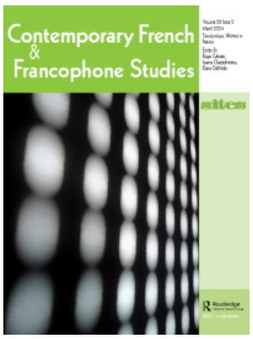

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The Translingual Turn and French Literary Prize-winners: Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the complex relationship between the translingual turn and French literary prize-winners by focusing on a recent Goncourt laureate, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, and his plurivocal poetics of translingualism in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021). Through an examination of the text and its contexts, intertexts and paratexts, it demonstrates how the author draws on past, present and future representations of translingual lives and works to denounce the French literary system and undermine its monolingual perspectives and editorial judgements, such as plagiarism. It shows how the interconnected network of references to other Black and/or African literary prize-winners functions as a support for the author's translingual poetics, with various voices emerging through *biographèmes*, letters, messages and journal entries in the text. In conclusion, it confirms the connections between the translingual turn and French literary prize-winners, tracing how translingualism was introduced in the early twentieth century, firmly established around the turn of the millennium, then reinforced and renewed by Mbougar Sarr's writing and experiences in 2021 and beyond.

KEYWORDS Translingualism; translingual lives; French literary prizes; Mohamed Mbougar Sarr; plurivocal poetics; plagiarism; *biographèmes*

Introduction

The translingual turn could be said to coincide with the turn of the millennium. In 2000, Stephen Kellman's *The Translingual Imagination* gave a name to the emerging trend of writing across, between, with and among different languages. While this practice had been present in literature for centuries, it became more noticeable in the decades leading up to the millennium due to multiple prizes being awarded to translingual writing from all over the world. From the Man Booker to the Pulitzer, prizes are regularly going

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to translingual writing in English that is at least inflected if not imbued with non-English languages and cultures. In French, the Goncourt, the Renaudot, and a swathe of other prizes have significantly more non-French recipients on their lists. Therefore, the translingual turn could also be said to coincide with a distinctive shift in the diversity of literary prize-winners.

This article intends to investigate the complex relationship between the translingual turn and French literary prize-winners by focusing on a recent Goncourt laureate, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, and his plurivocal poetics of translingualism in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021). Through an examination of the text and its contexts, intertexts and paratexts, I will attempt to demonstrate how the author draws on past, present and future representations of translingual lives and works to denounce the French literary system and undermine its monolingual perspectives and editorial judgements, such as plagiarism. I will show how the interconnected network of references to other Black and/or African literary prize-winners functions as a support for the author's translingual poetics, with various voices emerging through *biographèmes*, letters, messages and journal entries in the text. In conclusion, I will confirm the connections between the translingual turn and French literary prize-winners, tracing how translingualism was introduced in the early twentieth century, firmly established around the turn of the millennium, then reinforced and renewed by Mbougar Sarr's writing and experiences in 2021 and beyond.

A brief overview of some of the foundational non-French winners of French literary prizes provides essential texts and contexts for understanding the developing recognition and acceptance of translingual diversity as a feature of French-language literatures over the last century. The intertexts and paratexts that filter through and around *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* are explored in the following section, emphasising the extraordinary network of references and exchanges that traverse a century of inspiration and experience. Finally, Mbougar Sarr's plurivocal poetics are considered to reveal how multiple voices can present many truths in a schema that counters the kinds of accusations of plagiarism that have haunted Black and/or African literary prize-winners for over a hundred years.

The Translingual Turn and French Literary Prize-winners: Texts and Contexts

In 1921, France's most prestigious literary prize, the Prix Goncourt was awarded for the first time to a Black writer, 34-year-old René Maran. Born in 1887 on a boat bound for Martinique, Maran's beginnings laid the way for a peripatetic life of multiple identities and affinities. When his Guyanese parents went to work in Gabon's colonial administration, the 7-year-old

Maran was sent to Bordeaux, educated and raised in boarding schools including the Lycée Michel de Montaigne. There he met Guyanese student Félix Eboué, future Governor of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Chad, and Equatorial French Africa, and hero of the French Resistance Overseas, immortalized in the Panthéon. Eboué also provided Maran with his posting in Oubangui-Chari, the setting for his fictional *Batouala: véritable roman nègre* (1921) which won the Goncourt in that year.

Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun was the next non-French winner of the Goncourt in 1987 with *La Nuit sacrée*, followed by Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* in 1992, and Lebanese-French Amin Maalouf's *Le Rocher de Tanios* in 1993, all of which suggested a momentary postcolonial preference in the Académie Goncourt. The Renaudot jury also seemed similarly predisposed but over a longer period, naming Martinican Edouard Glissant's *La Lézarde* in 1958, Malian Yambo Ouologuem as the first African laureate with *Le Devoir de violence* in 1968, and Haitian René Depestre's *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* in 1988. When Russian Andreï Makine's *Le Testament français* won the Goncourt in 1995 and shared the Médicis with Greek Vassilis Alexakis for *La Langue maternelle*, and the Renaudot went to Senegalese Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé* in 2000, and posthumously to Ukrainian Irène Nemirovsky in 2004 for *Suite française*, it appeared that a new way of reading and appreciating translingual writing in French was also surfacing. This tendency became evident in 2006 after five of France's literary prizes were awarded to writers born outside France, in a heady mix of postcolonial and North American innovation and creativity. The Goncourt and the Grand Prix du roman de l'Académie française went to American Jonathan Littell for *Les Bienveillantes*, the Renaudot to Congolese Alain Mabanckou for *Mémoires de porc-épic*, the Femina to Canadian Nancy Huston for *Lignes de faille*, and the Goncourt des lycéens to Cameroonian Léonora Miano for *Contours du jour qui vient*.

From 2006 onwards, French literary prizes were overtly politicized—and racialized, not only because of the overwhelming evidence that French literatures from France were not as appealing as those from beyond the Hexagon—at that particular time. Michel Le Bris, prolific author and founder of the *Etonnants voyageurs* festival in Saint-Malo since 1990, and Jean Rouaud, Goncourt winner in 1990, published their manifesto "*Pour une littérature-monde en français*" in *Le Monde des livres* on 16 March 2007, with 44 influential signatories from across the literary spectrum. There is, however, no explicit mention of translingualism in the manifesto nor in the ensuing volume of essays, published in May 2007, and little consideration of languages other than French.

Critics such as Kathryn Kleppinger and Françoise Lionnet noted the *littérature-monde* writers' failure to address the nature and specificity of their relationship to language, especially the French language, and regretted their silence about their own linguistic innovations and how these serve to connect their stories to places and spaces that are not French (Kleppinger 2010, 77; Lionnet 2009, 204). It is true that these topics were not explored in depth, nor even in a satisfactory way, but certain participating authors—Maryse Condé, Ananda Devi, Alain Mabanckou, and Boualem Sansal—were alive to the fact that the language of their writing was more than just French (Dutton 2016, 412). It is also true that almost every one of the *littérature-monde* writers did refer to the French language in their essays, and Abdourahman A. Waberi's contribution pointed out that the French are much more obsessed with language choice than non-French writers themselves are: "Plus d'un écrivain dit francophone est déjà parti, au moins une fois, rencontrer la presse française comme d'autres vont à l'abattoir, redoutant la question qui coupe net tout élan : 'Pourquoi écrivez-vous en français ?'" (Waberi 2007, 67). Waberi's wonderful prose poem published in the *Libération* daily newspaper—exactly one year before the *Pour une littérature-monde* manifesto was published in *Le Monde des livres*—offers no less than 46 reasons why he writes in French, with the one foregrounded in the title being "Parce que je suis un pur produit postcolonial" (Waberi 2006). Each author's reticence to delve into the details of their language choice is inevitably different, but surely Waberi's satirical answer resonates with almost all those writing from postcolonial positions. Declaring oneself to be a pure postcolonial product negates the complexities and nuances of linguistic expression that make these translingual writers' work so interesting, desirable, unique, and of course denies the talents of the individual. Yet it counters the question with a perfect deadpan response designed to highlight the irony, the audacity even, of asking such a thing.

Since the debate on *littérature-monde*, more Black and/or African writers have been winning not just French prizes (Marie Ndiaye received the Goncourt in 2009 for *Trois femmes puissantes*) but also worldwide literary accolades like the Nobel Prize in Literature (Tanzanian-British Abdulrazak Gurnah in 2021) and the Man Booker International (Senegalese-French David Diop in 2021). When Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* won him the Goncourt in 2021, he was already well versed in articulating his language choice and had reflected deeply on the role of language in relating difficult stories of identity. In a 2018 interview with Anthony Audureau, Mbougar Sarr explicitly recognized the translingual imagination at work in his writing:

> Comme beaucoup d'écrivains africains, je suis dans une situation de plurilinguisme. Je parle le sérère, qui est ma langue maternelle, le wolof, la langue vernaculaire du Sénégal, et enfin le français, que j'ai commencé à apprendre à six ans. Mon imaginaire profond, celui qui nourrit ma création, vient de mon enfance. Il est lié à d'autres langues que le français. Lorsque j'écris, je dois transposer en français l'imaginaire qui me vient de ma langue maternelle. Je ne traduis pas d'une langue à l'autre, mais d'un imaginaire à l'autre. Je reste donc un étranger dans la langue française, une langue qui est un héritage de la colonisation – ce qui peut mettre très mal à l'aise. Plutôt que d'en faire une difficulté, j'ai personnellement décidé d'assumer cette condition : une aventure ambiguë. (Audureau 2018)

As a corollary to assuming his plurilingual condition and the ambiguous authorial adventure it offers, Mbougar Sarr also undertook to share his learning with other migrants during his residency at the Musée national de l'histoire de l'immigration in 2019. His sensitivity to translingual experience led him to design a writing workshop for refugees on "la Vie entre les langues": "Quels mots pour dire dans une langue nouvelle ce qui relève de l'intimité la plus profonde, de la langue la plus ancienne, donc? La traduction peut-elle traduire ce qui semble *a priori* intraduisible, enfoui, irréductible à l'usage d'une nouvelle langue ?" (Mbougar Sarr 2019, 184). The fruits of this experience were published in French in *Hommes et migrations* in 2020 (Mbougar Sarr 2020) and recordings of the workshop participants' texts read in their mother tongues are available on the Museum's website.

The enabling qualities of translingual validation are therefore fully understood and generously shared by Mbougar Sarr. A 2021 interview for Afrik.com foregrounds the author's message to his African readers, which echoes the message he himself received through the Goncourt's recognition of his talent: "Je pense que l'académie Goncourt a envoyé un très beau message […] Il n'y a aucun complexe à avoir, aucune peur, aucune crainte devant la langue française, dans la création et l'écriture dans cette langue-là" (Afrik.com 2021).

Mbougar Sarr's meditations on and practices of translingualism were undoubtedly enhanced during his residency at the Museum in 2019, where he was also working on his Goncourt winning novel. His strategies for introducing a more subtle plurivocal poetics of translingualism in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* were likely refined at this time, resulting in a preference for intertextual and paratextual indices of translingualism, combined with *biographèmes*, letters, messages and journal entries within the text. To track and interpret these enigmatic sources and their significance, I will now consider the dynamic interplay between Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021) and the two key prize-winning novels by Black authors that preceded it: René Maran's

Batouala : véritable roman nègre (1921) and Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Désir de violence* (1968).

Young, Gifted, and Black: Intertexts & Paratexts

These immortal words were pronounced by Lorraine Hansberry, the first African-American woman to have a play produced on Broadway, when she rose from her sickbed to address six African-American teenage winners of a national creative writing contest: "I wanted to come here and speak to you on this occasion because you are young, gifted and black … " (Hansberry 1970). Made ever more famous by Nina Simone in her eponymous song, such words also characterize perfectly the three Black writers who won France's leading literary prizes at a very young age: Maran with the Goncourt at 34, Ouologuem with the Renaudot at 28, and Mbougar Sarr with the Goncourt at 31.[1] Mbougar Sarr has played a clever double hand in his novel, showing that it is finally now possible to be fully—not conditionally—recognized as young, gifted, and Black in the French literary system, while denouncing the same system's refusal of young, gifted, and Black writers over the past century.

To describe Mbougar Sarr's novel, discern its principal intertexts, and decipher its paratext almost merits an article of its own. *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is narrated in the first instance by Diégane Latyr Faye, a young Senegalese writer based in Paris and in search of inspiration—which is presented in the form of a mythical novel *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* by a mysterious Senegalese author T.C. Elimane, published in 1938. Although this apparently lost text is found in the first part of the book—"Dans la toile de l'araignée-mère," given to the narrator by ageing "spiderwoman" Siga D., a scandalous Senegalese author, the quest is far from over. The text's presence or absence, its author or its reception determines the entire narrative, like a force consuming all the characters except Aïda, Faye's grounded and non-literary girlfriend, who disappears early and only returns at the end of the story. To the writers, critics, editors, cultural and familial mediators in France, Senegal and Argentina, T.C. Elimane is a life-changing being: "T.C. Elimane, c'était à ce nom que nous devions l'œuvre qui avait changé notre regard sur la littérature. Peut-être sur la vie. *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* : ça s'intitulait comme ça, et nous allions à ses pages comme les lamantins vont boire à la source" (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 19). The final lines of this quote herald not only the plurivocal poetics that Mbougar Sarr is setting up via a range of direct and indirect intertexts. "Comme les lamantins vont boire à la source" is the title Senegalese writer and president Léopold Sédar Senghor gave the revelatory Postface to his poetry collection *Ethiopiques* (1956), suggesting

already the importance of the paratext as well as the intertext in Mbougar Sarr's translingual approach. This Postface provides the perfect metaphor for Elimane's ardent followers: like the *lamantin* or the poet himself, they remain always faithful to their inspirational source.

