Cowry shells to predict the future. In accommodating opposed positions on the question of female emancipation, as will be shown in greater detail below, the tone is exploratory and experimental rather than prescriptive. This is seen in the questions posed to readers in the editorial of the first issue: 'bavarde et pédante? Sérieuse et moralisatrice? Féminine et gaie? Que sera "AWA"?' ['chatty and pedantic? Serious and moralising? Feminine and gay? What will AWA be?'].¹⁷ *AWA*'s editors sought to bridge the cornerstones of post-independence nation-building, (re)productive labour and pan-African consciousness, with ludic spaces for leisure and stylish self-fashioning.

¹⁶ For existing studies of African glossy magazines, see: Priebe, Richard (1978) 'Popular Writing in Ghana: A Sociology and Rhetoric', *Research in African Literatures* 9.3, 1978, 395–425; Bryce, Jane (1997) 'Women & Modern African Popular Fiction', in *Readings in African Popular Culture*, ed. Karin Barber (Bloomington, Ind.: International African Institute in association with Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 118–24; Jaji, Tsitsi Ella (2014) '*Bingo*. Francophone African Women and the Rise of the Glossy Magazine', in *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday*, eds. Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome (London: Routledge).

¹⁷ 'Editorial: Réflexion', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 1, January 1964, p. 3.

This reflexive, self-conscious questioning of *AWA*'s purpose remains constant in the magazine. The editorials ask repeatedly what shared notion of femininity could be cultivated with readers, while the magazine's content is oriented towards a discourse of aspiration and self-realisation that weaves between the demands of domestic labour and the public world of work. To take one example which demonstrates the range of content produced in response to that questioning, the fifth issue, published in May 1964, included articles on 'Women and Islam', 'Working women in Guinea', 'A young African woman in Brazil', 'How to become a psychiatric nurse', 'The role of games in education', 'Women in Shakespeare' and a profile of Aida Cissé (a young bookbinder), together with the regular features on fashion, recipes, home decor, a story for children, readers' letters, games, and the 'Gentleman's commentary'. This eclectic list of contents gives a sense of *AWA*'s intended role as a vehicle for discussion of women's lives across the African continent and the black diaspora, as well as their representation in the broader cultural imaginary.

AWA's editors drew on existing models of African press and French women's magazines which flourished in the post-war period. This cross-pollination signals the intercultural, transnational networks established through print in the post-independence period. Consciously intellectual journals such as *Présence Africaine*, founded in Paris in 1947, *Abbia* in Cameroon, or *Black Orpheus* in Nigeria played a key role in nurturing in a critical space for African art and literature in the period of decolonization. They were instrumental in the careers of writers, providing an opportunity for dialogue about cultural production. In Senegal, the mainstream press was dominated by French-owned titles, such as *Paris-Dakar*, the leading francophone African daily newspaper, founded in 1933 by Charles de Breteuil; the weekly paper, *Afrique nouvelle*, founded by French missionaries in 1947; *La Vie Africaine* (1959–65), a magazine financed by the French state; and political magazines such as *Jeune Afrique*, founded in Tunisia in 1961. These publications contained isolated individual articles pertaining to the situation of women, as well as a number of texts written by women (including future contributors at *AWA*), all worthy of further critical attention. Read in juxtaposition with *AWA*'s efforts to forge a specifically female publication, the male bias of these titles was symptomatic of the very limited access of African women in the colonies to higher education, politics and the media.

One important model for *AWA*'s editors was the glossy magazine *Bingo*, founded in 1953 in Dakar and Paris and aimed at a francophone African readership. This magazine featured a women's page and sought to instil new forms of media literacy in its readers. As Tsitsi Jaji has argued, it developed readers' ability to move between registers and genres, between text and image, and differing modes of address; in short to make choices and connections between the 'various performances of tradition and modernity' which constituted African experiences of modernity.¹⁸ Jaji terms this form of reading, 'sheen reading'.¹⁹ The same would certainly have applied to *AWA* as its 'sheen reader' flips from adverts for airlines and fizzy drinks, to home decor, accounts of rural development and aspirational portraits of career-women. According to the editorial of the second issue of *AWA*, the editors hoped the magazine would become an:

... objet de distraction [...]

... instrument de travail pour nous qui, par "AWA", voulons nous former, trouver une méthode de réflexion commune [...]; instrument de coordination des activités des femmes de bonne volonté qui oeuvrent dans le même sens et s'ignorent [...]

... véhicule de nos idées, de nos pensées les plus intimes, nous, femmes du monde noir, qui cachons au plus profond de nous-mêmes notre sensibilité [...] et qui, par "AWA", pourrions désormais exprimer notre point de vue sur nos propres problèmes qui, jusqu'à présent, n'ont été traités que par ceux-là mêmes qui ignorent tout de nous: les hommes!...

['...object of distraction [...]

