

Setting readers at sea: Fatou Diome's *Ventre de l'Atlantique*

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Fatou Diome's first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (2003), can be read as a work of migrant literature in which the Atlantic figures as a separating expanse beholden to a single past, that of the Atlantic Slave Trade. The ocean divides contemporary African migrants to Europe from the continent, as it did enslaved Africans taken forcibly to the Americas; it consumes a returned impoverished migrant, as it swallowed those who did not survive the Middle Passage. Yet for the authorial protagonist, Salie, and her island home, the Senegalese fishing village of Niodior, the Atlantic evokes multiple histories and experiences. This ocean is a place of freedom, as well as its absence; of daily sustenance, as well as migration; of life, as well as death; of postcolonial violence, as well as the violence of the Trade. The novel's Atlantic, like the text as a whole, alludes to many pasts and, at times, abandons the dualities of place, race, and gender that organize most contemporary discourse about migration and oppression. Passages of opaque desire and oblique critique diverge from a dichotomous geography of continents and subject positions. Where Salie and Niodior emerge uncontained by categories inherited from colonial discourses, there are intimations of what genuinely postcolonial freedom might be. **Keywords:** diaspora, Senegalese literature, Fatou Diome, Atlantic, postcoloniality, freedom.

In Fatou Diome's first novel, *Le Ventre de l'Atlantique* (The Belly of the Atlantic), the authorial protagonist recounts her childhood in the Senegalese island village of Niodior. Salie, herself a writer, narrates from the vantage point of her early twenty-first century Strasbourg present, the same historical location in which the novel, published in 2003, was written. Both narrative and novel are thus produced within an Afro-European diaspora, and migration to Europe, experienced and desired, is one of its central subjects.

Salie's emigration is motivated by a desire for freedom, she tells us, and the story she writes is one that is saturated with freedom's opposite: the racist oppression of African people, past and present, and the prejudices of her insular patriarchal home community. Niodior's inhabitants are trapped within an oppressive patriarchal social structure, as well as within neocolonial economic dynamics that impoverish the island

and compel villagers to leave—or dream of leaving—for a life of success and plenty in Europe. The young sons of Niodior, notable among them, Salie's football fanatic younger brother, long to leave (at least one, we learn, did leave) for a life of professional football in France. Salie's own departure is primarily propelled by the pain of having been a relatively powerless outsider because of her sex and the circumstances of her birth: her father was not from Niodior and she was born out of wedlock.

Through an episodic narrative of her early life, we learn how Salie came to choose "exile"—that is, her adult life as a domestic worker and struggling writer in France. Yet stories of Salie's early life—she is raised by her devoted grandmother and taught to love the written word by the village's sole school teacher, a Monsieur Ndétare still beloved to Salie—compose a relatively small portion of the novel. They are far outweighed by scenes of her diasporic present, an account of her recent visit home and, most voluminously, by a collection of intersecting biographical stories, both mythical and historical, each centred on a different Niodior resident.

From these, readers learn how village life, which the narrator characterizes as "traditional" and "African," discards, into the Atlantic, those who do not obey its social strictures, and often imprisons even those who do. Long ago in Niodior, two young lovers, lacking social sanction to marry, drowned themselves in the sea. Villagers say that the two transformed into dolphins and, today still, they care for the village's unwanted infants who, cast into the sea to die, themselves transform into young dolphins. Well within living memory, Moussa, a young man recruited to play football in France, returns home penniless and ashamed. Ostracized as a failure and then baselessly suspected of a homosexual relationship with Ndétare, the village's resident "stranger," he commits suicide by drowning. Ndétare's single love affair, with a young woman ordered by her father to marry a powerful older man, produces an (illegitimate) child whom her father kills and throws in the sea. Ndétare helps the woman make an escape by sea; she is never seen again.