The nexus of intertext and paratext is but one device used by Mbougar Sarr to introduce different voices and cultural meanings to his narrative, providing a foundation for his translingual poetics via Gombrowicz, Borges, Bolaño, Mabanckou, Ndiaye, Miano, and many, many others. Other strategies are both more and less explicit, developing as the story unfolds but also wrapping around the text, enfolding it in a paratext of intertextual significance. The title *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is taken from the quote by Roberto Bolaño selected for the epigraph—from *Les Détectives sauvages*. It alludes to the persistence of literature without critics and readers, in a world where the Sun, the Earth, and the Stars die before literature does, and to lost tales of human history, such as the fictitious *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, that Mbougar Sarr elaborates on in the early stages of his novel:

> *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* appartenait à l'autre histoire de la littérature (qui est peut-être la *vraie* histoire de la littérature) : celle des livres perdus dans un couloir du temps, pas même maudits, mais simplement oubliés, et dont les cadavres, les ossements, les solitudes jonchent le sol de prisons sans geôliers, balisent d'infinies et silencieuses pistes gelées (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 23).

The "ossements" and "solitudes" on the "pistes" here also resonate with Bolaño's words in the epigraph: "Ensuite la Critique meurt encore une fois et les Lecteurs meurent encore une fois et sur cette piste d'ossements l'Œuvre poursuit son voyage vers la solitude" (9). Mbougar Sarr thus mirrors Bolaño's image of a desolate pathway for the forgotten literature and its secret history, unless the critics' and readers' interest in it is rekindled, by a writer such as himself.

The intention to rehabilitate lost African texts becomes clear from the novel's dedication to Yambo Ouologuem, as do the parallels between this writer and the fictitious T.C. Elimane in Mbougar Sarr's novel. Both the real and imaginary authors enjoyed a blaze of glory when their work was first published, Ouologuem's in 1968 with the Prix Renaudot, and Elimane's in 1938 when he was hailed as the "Rimbaud nègre." Their subsequent real and imaginary trajectories were equally tragic, as accusations of plagiarism were followed by retractions of their texts and withdrawal from the literary scene entirely. Mbougar Sarr resisted involvement in recent campaigns by Jean-Pierre Orban and others to republish and recognize the inherent value of Ouologuem's work, decrying the racialized rhetoric and racist action that discredited his writing (Bertho 2022, 505).

Instead, he preferred to re-imagine Ouologuem's voice in literary form, translating the Malian author's experience into a Senegalese context, and transposing the turning point back to 1938 instead of 1968. This approach liberated Mbougar Sarr from the constraints of a purely historical account and the temporal shift also allowed more focus on a period in Paris known for its appreciation of Black arts and culture (Stovall 1996) and on the correlations between the Jewish and Black conditions in France between the wars, leading up to World War II (Orban 2022). But the connections to Ouologuem's life story are nevertheless evident, as are references to his prizewinning novel *Le Devoir de violence*.

Mbougar Sarr's relationship to René Maran's work is not as blatantly signposted in the paratext of *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*. However, the contemporary author's engagement with his predecessor's writing manifests in the paratext of the 2021 edition of Maran's *Un homme pareil aux autres* (2021b), to which Mbougar Sarr contributed a Preface. Signalling a need to resist reading Maran's work as Fanonian, Mbougar Sarr suggests instead immersing oneself in its ambiguity, admiring the author's artistic liberty and free conscience. Direct inspiration from Maran's *Batouala, véritable roman nègre* comes through in Mbougar Sarr's anticolonial novel 100 years later, drawn particularly from Maran's own paratextual Preface, a blistering critique of colonial administration and practices: "La vie coloniale […] avilit peu à peu. Rares sont, même parmi les fonctionnaires, les coloniaux qui cultivent leur esprit. Ils n'ont pas la force de résister à l'ambiance. On s'habitue à l'alcool […] Ces excès et d'autres, ignobles, conduisent ceux qui y excellent à la veulerie la plus abjecte" (Maran 2021a). Indirect inspiration filters through the fictitious letters from editors and press clippings in the Elimane dossier de presse that Mbougar Sarr bases on the real ones sent to Maran: "Nous attendions plus de couleur tropicale, plus d'exotisme, plus de pénétration dans l'âme purement africaine" (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 117; Bertho 2022, 504). Maran was also tarnished with the brush of plagiarism, charged with cobbling together ideas and lines from other colonial novels, and not expressing himself in a singular, identifiable style. As demonstrated in Charles Scheel's examination of the genesis of Maran's *Batouala*, the main issue was that Maran appropriated and transformed the French language, making it his own, not with "petit nègre" quotes or the local Banda languages of Oubangui-Chari, but with his ethnographic attention to language and life in this Central African community (Scheel 2021).