... a work tool for those who, through *AWA*, want to train ourselves, to find a means of common reflection, of 'reflection' [...]; a tool for coordinating the activities of well-meaning women who work towards this same goal and don't know of each other's existence [...]

¹⁸ Jaji, Tsitsi Ella, *Africa in Stereo : Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 111–12; p. 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

... a vehicle for our ideas, our most intimate thoughts, as women of the black world who conceal in our deepest being our sensibility [...] and who, through AWA, will from now on be able to express our point of view regarding our own problems which, until now, have only been dealt with by those who are oblivious to us: men!...']

The editors here sought to establish a shared identity on the basis of a common definition of 'notre originalité' ['our originality'] and affirm the role of the magazine as a 'véhicule' ['vehicle'] which will disclose intimate (yet still shared) aspects of 'notre sensibilité' ['our sensibility']. While *Bingo* offered 'an important staging ground for various experiments in modern African gender formation', its most significant difference with *AWA* lay in the structural conditions of the latter's production and distribution.²⁰

Bingo and the long-standing newspaper, *Paris-Dakar*, were both financed by the French aristocratic Breteuil family. Charles de Breteuil had founded *Paris-Dakar* in 1933, and subsequently founded newspapers in Madagascar, Ivory Coast, Benin and Congo.²¹ In contrast, *AWA* was African-owned and produced from the printshop of Abdoulaye Diop in Dakar. The first African member of the International Gutenberg Society, Diop was trained in France and produced a number of early secular and religious publications from his printshop, distinguishing himself from the missionary presses which had dominated Senegalese print cultures since the nineteenth century.²² This is significant less as evidence of *AWA*'s authenticity as an African product — indeed, its editors were

²⁰ Jaji, p. 113.

²¹ Lüsebrink, Hans-Jurgen, *La Conquête de l'espace public colonial: prises de parole et formes de participation d'écrivains et d'intellectuels africains dans la presse à l'époque coloniale (1900–1960)* (Frankfurt am Main: IKO-Verlag für Internationale Kommunikation; Québec : Nota Bene, 2003), pp. 29–30.

²² Prinz, Manfred, 'Quarante ans d'imprimerie Diop 1948–88', *Ethiopiennes* (1988), 5.1–2. Available at: <<http://ethiopiennes.refer.sn/spip.php?article1118>> [accessed 24 December 2012]; Bush, Ruth, *Publishing Africa in French. Literary institutions and decolonization* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 139–42.

involved in a constant negotiation of what African and feminine identities would mean following independence — than because affected the magazine's material circumstances in significant ways. Because of its lack of financial resources *AWA* did not survive long. Its advertising revenue was minimal. As Annette Mbaye d'Erneville noted in an interview: 'Nous nous rendîmes rapidement compte qu'une revue n'est pas seulement une affaire d'idées, mais aussi et surtout, une affaire d'argent. Or à cette époque-là, la politique des Etats africains n'était pas encore tournée vers les mass média' ['We quickly realised that a magazine is not only a matter of ideas, but also, and especially, a matter of money. In that period though, African state policies were not yet concerned with mass media.'].²³ In 1972, the Breteuil family offered to buy *AWA* with the aim of extending their hand of publications in the region. *AWA*'s editorial team refused on symbolic grounds and the Breteuil family subsequently launched a new magazine, *Amina*, as *AWA* foundered.²⁴ In terms of distribution, *Amina* quickly became the leading francophone magazine aimed at black women in Africa and the African diaspora and remains so today. This material history highlights *AWA*'s deliberate distancing from (neo)colonial structures of production and distribution, as well as the significant obstacles to sustaining an independent magazine in this period.

Literacy and female aspiration

Despite these material barriers, one of *AWA*'s strengths lay in its connectivity and mobility across French-speaking Africa and internationally. There was no formal distribution structure for the magazine yet the readers' letters pages confirm the magazine travelled widely internationally and copies were frequently shared between women. Letters are published from men and women in Senegal, Niger, Congo, Martinique, Canada, the UK and Israel, while reports are featured on African women's experience in the United States, Brazil and India. There also are numerous letters from women's associations in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe expressing political solidarity, or requesting use of images from *AWA* for their own publications. This

²³ Aliane, 'Mme Mbaye d'Erneville, Directrice des programmes à l'Office de Radiodiffusion du Sénégal', *Amina* 83, July 1975. 21–23. Available at: <http://aflit.arts.uwa.edu.au/AMINAMbayedErneville.html> [accessed 22 August 2015]

²⁴ Aliane; Author's interview with Mbaye d'Erneville, 2014.

network of readers was to a large extent due to the editorial team's elite educational background. Annette d'Erneville, along with several other members of the editorial team had attended one of the two Colleges open to women in French West Africa: the Ecole normale des jeunes filles de l'Afrique Occidentale Française in Rufisque, founded in 1938. This Ecole trained almost 1000 women to be midwives, nurses, or primary school teachers.²⁵ It was founded to strengthen the colonial civilizing mission by providing French-style further education for a class of 'évoluées'. Their exceptional status among the female population of the region formed strong, long-lasting bonds between them.²⁶ The network survived as these women extended their professional training into different domains, including Law, politics, and the media, and *AWA* used the school's alumni network to reach a wide and influential readership.