The Atlantic receives the human evidence of unacceptable desire. It also, sometimes, makes possible the liberation of those whose desires, like those of Salie herself, the village either condemns or cannot contain. Salie portrays her exilic condition, that of a writer who is fully at home nowhere but in her writing, as a variety of maritime suicide—"j'ai pris ma barque et fait de mes valises des écrins d'ombre. L'exile, c'est mon suicide géographique" (I took my boat and turned by suitcases into shadow boxes. Exile is my geographical suicide) (262) – albeit one motivated by her desire to write and to be free.¹ Salie's Atlantic, the location of several kinds of death, is also a place of life. On the novel's final page, she compares herself to algae drifting in the Atlantic. A writer at home and free nowhere but on the page, she is always at sea:

Aucun filet ne saura empêcher les algues de l'Atlantique de voguer et de tirer leur saveur des eaux qu'elles traversent [...] Partir, vivre libre et mourir, comme une algue de l'Atlantique.

No fishing net can prevent the seaweed of the Atlantic from drifting, nor from absorbing the flavors of the waters it passes through [...] To leave, to live in freedom, and to die, like seaweed in the Atlantic. (296)

The Atlantic of Diomé's novel is not only a figurative location within Salie's account of her exilic itinerary and it is not solely the chasm into which Niodior discards the lovers (and infants) it condemns. This Atlantic also sometimes figures as a separating expanse beholden to a single past: the ocean divides contemporary African migrants to Europe from the continent, as it did enslaved Africans taken forcibly to the Americas. Diomé's novel has been chiefly read as a work of migrant literature (Adesanmi; Dobie and Saunders; Diouf; Nganang) and this reading is supported by the novel's engagement with the Middle Passage past. Postcolonial African migration is equated with the Atlantic Slave Trade and passages explicitly identify contemporary European sex tourism in Africa and the present-day European "trade" in African football players with the historical Trade.² In this identification, categories of continent, race, and gender are self-evident and transcend historical change.

Other parts of the novel, often didactic passages that explain African or female experience, produce similarly essentialist understandings of place and selfhood. One such passage, lodged within Salie's account of a recent visit home, illustrates the limitations produced by this sometime-employment of binary conceptions of continent, gender, and race. Fleeing the suffocating suspicions and judgements of Niodior in search of a few days of holiday, Salie goes to the nearby seaside town of Mbour. Out on an evening walk, she comes upon the drumming and singing that announce a traditional wrestling match and, within the novel, occasion Salie's explanation of what it means to be an African woman:

Aucune fille d'Afrique, même après de longues années d'absence, ne peut rester froide au son du tam-tam. Il s'infiltré en vous, tel du beurre de karité dans un bol de riz chaud, et vous fait vibrer de l'intérieur. La danse devient alors un réflexe: elle ne s'apprend pas, car elle est sensation [...] La tête vrillée par ce son ancestrale, les pieds enfoncés dans le sable froid des soirs côtiers, on ne saurait mieux s'imbiber de la sève de l'Afrique. C'est comme une communion venue du plus profond des âges [...] aucun savoir-faire technique ou chimique ne saura jamais extirper de notre âme la veine rythmique qui bondit dès la première résonance du djembe. Raison et sensibilité ne s'excluent point. Malgré les coups assenés par l'Histoire, ce rythme demeure, et avec lui notre africanité, n'en déplaie aux prêcheurs de tout bord. Ah! comme il était bon d'être là! Je suis heureuse, heureuse, heureuse! répétais-je.