Like one of Senghor's *lamantins*, Mbougar Sarr drinks from the source and re-examines, reiterates, recasts his Black predecessors' stories and histories in a translingual text that foregrounds the plurivocal poetics that "plagiarism" or intertextual borrowings can offer. He has not been

completely exempt from the accusations suffered by his forebears, though Jordi Bonells' article in *Diacritik* on allusions and references in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is more carefully suggestive of potential plagiarism than Maran's and Ouologuem's detractors were (Bonells 2022). It is surely easier to be young, gifted, and Black in France today than it was 100 years ago, but as Mbougar Sarr says, it would be better to be considered without any reference to one's color.

According to Elara Bertho's excellent study of his work, Mbougar Sarr performs a literary coup wrapped up in a bibliophilic thriller with his extended investigation of an African author accused of plagiarism and his counter-attack on the establishment (Bertho 2022, 491). Her forensic analysis of Mbougar Sarr's fictionalized twentieth-century history of African literature in French identifies the key references and real events, including scandals and debates, that inspired the author to create such an intricate narrative (Bertho 2022, 497–503). She presents a compelling case for interpreting *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* as an attempt to reveal alternative ways of thinking about the universal, championing literature as a critical positioning tool between peoples, cultures and languages (506). However, there is also scope to examine the interwoven threads of history and fiction, languages and cultures in this novel from another perspective—which is what I will attempt to do by reading the texts and contexts, intertexts and paratexts to elucidate Mbougar Sarr's plurivocal poetics of translingualism.

Multiple Voices, Many Truths in a Translingual Context

Having begun this article with a loose reference to Kellman's designation of the translingual imagination to anchor understanding of the term, it is now the moment to refine my approach using definitions provided by Stefan Helgesson and Christina Kullberg. They propose a more generic, quotidian view on translingualism "as a primary condition that literary texts can either work with or disavow and—by the same token—that reading practices can choose to highlight or ignore" (Helgesson and Kullberg 2018, 137). In addition, their holistic method of considering translingualism as a broader contextual condition within which writers, publishers and editors use languages attributes more attention to the making and unmaking of linguistic boundaries, rather than observing the instances of crossing them (137–138). Through focusing on the texts and contexts, intertexts and paratexts related to Mbougar Sarr's *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, I advance a schema that establishes the linguistic and literary boundaries, while allowing me to focus on his plurivocal poetics in particular translingual sites or events. Among the linguistic and

literary boundaries that have been made across this range of textual interplay, translingual and transtextual "plagiarism" is the most prevalent preoccupation and it has the means to unmake the monolingual French boundaries if permitted. To mitigate the impact of accepting such plagiarism as a part of a translingual phenomenon, Mbougar Sarr (and his predecessors) have adopted a plurivocal strategy, featuring multiple voices in the text, telling many truths in a translingual context.

As accusations of plagiarism have haunted Black and/or African writers who master and manipulate the French language with talent over the century encompassing from René Maran to Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, the latter has chosen to parody such unfounded condemnation of Elimane in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*. The translingual/translational element that was also at the base of Maran's and Ouologuem's plagiarism cases is again raised here, with an ironic twist, as colonial adventurer Henri de Bobinal launches his ridiculous claim that Elimane's novel is a counterfeit copy of an authentic "Bassère" legend: "l'ouvrage de T.C. Elimane est une réécriture honteuse d'un des récits de la cosmogonie bassère" (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 124–25). That the tribe is found not to be Senegalese or perhaps even exist is irrelevant as Elimane's name is already mud in the French literary scene.