The formative influence of the Rufisque school network on the ideas of its students is made apparent in an extended article in *AWA* on its founder and principal, Germaine Le Goff. Emphasising the school's spirit of 'unity, work, and service', the article praises Le Goff's pedagogy, which encouraged students' self-development, while seeking to limit cultural alienation.²⁷ Mbaye D'Erneville subsequently described Le Goff's role in her education:

C'est elle qui m'a fait prendre conscience que les femmes, elles aussi, peuvent faire quelque chose pour l'Afrique. Elle nous a fait prendre conscience de notre "africanité", bien avant que ce mot soit à la mode, comme maintenant, à une époque où personne ne songeait réellement à l'indépendance du continent.

[She made me conscious of the fact that women too could do something for Africa. She made us conscious of our "Africanity", well before the word was

²⁵ Barthélémy, Pascale, *Africaines et diplômées à l'époque coloniale (1918-1957)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010), p. 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

²⁷ Anon, 'Amicale Germaine Le Goff', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* New Series 1, October 1972, 13.

fashionable, as it is now, and at a time when no one was really thinking of the continent's independence.]²⁸

Le Goff's work, which cannot be disentangled from the colonial politics of the French educational system, helped to shape practical and symbolic ideas of African femininity with (and not *for*) her students. Elsewhere, the novelist Mariama Bâ claimed that Le Goff 'taught me to know myself', signalling the formative influence of this particular individual, but also the broader pedagogical initiative to empower a select group of female students.²⁹ Following independence, *AWA* provided a platform on which those ideas could be further elucidated, explored and refined.

Many of *AWA*'s readers were extraordinary in both their social standing and professional capacities, and its editors were concerned by the economic and social disparities revealed in their magazine. They were conscious of the bias of their readership towards an educated, urban elite, while also wanting to cater for the changing tastes of that demographic. Cover shots reveal this mixed attitude towards the allure of modernity. They include several anonymous Senegalese women in close-up, two medical students, members of the Guinean women's orchestra, an anonymous mother and child, a Mauritanian woman in traditional head-dress, Tiguidanke Soumah (a Guinean minister), a group of women reading *AWA*, the painter Younoussé Seye, and (in the most explicitly anti-colonial issue, dating from 1973) a group of female resistance fighters and members of the *Partido Africano da Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*. The magazine contains features on particular ethnic groups in West Africa (the Mossi and the Serer), on rural women's education in Senegal, and detailed reports on the economic status of women in rural and urban zones which promote female literacy.³⁰ Indeed, several readers' letters called for more illustrations and photographs

²⁸ Aliane, n.p.

²⁹ 'Mariama Bâ on Her Life', *American Universities Field Staff Reports* 10 (1981), 7 (quoted in Miller, p. 269).

³⁰ Fatou Sow, 'Réflexions sur l'Évolution de la Condition Féminine au Sénégal', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 10, December 1964, 8–11.

to encourage illiterate readers to engage with the magazine.³¹ Basic literacy rates in French and Arabic remained very low across the region at this time – 6 percent in Senegal to 1 percent in Niger.³² Nevertheless, the image and experience of urban women dominates *AWA*'s covers and the majority of its pages.

In African cultural criticism, recent work has sought made to understand the role of 'popular culture' (often defined in contrast to traditional and elite cultural production) in 'knowledge production about people's everyday worlds' (Newell and Okome, 2014: 2). Given low literacy levels and the widespread disparities between the experience of urban professionals and rural women in Senegal, applying the term 'popular culture' to *AWA* is particularly fraught. At the very least, however, *AWA*'s editors played a significant role in defining in specific local settings the value of literacy itself as a means for self-improvement and collective identification. Produced by Abdoulaye Diop's Dakar-based printshop, the magazine emphasised the need for locally produced materials to encourage reading. An early article issued the instruction, 'Mesdames, il faut lire!' ['Mesdames, you must read!']. It acknowledged the low priority placed upon reading – especially for pleasure – among other the many daily tasks in women's lives. Reading, the article argued:

Nous est aussi nécessaire que, par exemple, les fruits que nous introduisons dans nos menus à cause des vitamines et des sels minéraux indispensables au bon fonctionnement de notre organisme. La lecture est à la fois une gymnastique et une nourriture pour notre esprit.

[Is as necessary to us as the fruit we add to our diet for the vitamins and mineral salts which are indispensable for the correct functioning of our organism.

Reading is both gymnastics and nourishment for the mind.]³³

³¹ Thibault, Eugénie (1964) 'Letter to *AWA*', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 2, February 1964, 33; M'bengue, Mamadou Seyni (1964) 'Letter to *AWA*', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 2, February 1964, 33.