No daughter of Africa, even after long years of absence, can remain unmoved by the sound of the tam-tam. It seeps into you like shea butter in a bowl of hot rice and makes you vibrate from the inside. Dance thus becomes a reflex; it cannot be learned, because it is sensation [...] Head twisting from this ancestral sound, feet sunk into the

cool sand of coastal evenings, there is no better way to imbibe Africa's sap. It is like a communion originating in the most distant of ages [...] no technological or chemical know-how could ever excise the vein of rhythm from our soul, a vein which pulses at the djembe's first note. Reason and emotion (*sensibilité*) are not mutually exclusive. Despite the assaults of History, rhythm remains, and with it our *africanité*, whatever preachers from all corners might think. Oh! How good it is to be here! I am happy, happy, happy, I repeated. (Diome 225)

Readers—"you"—are invited to identify with this "daughter of Africa." We learn that to be a female child of the continent is inextricably, even essentially, connected to drumming, dancing, and a specific—necessarily raced and gendered—experience of embodiment. Dancing is akin to a bodily reflex; not only can it not be learned, it is sensation itself. A daughter of Africa is she who, permeated by its sound, dances to the beating of tam-tams; the continent's life force is found in the drum beat that vibrates within her dancing body. African rhythm and movement compose an ancient communion that transcends historical change and refutes whatever objections might be brought to the notion of *africanité*, an African essence.

Our narrator poses an oblique challenge to Léopold Sédar Senghor's infamous statement regarding the continental distribution of rationality and soul—"L'émotion est nègre, comme la raison est hellène" (Emotion is *nègre*, as reason is Hellenic) (Senghor 295)—only to abandon that challenge. Found in Senghor's first theoretical articulation of Negritude, the 1939 essay "*Ce que l'homme noir apporte*", the sentence has become a shorthand that, in the eyes of Negritude's critics, encapsulates the essentialism, even racism, of the movement and its most famous 'father.'³ Readers might expect our narrator to pursue the implications of her pointed allusion. Yet she does not, as if the 'African' content of dancing and drumming cannot be handled except through a lexicon of authenticity. The sentences which follow, like many articulations of Senghorian Negritude itself, seem concerned only with a particularly African spiritual and cultural essence.

Despite the exuberant lexicon and the implied invitation to readers to share in an experience of passionate embodiment, the account lacks the specificity and immediacy found in passages of the novel that are not 'about' either Africa or gender. Compressed into two rhetorical poles—of womanhood and Africa—Salie's bodily experience is conveyed in a well-worn vocabulary of gendered African authenticity. While the description seems intended to transport the reader, just as Salie herself has ostensibly been transported, it does not transmit the intensity and complexity of a particular interior experience.

Where, however, the novel diverges from a dichotomous geography of continents, ideas, and subject positions, experiences of desire and freedom emerge, uncontained by binary categories of race, place, and gender inherited from colonial discourses.

In the opacity of these passages, in which little is explained, the Trade is nowhere referenced and “Africa” is not defined. There is an oblique critique of the long afterlife of colonialism and intimations of how desire, uncorralled by the ostensible poles of gender, race, and continent, might feel.

Readers enter *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* through a televised soccer game. The novel begins in excited staccato tones that alternately suggest an enraptured television sports commentator and an engrossed spectator:

*Plus vite! Mais le vent a tourné: maintenant, le ballon vise l’entrejambe de Toledo, le goal italien.
Oh! mon Dieu, faites quelque chose!*

Faster! But the wind has changed direction: now the ball is heading between the legs of the Italian keeper, Toledo. Oh, my God, do something! (11)

It is only in reading the subsequent paragraph that readers can surmise that these two seemingly distinct narrative voices, one energetically descriptive, one energetically supplicant, belong to a single narrator, an ‘I’ not yet named, raced, gendered, or otherwise socially located, watching a television screen:

Devant ma télévision, je saute du canapé et allonge un violent coup de pied. Aie, la table! Je voulais courir avec la balle, aider Maldini à la récupérer, l’escorter, lui permettre de traverser la moitié du terrain afin d’aller la loger au fond des buts adverses. Mais mon coup de pied n’a servi qu’ à renverser mon thé refroidi sur la moquette. A cet instant précis, j’imagine les Italiens tendus, aussi raides que les fossiles humains de Pompéi. Je ne sais pas pourquoi on serre les fesses quand le ballon s’approche des buts.