Giving voice to as many people possible involved in the *quête et contre-enquête* is part of Mbougar Sarr's answer to balancing the scales of justice in his novel. Each section and subsection of *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is recounted in plurivocal modes. The table below maps the voices in each section/subsection.

Sections and Subsections	Voices & Stories
Livre Premier	
Première partie – La Toile de l'Araignée-mère	Diégane Latyr Faye tells the story of his awakening to the power of Elimane's story and his meetings with Siga D, sometimes in journal form.
Deuxième partie – Journal estival	Diégane Latyr Faye's journal entries in July and August contain long quotations from the dossier de presse he is reading about Elimane, including voices of the major literary critics.
Premier biographème – Trois mots sur le livre essentiel (extraits du journal de T.C. Elimane)	Elimane's short notes are written in the second person singular telling us/himself about the true nature of literature.
Deuxième livre	
Première partie – Le Testament d'Ousseynou Koumakh	Siga D. recounts her meetings with her father, the blind prophet Ousseynou Koumakh, also uncle/probable father of Elimane Madrag. Ousseynou takes over the narration in the first person, telling the story of Assane his brother and Mossane, the woman they both love and who becomes mad when her husband Assane and son Elimane disappear.

(*continued*)

Continued.

Sections and Subsections	Voices & Stories
Deuxième biographème – Trois cris en plein tremblement	Mossane tells her own story, identifying Ousseynou as the father of Elimane.
Deuxième partie – Enquêteuses et enquêtées	Diégane Latyr Faye begins, Siga D. follows, reading aloud from literary critic Brigitte Bollème's book on the Rimbaud nègre, finishing with a question as to what happened to Elimane and the Jewish couple, Thérèse Jacob and Charles Ellenstein, who edited and published his work, supported and loved him.
Troisième biographème – Où finit Charles Ellenstein	An omniscient narrator tells Charles Ellenstein's tragic story in the third person, which ends in deportation and death, before Siga D.'s voice returns to finish a dialogue with Brigitte Bollème. The section ends with a letter from Elimane to Thérèse Jacob and Charles Ellenstein, followed by a dialogue between Diégane Latyr Faye and Siga D. Siga D.'s final conversation with Brigitte Bollème is also layered through the end of the section.
Troisième partie – Nuits de tango par marée haute	Siga D. recounts her days working in a Clichy tango bar and the ominous visitor who may have been Elimane, interspersed with a suite of short notices telling how the literary critics who condemned Elimane have died in strange circumstances or committed suicide.
Troisième livre	
Première partie $Amitié\text{–}amour \times \frac{littérature}{politique} = ?$	Diégane Latyr Faye counts down the days in Dakar until he receives a message from Aïda, his ex-girlfriend, and childhood friend Chérif Ngaïdé self-immolates at the memorial march for Fatima Diop, the Senegalese militant who has committed suicide. The Haitian poetess, lover of both Elimane and Siga D. at different times, reveals her affair with Elimane in Argentina to Siga D. before Diégane Latyr Faye takes back the narrative to head off to Elimane's hometown.
Quatrième biographème – Les lettres mortes	Lost letters from Elimane and his father Assane to Mossane and Ousseynou
Deuxième partie – La solitude de Madag	Diégane Latyr Faye reads a long email from his militant writer friend Musimbwa in DR Congo describing the story of his parents' murder and his own childhood trauma. Diégane Latyr Faye describes his arrival in Elimane's village just a little too late to meet him. The sixth subsection is written in the 2nd person singular, as Diégane Latyr Faye tells us/himself what we have discovered about Elimane and reads the final letter from Elimane, addressed to him.
Epilogue	Diégane Latyr Faye recounts reading the last work of Elimane, judges it unworthy of the master, and throws it in the river.

As this table demonstrates, first person narratives dominate the text, providing diverse perspectives and styles that reveal different linguistic and cultural agendas. Letters, emails, reports, notices, and of course direct dialogues also bring new voices into the narrative, competing for attention as Diégane Latyr Faye strives to piece together an authentic account of Elimane's existence.

To complete this analysis of how Mbougar Sarr's plurivocal poetics support translingual perspectives in his text, I will briefly discuss the four "Biographèmes" and the Epilogue plus the letter immediately preceding it. These sections contain all the direct quotes from Elimane in the novel, channelling his voice into the essentialized biographical snapshot that Barthes intended a biographème to be (Barthes 1975). By including multiple different narrative voices to frame these biographèmes and Epilogue, Mbougar Sarr presents precisely the kind of inflections and modulations of an identity that plurivocal poetics can offer, while still holding on to Elimane's voice as a red thread throughout the development of his most authentic and essential profile.