³² Coquery-Vidrovitch, Catherine, *African Women: A Modern History* (Boulder Colorado: Westview Press, 1997) p. 151; Miller, p. 69.

³³ Sim, 'Mesdames, il faut lire!', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 2, February 1964, 27.

The blend of physiological well-being and sustenance for the mind signals reading as a further form of consumption appropriate for a modern health-conscious woman. This promotion of general literacy remains future-oriented: reading is a form of self-improvement necessary for life in the 'modern world'. There is nonetheless a direct engagement with alternative reading formats as a key to literacy, in contrast to the emphasis placed on formal literature in *Bingo* or the book reviews of intellectual journals such as *Présence Africaine*.

Refashioning (la) 'Femme noire'

Together with its affirmative practical intervention, *AWA* provides an ambivalent engagement with the trope of female embodiment of the nation. It has frequently been argued that anti-colonial and post-colonial nationalist discourse has constructed women (or a monolithic 'woman')) as the embodiment of the nation, the 'symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour'.³⁴ Léopold Sédar Senghor's poem 'Femme noire', to give the best-known example, describes a beautiful black woman, shifting from maternal images ('J'ai grandi à ton ombre' ['I have grown up in your shadow']) to sensual metaphors that describe her body, ('fruit mûr à la chair ferme' ['ripe firm-fleshed fruit']).³⁵ The poetic voice then turns to tropes of the land to describe its subject: she is 'Terre promise' ['Promised Land'] and 'Savane aux horizons purs, savane qui frémit aux caresses fervantes du Vent d'Est' ['Savannah of pure horizons, savannah which trembles under the fervant caress of the Easterly Wind']. The magazine's diverse textual and visual representations give texture to essentialized notions of African femininity which underpinned the rhetoric of *négritude* and African nationalism more broadly. We can look to the pages of *AWA* to see how that dominant discourse was both questioned (as it has by later women writers), and at times reinforced, by *AWA*'s contributors.

The title of the magazine presents a singular, personified point of identification and aspiration for readers. *Awa* becomes a metonym for 'la femme noire' in the magazine's

³⁴ Yuval-Davies, Nira, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 43.

³⁵ Senghor, Léopold Sédar, *Œuvre poétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), pp. 18–19.

subtitle. This 'femme noire' seems to propagate the image of an idealised woman who is consciously modern in her modes of dress and behaviour. On closer reading, this composite 'femme noire' acts as a repository for multiple ideas regarding feminine identity in post-independence francophone Africa. From the outset the magazine's editors maintain distance from terms such as feminism and emancipation that circulated in contemporary discussions of women's lives in the global North:

Il ne s'agit pas – comme d'aucuns pourraient le penser – de forger une arme pour un féminisme insensé, mais plutôt de ciseler un instrument qui puisse mettre en valeur nos possibilités, notre féminité.

Il n'est pas question de se servir d'"AWA" pour lancer la croisade de l'égalité des femmes et des hommes ni pour chanter l'émancipation de la femme africaine. Tout cela est dépassé, partout les femmes ont déjà fait leurs preuves.

[It is not – as some may think – a matter of forging a weapon for senseless feminism, but rather of carving an instrument which can bring out our possibilities, our femininity.

It is not a question of using AWA to launch the crusade for the equality of women and men, nor to chant the emancipation of African women. That is all outdated. Women have already shown their worth.]³⁶

Here the editorial somewhat blithely counters the pursuit of gender equality and female emancipation with the assertion that women have already affirmed their positive presence and their potential. It continues nonetheless with acknowledgement of global feminist struggles and sense of optimism for the inspiration these might offer to black women:

S'il est vrai que les femmes noires ont leurs problèmes particuliers qui demandent des solutions adaptées, ce n'est pas pour cela que "Awa-la-noire" ignorera les soucis et les joies des autres femmes de la planète; elle s'inspirera de leur marche vers le progrès, de leurs moyens de lutte contre les freins de

³⁶ 'Editorial: Réflexion', p. 3.

l'épanouissement de la femme; "AWA" se doit aussi d'être le miroir impitoyable qui, sans les grossir, nous montrera nos faiblesses, nos maladresses.

[If it is true that black women have their particular problems which require adapted solutions, it is not for that reason that 'black-Awa' will ignore the concerns and joys of other women on the planet; she will take heed from their march towards progress, their means of struggle against the impediments to women's fulfilment; AWA must also provide a merciless mirror which, without exaggeration, will show us our weaknesses, our blunders.]³⁷

Here the magazine resists any narrow definition of femininity. As elsewhere, the language of the magazine's editorial suggests an ethos of complementarity between men and women.

An apparent scepticism regarding the pursuit of 'l'émancipation de femme africaine' is reinforced by several male contributors to the magazine, especially on the readers' letters pages. In the fourth issue, a male-authored 'Tribune libre' declares that 'La femme est, bien sûr, l'égale de l'homme', blaming women's material aspirations on European influence:

La question n'est pas de savoir si oui ou non il y a égalité entre la femme et l'homme, mais plutôt de savoir si, dans la transformation structurale des nations – due aux progrès de la science et de la technique – qui s'opère actuellement sous nos yeux, la femme est capable autant que l'homme d'actions décisives.