In front of my television, I leap from the sofa and perform a violent kick. Ow, the table! I wanted to run with the ball, to help Maldini get it, to allow him to cross half the field with it, in order to sink it into the opponent’s goal. But my kick served only spill my cold tea on the carpet. At the precise instant, I imagine the tensed Italians, rigid as the human fossils of Pompei. I don’t know why one tightens one’s buttocks when the ball approaches the goal. (11–2)

The television provokes not only our narrator’s emotional engagement, but her corporeal engagement as well. She is a spectator, but one whose body nonetheless joins with the action of the soccer match, entering into the televised mediation of a geographically remote event—only to encounter her own table in her misplaced effort to assist this mysterious Maldini. We know nothing of this over-enthused spectator (we do not yet know that ‘she’ is ‘she’); we cannot guess at the source of her passion for the game and for, it seems, Maldini. It does seem clear, however, that we are witnessing a scene of fanatical football spectatorship. Yet the paragraph’s final sentence upends even this tenuous understanding. It has the straightforward and unpolished quality of a child’s uncertainty, at odds with the voice of an apparently

adult narrator. Who is this adult who wonders, in the midst of the game, about the basics of physical response? Why, suddenly, an inquiry about “tightening buttocks?”

The desire to prevent or facilitate the scoring of goals and an identification with the player prompts a bodily response in our spectator. The desire to assist that player leads to the unanticipated connection of her foot with her table. Yet the reference to buttocks tightening in anticipation evokes sexual desire and thus foregrounds still unanswerable questions about the narrator’s gender and the character of the narrator’s bodily involvement and passion. Readerly curiosity heightens: what is ‘really’ going on here?

While readers know this narrator’s immediate preoccupation (the football game), we know little else and must, for a little while, content ourselves with this information. The passage thus grants the as-yet-unknown narrator an opacity that readings often deny to African literary characters. Édouard Glissant (in *Poetics of Relation*) famously theorized a “right to opacity.” Tobias Warner has written about the opacity that dominant feminist readings of Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* (1979) (*So Long a Letter*) refuse Ramatoulaye, the novel’s narrator and fictive author, arguing that this opacity-denying interpretation is part of the condition under which Bâ’s (African) novel has been included in the canon of World Literature (Warner). Reading of this contemporary novel, authored by Bâ’s compatriot, centres contemporary migration and, sometimes with it, the history of the Middle Passage, which Diome’s novel, particularly its Atlantic, also evokes. These readings attend to some of the many apparently transparent passages, in which the narrator announces, names, and explains; the novel’s particularly opaque, albeit brief, inception has received little, if any, critical attention.

Just as readerly speculation begins to surface, the narrator addresses us directly:

Pourquoi je vous raconte tout ça? J’adore le foot? Pas tant que ça. Alors je suis amoureuse de Maldini? Mais non! Je ne suis pas folle à ce point quand-même.

Why am I telling you all this? I adore soccer? Not all that much. Then, am I in love with Maldini? No! I’m not crazy to that extent. (Diome 12)

We learn of an ostensibly transparent gender identity (woman) and learn of one reason (sexual desire) that does not account for her passionate engagement with televised soccer. With the feminine gendering of “in love” (*amoureuse*), we learn that the spectator is a woman. She summons the predictable spectre of heterosexual desire, only to discount the absurdity of such desire to explain her avid relationship with Maldini—or, equally accurately, to explain the passion of her relationship with the television that transmits his game into her living room.

A sentence finally moors the scene and the reader to a date and a particular moment in football history: “*Le 29 juin 2000, je regarde la Coupe d’Europe de football. L’Italie*

affronte les Pays-Bas en demi-finale. Mes yeux fixent la television, mon coeur contemple d'autres horizons" (June 29th 2000, I am watching the European Cup. Italy faces the Netherlands in the semi-finals. My eyes fix upon the television, my heart contemplates other horizons) (13). We are offered some pieces of anchoring context; yet, once again, we are set at sea. The final sentence reminds us that more fundamental information remains elusive: we still do not understand the character of the desire which has infused this scene. If the desire is not erotic, nor propelled by a passion for the game itself, what sort of desire is it? If its object is not Maldini, or the beautiful game itself, then what could it be? Where, on which horizons, has this heart set its gaze?