Beginning with the notes from Elimane's own journal, the first biographème introduces the fictitious author's obsession with writing the one great book that will obliterate, outshine, even kill all others, in a Borgesian gesture of biblicide:

> Tu voudrais n'écrire qu'un livre. Tu sais au fond de toi qu'il n'y en a qu'un seul qui compte : celui qui engendre tous les autres ou que ceux-ci annoncent. Tu voudrais écrire le biblicide, l'œuvre qui tuerait toutes les autres, effaçant celles qui l'ont précédée et dissuadant celles qui seraient tentées de naître à sa suite, de céder à cette folie. En un geste, abolir et unifier la bibliothèque. (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 141)

In full recognition of the impossibility of achieving this goal, Elimane nevertheless pushes himself to harness the courage of his father, to stop writing this journal, and to start writing *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*. He also acknowledges that "l'essentiel [dépend] d'une pose qu'on prend devant le langage ou le monde, quand il provient d'une soumission à une langue de l'interstice" (142). This is the first explicit statement on writing that could be interpreted as a reference to the translingual status of the fictitious and real writers—both Elimane as well as Mbougar Sarr, Ouologuem, and all the others who precede them. To produce the essential book, they must position themselves in relation to an in-between language to which they must submit.

The second biographème is a stream of consciousness by Mossane, Elimane's mother, and is the only biographème that does not include any words from Elimane. It does confirm that Ousseynou is more likely his biological father than Assane, thus adding to the writer's profile as a prophet, a mystic, a seer with magical powers.

The first narrator of the third biographème is omniscient and anonymous—expressing Charles Ellenstein's innermost thoughts in the third person. In a sense, Charles is the most silent character in the novel, speaking alongside his wife Thérèse Jacob only momentarily in a published interview with Brigitte Bollème (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 119–121) and in brief dialogue in this

biographème. However, through the narration of his return to Paris to search for Elimane, we learn that the author has escaped a trap set by a German officer, is no longer in Paris, and that Charles was deported without a trace. This may well be a device Mbougar Sarr uses to emphasize the correlations between the Black and Jewish conditions, rendering Charles as silent and invisible as Elimane in Europe during that dark period of history. The omniscient anonymous voice offers an opportunity for more neutral assessment of the situation. After finishing Charles' story, Siga D. takes back the narrative voice in dialogue with Brigitte Bollème, who recounts her final conversation with Thérèse Jacob and her gift of Elimane's letter and photo. To this biographème is therefore added a visual image of the young writer, who has never been physically described. Half in shadow, half in light, Elimane's face is half man, half boy, half smiling, half grimacing, intrigued or amused, appearing to be about to say something before the photo was taken or having just said something. His face is expressive, handsome, and young but essentially ambiguous, as might be expected from descriptions thus far. The photo is lost; only the letter to Thérèse Jacob and Charles Ellenstein reaches Siga D. and Diégane Latyr Faye whose critical evaluations of Elimane's writing finish this biographème. Reproduced in the text in full, the letter describes Elimane's resignation, his acceptance of his fate in becoming his own fictitious King in his labyrinth of inhumanity, and his desire to go home. Diégane Latyr Faye is particularly unimpressed by this "merde cryptosymboliste" and does not believe the letter is even authentic (331), but Siga D. decodes the text using Brigitte Bollème's theory of *pêcheurs/pécheurs* representing those critics who could not read his novel for what it was—they could not understand his language. It is in this biographème that Brigitte Bollème also points out the deaths and suicides of all the critics involved in Elimane's plagiarism case, except for herself and Philippe Vaillant, who both recognized the merit of the young author's work. She states boldly her belief that Elimane killed them all, and that he practised black magic (337), further developing the nefarious image of an African Other.