[It is not a matter of knowing whether or not women and men are equal, but rather whether, given the structural transformation of nations which is taking place in front of our eyes due to scientific and technical progress, women are as capable as men of taking decisive action.]³⁸

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ N'diaye, A. Baudin, 'La femme est, bien sûr, l'égale de l'homme', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 4, April 1964, 23–24, 40.

While the relatively few response letters by women is again symptomatic of disparities in access to the tools of writing, the editors' willingness to print these letters by male readers is a key indication of their will to stage dialogue.

Another long 'letter of the month' by a male reader in an early issue describes his first encounter with the magazine. Personifying *AWA* as 'la belle aux yeux de velours', he writes:

La première fois que je t'ai rencontrée, tu étais belle et neuve dans tous tes atouts. Je me suis dit: "Elle est, comme toutes les filles, trop belle en apparence et trop bête en réalité".

[The first time I met you, you were beautiful and new in every aspect. I said to myself, "She is like all the other girls: too beautiful in appearance and too stupid in reality".]³⁹

Despite this initially negative impression of frivolity, the reader makes several recommendations which would enable *AWA* to 'me séduire encore davantage'. These include encouraging a renewed commitment to tradition:

Je pense que tu dois être plus africaine, il te manque certains des vieux atours [sic] de nos grands mères.

[...] Tu dois être synthèse de nos vieilles valeurs intégrées dans ce monde moderne. En passant des "n'goukas" et "dièré" [différentes coiffures postiches de la femme sénégalaise, ancêtres des perruques actuelles] aux perruques, il y a une infinité de formes que tu pourras adopter mais que tu as ignorées et qui seraient sûrement moins affreuses que ces baguettes de plastiques que sont tes perruques.

[I think that you should be more African. You're lacking some of the old virtues of our grandmothers.

³⁹ N'diaga, 'A la belle aux yeux de velour', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 5, May 1964, 34–35.

[...] You should be the synthesis of our ancient values integrated into this modern world. From “n’goukas” and “dière” [Senegalese hair-pieces, ancestors of the current wigs] to wigs, there is an infinite number of forms you could take, but which you have ignored, and which would surely be less awful than these plastic moulds which you wear as wigs.]

Here the discussion of how to negotiate tradition is channelled through the topic of women’s hair. The instruction is shaped by a tension between ideas of nature and artifice, the shadow of capitalist mass production, and the perceived corruption of ‘pure’ traditions as they pertain to the female body. Where that body might be perceived by the author of this letter as source of strength (and seduction) for the new nation, the editors’ response is instructive:

Les perruques ont certes actuellement envahi le monde féminin africain. “AWA” ne peut méconnaître cette réalité. Mais, la revue de la femme noire s’est toujours appliquée à éviter, dans le choix de ses photos, les fards exagérés, les bijoux excessifs, les perruques ridicules. Avouez, tout de même, que certaines coiffures artificielles sont bien seyantes et demandent beaucoup moins de temps au départ: or le modernisme marche de pair avec la vitesse.

[Wigs have certainly invaded the African feminine world at present. AWA cannot overlook this reality. But the magazine of the black woman has always striven to avoid exaggerated artifice, excessive jewellery and ridiculous wigs when selecting photos. Confess, in any case, that certain artificial hairstyles really are charming and require much less time at the outset: modernism walks hand in hand with speed.]⁴⁰

The debate surrounding the sale of artificial wigs is acknowledged, yet the editors also affirm their practicality in terms of speed, efficiency, and attractiveness. The many photographs of hair and head wraps in the magazine support their claim here to represent a spectrum of styles and avoid excess.

The rapid growth in women’s magazines was a symptom of post-1945 economic growth and a catalyst for post-war consumerism in the domestic setting. *Elle* and *Marie-Claire*,

⁴⁰ Anon, ‘Awa à N’diaga’, *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 5, May 1964, 35.

for example, launched in 1945 with circulation figures in France and across the francophone world approaching one million for each.⁴¹ Idealised versions of French femininity were reified, and such magazines became a site on which gendered struggles for political and cultural decolonization played out.⁴² *AWA* loosely imitated some elements of these existing magazines. It offered advice on recipes, furnishing the home, and many pages dedicated to fashion and hairstyles. The editors reframed these features to include European and African styles. However it is also important to note that they avoided any reference to skin-lightening products advertised in other magazines of the period.⁴³ While Frantz Fanon had explored the psychological implications of such products for black women and Awa Thiam would later attack their damaging effects, the absence of these products from the pages of *AWA* seems to indicate a further deliberate choice on the part of its editors.

