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 **Dances with Wolofs: A conversation with Boubacar Boris Diop**

Charles Sugnet, Boubacar Boris Diop

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**Dances with Wolofs**  
**A conversation with Boubacar Boris Diop**

*Charles J. Sugnet (bio)*

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It's May 1968, and the revolution will be in French: rockers and hippies join

communist cells, marches give way to riots, workers dance with students, the city is paralyzed. Everyone stays up all night talking, arguing, putting every convention to the test: anarchists vie with Stalinists, Maoists, and Trotskyists for the soul of the movement. The government has lost control. The president, the liberator of his nation, is nearly forced to resign. Finally, the flamboyant leader consults with his generals and defuses the crisis—just barely—with a cynical mix of concession and repression. “May ’68” becomes a legend, a talismanic symbol of youth and change, tear gas and truncheons, the high-water mark of sixties radicalism.

It’s a twice-told tale, a media myth: the siege of Paris, May 1968. But this isn’t Paris. It’s Dakar, Senegal, and the president is not Charles de Gaulle but Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet-politician who led Senegal to independence. Dakar has existed in a state of perpetual nervousness ever since. The workers and students eventually dispersed, but opposition to Senghor and his Socialist Party remained illegal until 1976, when he created a bogus multiparty system where Senghor himself chose names and ideologies for the opposition parties. Last spring, the veterans of May ’68 helped to push the ruling socialists out of office, ending a regime that grew more corrupt and more repressive throughout its forty years in office, and promising a new dawn for democracy.

Boubacar Boris Diop is politely skeptical. A former book-toting, jean-wearing radical, he survived manhandling by Senghor’s police to become one of Senegal’s leading writers, a public intellectual and gadfly who is also, in his way, one of the most widely respected people in the country. A cofounder of *Sud*, Senegal’s first independent newspaper, he has spent the last two decades reporting and editing at several papers and magazines; indeed, he helped to create the vibrant alternative press whose daring **[End Page 138]** stories helped bring down the Socialists. But Boris Diop is best known as a writer. Since 1981, he has published several award-winning novels, as well as electrifying plays such as *Grand Dakar Factory*—a Beckett-like parable about a government bus that

never arrives. Although he supports Abdoulaye Wade, the new president, Diop is too well informed to be wholly sanguine about Senegal's prospects. His writings have never toed a party line.

Consider *Les tambours de la mémoire* [The drums of memory], the 1990 novel from which Diop's story "Dakar Noir" is adapted. *Drums* tells the story of Fadel Sarr, the unruly scion of a powerful Senegalese family, who turns up dead one afternoon after a seven-year sojourn in the beautiful, archaic Kingdom of Wissombo. Sarr had been in Wissombo in hopes of finding a mystical heroine named Queen Johanna Simentho—a shadowy figure who bears a striking resemblance to Aliin Sitooye Diatta, a real-life hero from the 1920s. Diatta was a kind of Senegalese Joan of Arc, exiled at the age of twenty-five for her anti-colonial activism against the French.

Wissombo, as it happens, is a thinly fictionalized stand-in for Casamance, a breathtakingly lush territory along the southern limit of Senegal. Casamance was a favorite spot for French tourists until 1982, when Senegalese troops violated a forest sacred to the region's Diola people. Thousands of Diola marched the following Sunday, armed with machetes, poison arrows, and old hunting muskets—and the government responded with machine guns. Some three hundred Diola were killed, martyrs to the newfound cause of Casamance independence, and Senegal has been at war ever since. Aliin Sitooye Diatta, the Senegalese dissenter, has become the matron saint of Casamance independence.

No one in Senegal wants to talk about Casamance. It's dangerous, for one thing—until recently, open criticism of the government's war effort sometimes landed people in jail. But it's also complicated. Most Senegalese in the north, even the peace activists, want the Diola to quit fighting; the Diola themselves want to quit the...



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Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218  
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