The second and third biographèmes therefore serve to bolster the magical and ambiguous qualities attached to the image of Elimane, emphasising his Otherness even while giving him voice and form. Consisting of "dead" (unsent/unclaimed) letters from Elimane and Assane, his supposed father who died in WWI, the fourth biographème is shared between these two voices, interspersed so as to reflect their different experiences of France and the French. Elimane begins by excusing himself for not writing, then Assane does the same, wondering if he will even return from the horrors of war. Elimane then tells of his search for his father whom he hates for leaving him, but the hate is transformed in both Assane's and Elimane's subsequent lines: Assane deflects it to

characterize his brother Ousseynou's feelings for him, and Elimane neutralizes it, saying that he never missed his father because he had Ousseynou as a father. Elimane describes Charles Ellenstein as a brother who also lost his father during World War I, and who pushed Elimane to continue until he arrived in the tiny village in the Aisne department where he found his father's unsent letter. Elimane hopes that "le père Greusard réussira à vous traduire fidèlement ses mots" (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 500), reinforcing the role of translingual communication between family members and communities. This letter from Elimane also accompanies a copy of his book, that he will translate for his mother and uncle himself when he returns, as a famous writer, neither dishonoured nor ashamed. This intergenerational interplay from the men who went away emphasizes the importance of Mbougar Sarr's plurivocal poetics, as voices and languages from the community—le père Greusard—intertwine with those from the past and present in France in this letter.

Finally, the Epilogue brings the principal narrator, Diégane Latyr Faye's voice to the fore, after he reads the letter Elimane addressed to him before dying, the elderly author knowing somehow that someone was coming to find him. This letter accompanies Elimane's autobiographical manuscript, which he asks Diégane to publish even though he knows it is nothing compared to *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*. The letter is more powerful than the manuscript: "Le futur me manque. Ainsi finit tout devin : dans la nostalgie du futur. Ainsi finit le voyant : dans la mélancolie de l'avenir" (Mbougar Sarr 2021, 561). But it is not powerful enough to overcome Diégane's decision to destroy the manuscript. The last paragraphs of the novel are deployed to justify and yet contradict this decision, threatening a visitation from Elimane to wreak his revenge. In the end, the intricate and ambiguous magic of these Senegalese writers blends to become a simple statement of their alternatives: "écrire, ne pas écrire" (566). But the more complex questions arise in their wake. How can Senegalese and/or non-French authors write in a monolingual context that slanders their plurivocal poetics of translingualism? How do Senegalese and/or non-French authors banish accusations of plagiarism from their translingual contexts? How must Senegalese and/or non-French authors convince the French literary system to recognize that their linguistic and literary boundaries are no longer valid nor enforceable?

Conclusion

The connections between the translingual turn and French literary prize-winners may seem evident from the rise in non-French writers winning the Goncourt and the Renaudot in recent years, especially around the

turn of the millennium. However, by identifying translingualism as part of the picture since the early twentieth century, when René Maran was awarded the Goncourt in 1921, and tracing how translingualism has been consistently undermined by the spectre of plagiarism projected by monolingual perspectives and editorial judgements, this article has demonstrated that the relationship between translingualism and French literary prize-winners is more complex than it seems. While many non-French writers escaped the innuendo and condemnation heaped on Black and/or African laureates, scapegoats like Yambo Ouologuem have paid the price for their translingual approaches and plurivocal poetics, enfolding multiple voices and many truths into their novels. Into this ambiguously racialized mix of praise and plagiarism, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr drove his message confidently and with clear purpose. He managed to steer the translingual turn in such a way that he faced the plagiarism accusations head-on, staring down the monolingual critics and flaunting his extraordinary range of intertexts and paratexts, establishing plurivocal poetics as his translingual mode par excellence. He has reinforced the potential for considering translingual writing as *unconditionally* worthy of French literary prizes, and opened the way for more direct critique of a French literary system that would enforce monolingual perspectives and editorial judgements.

As a coda, in his final paratext, Mbougar Sarr thanks Felwine [Sarr] and Philippe [Rey], his co-editors who represent perfectly the translingual context in which Mbougar Sarr is publishing. Jimsaan, the publishing house created in Senegal by Felwine Sarr, Boubacar Boris Diop and Nafissatou Dia proposes a multilingual publishing policy and Mbougar Sarr has expressed an interest in writing in Senegalese languages. Medium-sized independent French publishing house Philippe Rey also supports the work of Sarr and Diop in a collaboration that counters the hegemony of Galligrasseuil (Gallimard, Grasset et Seuil) in the French literary prize race. In the end, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, through its text and context, intertexts and paratext, presents a compelling example of how the translingual turn has not only transformed the profiles of French literary prize-winners, but has also shaken the foundations of what it means to write a novel, ostensibly in French, today.

Note

1. Two other transnational and translingual writers were actually the youngest ever to win these prizes: the Goncourt went to 26-year-old Russian-French Henri Troyat (Lev Aslanovitch Tarassoff) for *L'Araigne* in 1938 and the Renaudot to 23-year-old French-Mauritian JMG Le Clézio for *Le Procès-verbal* in 1963.

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