In later years these discussions of haircare and female body image developed a transatlantic dimension. One issue included a featured double spread of Afro hairstyles by a New York hairdresser based in New York 'qui lutte pour le rétablissement de la beauté typiquement africaine' ['struggles for the re-establishment of typically African beauty'].⁴⁴ She argues that 'la coupe en cheveux crépus est préférable au défrisage' ['An Afro haircut is preferable to hair-straightening'] and expands the politics of African hair in the magazine with accompanying photographs of cutting edge Afro hairstyles that contrast to the predominance of braids, headscarves and wigs in previous issues. Such discussions were amply illustrated, providing examples to imitate and the opportunity for female readers to discuss among themselves. Those visual elements are accompanied throughout the magazine by extracts from poems of the Harlem

⁴¹ Sullerot, Evelyne, *La presse féminine* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1983), p. 83.

⁴² See Jaji (2014) for a related discussion of the highly critical, anti-colonial representations of African women reading French magazines in Sembene's *La Noire de...* and Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*.

⁴³ Coquery-Vidrovitch, p. 159; Thiam, Awa (1978) *La parole aux négresses* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier), p. 14.

⁴⁴ Black Rose, 'La Coiffure', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* New series 2, November 1972, 17–19 (p. 18).

Renaissance and *négritude* movement by authors including Léopold Sédar Senghor, Countee Cullen, David Diop, René Depestre, and Langston Hughes. With a nod to the discursive and political effect of this poetry, these fleeting literary captions to the photographs of fashion and hair invite the reader to make the playful connections between their idealised images of black femininity.

Further to any such connections we might infer, this juxtaposition of word and image provoked critical reactions from some readers. One wrote to the editors, advising the magazine's readers to approach these poems with caution:

Tu as l'air d'aimer les poèmes, il faut te méfier. Tu devrais demander à un ami étudiant de t'expliquer comment la femme noire a pu prendre une place prépondérante dans la poésie d'après-guerre.

[You seem to like poems. You should be careful. You should ask a (male) student friend to explain to you how it came to be that the black woman took such a prominent position in post-war poetry.]⁴⁵

Another (male) reader wrote, wary of the image of female beauty constructed by the magazine:

Je ne crois ni à l'authenticité de l'africanité, ni à l'efficacité de certains genres de poèmes sur la beauté physique de la femme noire; au contraire, cela me paraît actuellement dangereux.

[I believe neither in the authenticity of Africanness, nor in the effectiveness of certain genres of poem about the physical beauty of the black woman; on the contrary, these seems dangerous to me at the current time.]⁴⁶

These are covert signs of the emerging critique of Senghorian *négritude* which crescendoed in the years that followed, and of a growing skepticism with the politics of African authenticity. The *mise-en-scène* of poems by *AWA*'s editors enables an ensuing debate which circulates beyond the familiar circuits of intellectual reviews, inviting

⁴⁵ N'diaga, p. 35.

⁴⁶ Touré, Cheikh, 'Gardienne d'un héritage', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 7, September 1964, 30.

women and men to respond both publicly in the letters page and in their private reading experience.

AWA's readers were not then simply empty vessels for a commodified singular visions of femininity, or the 'ideal woman' who graced the pages of European and African-American women's magazines.⁴⁷ Articles criss-crossed between ethnicities, between rural and urban milieux, and troubled any straightforward opposition between tradition and modernity. The majority of the magazine provided a space in which women and men could develop dialogue and provide information concerning significant issues affecting women's lives. One reader of *AWA* wrote to its editors, congratulating them on having improved on French women's magazines, which had become 'trop artificielles' ['too artificial'], by providing instead 'une véritable documentation pour la vie pratique – questions juridiques, nutritives, religieuses, etc.' ['a real documentation for practical life – legal, nutritional, religious questions etc.'].⁴⁸ One reason for this amalgam of content stemmed from the editors' desire to test out new ideas, together with their relative autonomy from commercial and political pressures. The magazine does not challenge directly the official discourse of *négritude*, yet its plurality of voices and juxtaposition of fictional and factual content through textual and visual elements inevitably provides a far more complex account of female political subjectivity than Senghorian rhetoric had hitherto enabled.

Femmes savantes, masculinity, and nation-building in AWA

As Pascale Barthélémy has argued in her detailed history of the *Ecole de Rufisque*, this generation of educated African women faced 'la distorsion entre les aspirations et les réalisations' [an imbalance between aspirations and realisations].⁴⁹ They were the target of criticism, even hostility, among their educated male counterparts, who accused them of being 'femmes savantes' [learned women] or 'demoiselles frigidaire'

⁴⁷ For analysis of the images projected by African-American women's magazines, see in particular: Noliwe M. Rooks, *Ladies' pages. African American women's magazines and the culture that made them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

⁴⁸ Anon, 'La boîte à lettres', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 2, February 1964, 33.

⁴⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 283.

[frigiditaire maidens].⁵⁰ These tensions are seen in the dialogue surrounding nation-building in *AWA*. One male reader congratulates the magazine's editors for avoiding a perceived weakness of the post-colonial female elite:

Chère AWA, tu as redressé, il me semble, une tendance grandissante chez l'élite féminine africaine, tendance dangereuse, qui peut mener à la démission, celle de confondre liberté et libertinage, de n'entendre par émancipation, évolution, promotion féminine, que frivolité, mondanité, apparence, légèreté; de ne prendre de l'occident qu'un certain esprit matérialiste.

[Dear AWA, it seems to me that you have corrected a growing tendency among the feminine African elite, a dangerous tendency that can lead to defeat: confusing freedom and debauchery; taking the terms emancipation, evolution, female advancement, to mean only frivolity, society life, appearances, lightness; taking only from the West a certain materialistic mindset.]⁵¹

In their response, *AWA*'s editors again assume a single personified identity, affirming the magazine's national role as model and exemplar:

Je n'ai pas la prétention de porter remède à tous les maux de notre chère Afrique; mais je crois pouvoir tout au moins apporter ma modeste contribution en donnant la preuve par mon existence, ma tenue et ma portée, que la femme noire [...] s'applique à s'insérer utilement dans l'oeuvre de construction de la nation, de l'homme noir. Je suis une forme nouvelle d'expression de la personnalité de l'Eve d'Afrique.

[I do not claim to remedy all the problems in our dear Africa; but I think I can at least bring my modest contribution, proving by my existence, my appearance, and my demeanour, that the black woman [...] is asserting her role in the work of constructing the nation and the black man. I am a new form of expression for African Eve.]⁵²

⁵⁰ Barthélémy, p. 13.

⁵¹ Touré, p. 30.

⁵² Ibid. p. 31.

Here the editors indicate their part in the construction of the nation (and, in a reversal of the biblical creation, of man himself) which is both symbolic and practical. The tone is modest to the point of being self-effacing, yet the editorial response also gestures firmly to the autonomy of *AWA*'s female readers and launches an appeal to encourage more of them to write in and contribute to dialogue in the magazine's pages. In so doing it gestures to their critical capacity to engage actively (whether in approbation or dispute) with these ideas in the public realm of print.

Perhaps in the wake of this exchange, the editorial of this issue takes a more militant tone, advocating a broader understanding of women's role in national development:

L'indépendance de la femme, dans le sens d'une liberté réelle ne peut être enfermée dans les limites trop étroites. Il ne faut pas non plus l'envisager sous ses aspects les plus faciles. C'est un problème qui doit être examiné sous un angle familial, économique et social, ces trois aspects étant interdépendants.

[Women's independence, in the sense of real freedom, cannot be enclosed in limits which are too strict. It should not be envisaged either in terms which are too simplistic. It is a problem which should be examined in terms of the family, the economy, and society, these three aspects being interdependent.]⁵³

Through such interventions, the magazine provides a space in which women's stake in the new African nations can be discussed and illustrated more amply.

Elsewhere ideas of female influence are repeatedly constructed via the family and domestic setting. Another male reader advises *AWA*'s readers, 'Soyez la source!', advocating their role in a modern world perceived as otherwise cold and dehumanizing:

Vous êtes les gardiennes de la vie, vous êtes les gardiennes de l'humanité. Elle dépend de vous, de votre densité de l'être, de votre vérité de femme.

⁵³ 'Editorial', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 7, September 1964, 3.

[You are the guardians of life, you are the guardians of humanity. It depends on you, on your density of being, on your female truth.]⁵⁴

The critique of feminism and of ideas of female emancipation as a foreign, European import prefigures subsequent debates regarding African feminisms, as summarised at the outset of this article. In *AWA*, discussion of the specific European dimension of these debates is minimal. It is glimpsed in a brief, dismissive, reference to Simone de Beauvoir in one reader's letter: 'Celle en qui toute une génération de femmes, à la recherche de leur vérité de femme, s'est reconnue, vient d'écrire qu'elle découvre avec stupeur à quel point elle a été "flouée". Cet échec est l'échec d'une tentative qu'on peut appeler occidentale, d'émancipations de la femme' [The woman a whole generation of women identified with, in seeking their womanly truth, has just written that she has discovered, in amazement, the extent to which she was "swindled". This failure is the failure of what we might call a Western attempt to emancipate women.].⁵⁵ Such contributions were not mutely accepted or applauded in the magazine's letters pages. A Canadian woman reader wrote to chide the author: 'C'est un bien piètre argument, que même en France, les détracteurs les plus acharnés de cet écrivain, n'ont pas osé employer d'une façon aussi simpliste' [It's a feeble argument, which even the most vocal critics in France have not dared use in such a simple way].⁵⁶ By highlighting her interlocutor's poor translation of Beauvoir's ideas, this reader points tentatively both to alternative paths for *AWA*'s readers and a more combative response to the politics of female emancipation.

As this material demonstrates, feminine politics are inextricable from the task of nation-building in *AWA*. In issue eight, the 'letter of the month' asks directly: 'AWA, est-elle nationaliste?' ['Is *AWA* a nationalist?'].⁵⁷ The author of the letter expresses disquiet

⁵⁴ Gôôr-Gou-Mak, 'Soyez la source!', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 4, February 1964, 21, 24.

⁵⁵ The reference is to the controversial closing lines of Beauvoir's memoirs (Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des Choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 686).

⁵⁶ Pilote, Hélène, 'Tribune Libre', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 3, March 1964, 23.

⁵⁷ Bastard, Mireille, 'La lettre du mois: *AWA* est-elle nationaliste?', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 8, October 1964, 34–35.

over the patriotic fervor the term 'nationaliste' might invoke. In response, the magazine's editors assert their nationalism as 'un qualificatif qui cadre avec l'époque que nous vivons' ['a qualifier which fits the era in which we are living']:

'Awa-la-Noire' est contre le nationalisme irréfléchi et borné qui ressemble plus au racisme qu'à toute autre idéologie, mais il est indispensable, à l'heure actuelle, que les femmes, plus que quiconque, prennent conscience (ce mot a été tellement employé!...) non seulement de la forme de leur Continent, qu'elles portent en bijoux sur leur poitrine ou à leurs oreilles, mais aussi et surtout de son devenir.

['Black-Awa' is against thoughtless or blinkered nationalism which resembles racism more than any other ideology. But it is indispensable at the current time that women, more than anyone, become conscious (this word has become so common!...) not only of the form of their continent, which they wear as jewellery on their chest or in their ears, but also, and especially, of its future.]⁵⁸

Rather than a commodified image of the African continent as mere adornment, the editors here advocate a gendered national consciousness which is practical and future-oriented. The need to improve conditions for women's labour provide topics for several longer articles in the magazine. These include features on health, sanitation, and family law – a key issue in the years preceding the introduction of the Senegalese *Code de la famille* in 1972. Elsewhere there is coverage of women's congresses in Abidjan (Jan 1964, 12) and Monrovia (Sep 1964, 26), as well as surveys of women's opinions on issues such as the introduction of the continuous working day in Senegal during Ramadan. There are also profiles of women working in public roles across west Africa and further afield. These include: Caroline Demba Diop, first female minister in Senegal; Malian minister and author, Aoua Kéïta; Nobel laureate, Dorothy Hodgkin; first female PE teacher, Félicité Diouf; Aida Senghor, first female parachutist; Sokhena Dieng, first Senegalese 'téléspeakerine'; a group of female soldiers in Guinea-Bissau.

⁵⁸ 'Awa à Mireille', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire* 8, October 1964, 35.

Nevertheless, when *AWA* was relaunched in 1972, its editorial tone remained modest. While affirming the magazine's practical role for both men and women, the editors continued to reject an enthusiastic grasp of the term 'feminism':

“AWA” se refuse d’être l’inconsciente qui, ignorant les problèmes de notre époque, se contente de se laisser vivre, “AWA” ne veut point paraître la courtisane uniquement préoccupée de ses charmes et de ses bijoux. Féminine, “AWA” le demeure, mais toujours avec discrétion et raffinement. Féministe passionnée, “AWA” ne souhaite pas le devenir, elle veut simplement vivre et s’épanouir auprès de l’homme, son compagnon, collaborer avec lui pour le meilleur devenir de la famille.

[AWA refuses to be the thoughtless idiot, oblivious to all the problems of our time, who is happy to live and let live. AWA does not want to appear as a courtesan only concerned with her charms and her jewellery. AWA remains feminine, but always with discretion and refinement. AWA does not wish to become a passionate feminist, she simply wants to live and find fulfilment next to the man, her companion, to collaborate with him towards a better future for the family.]⁵⁹

As discussed at the outset of this article, Awa Thiam's 1978 book was seen as a watershed, collating oral testimonies to break taboos over issues of excision, polygamy, sexual initiation and skin whitening. Thiam claimed to 'give voice' to her subjects and defended feminism as a helpful term for struggles against patriarchal structures in specific African contexts. The material from *AWA* discussed above may at times seem constrained or conservative in comparison. It may lead us to ask in more nuanced ways how and why the literary texts that broach themes of victimhood and resistance have come to dominate the global circulation of ideas about African women. What does this suggest about the print archive and the uneven ways in which it is interpreted? Above all, the collective and independent material intervention of *AWA*'s editors cannot be understated. By complicating narrow stereotypes of African women as bearers of national pride, or victims of patriarchal and (neo)colonial oppression, *AWA* remains valuable evidence of how a network of women articulated their experience in the

⁵⁹ 'Editorial', *AWA: La revue de la femme noire*, new series 1, October 1972, 3.

decade following independence. Staging dialogue in a printed, portable form, this militant glossy magazine suggested the merits of thinking and acting collectively, but not homogenously, in response to the everyday lives and symbolic representations of women.