The subsequent sentences offer an elliptical response. As the eyes watch a televised European match, the heart travels to the island of Niodior:

Là-bas, depuis des siècles, des hommes sont pendus à un bout de terre, l'île de Niodior. Accrochés à la gencive de l'Atlantique, tels des résidus de repas, ils attendent, résignés, que la prochaine vague les emporte ou leur laisse la vie sauve.

Over there, for centuries, men hang suspended from a bit of land, the island of Niodior. Stuck like the remains of a meal to the Atlantic's gums, they wait, resigned, for the next wave to take them or to leave them with their lives. (13)

Thus, the reader is introduced to Salie's home village, the place where, it soon becomes clear, a young man has also been watching the game. By this account, it is a place barely located in the world, belonging perhaps more to the sea than to the land, its inhabitants likened to the detritus of a meal, awaiting their fate; sooner or later, they will be swallowed by a ravenous Atlantic. The narrator quickly returns us to the present of her living room and television screen before departing once again for an imagined Niodior:

La bruit de la télévision me sort de ma rêverie. Chaque fois que les reporters crient le nom de Maldini, un visage se dessine sur l'écran. A quelques milles kilomètres de mon salon, à l'autre bout de la Terre, au Sénégal, là-bas, sur cette île à peine assez grande pour héberger un stade, j'imagine un jeune homme rivé devant une télévision de fortune pour suivre le même match que moi ... Battements de coeur, souffles, gestes de joie ou de désarroi, tous nos signes émotionnels sont synchronisés la durée d'un match, car nous courons derrière le même homme: Paulo Maldini.

The television noise pulls me out of my daydream. Each time that reporters shout Maldini's name, a face appears on the screen. Several thousand kilometres from my living room, on the other side of the Earth, over there, in Senegal, on that island barely large enough to hold a stadium, I imagine a young man riveted before a makeshift television, following the same match as I am [...] Thudding heart, breaths, gestures of joy or distress, for the duration of a match, all our emotional expressions are synchronized because we are chasing after the same man: Paulo Maldini. (15)

The television collapses not only the distance between narrator and soccer game; it also mediates the vaster distance between Salie, in her Strasbourg living room, and the young man on the island not large enough to host a stadium. It is no longer a matter of an ambiguous collapsing or merging of two bodies, that of our narrator and Maldini. There is a third, albeit imagined, person in what is now, it seems, a triangulation. Is this the lover? Perhaps the true object of the intense physical engagement so evident in the novel's second passage?

Ambiguity of desire and relationship, if not of the gender of the two bodies in question, is again before the reader. The novel's opening sequence, in which our protagonist—not yet named, raced, gendered, or located in place and time—watches Maldini play televised soccer, forces readers to experience an opacity that is often denied to African characters and literature. One effect is that we are confronted with the possibility that binary categories of woman/man, black/white, Africa/Europe inherited from colonial discourses, which inform much of the novel, as they do the world outside of it, do not fully explain the complexity of our world, neither our experiences of embodiment, gender, and desire nor colonial and ongoing violence.

L'un d'eux reste muet, concentré sur les images. Le buste projeté vers l'écran, son regard se faufile entre les têtes. Les mâchoires serrées, seuls les quelques mouvements désordonnés qui lui échappent disent la passion qui l'habite. Au premier tackle de Maldini, spontanément, son pied soulève l'arrière-train du garçon accroupi devant lui. La victime se retourne, furieuse, mais, voyant le visage absorbé de l'auteur du coup, n'escompte aucune excuse et se réinstalle un peu plus loin.

One of them remains silent, intent upon the television images. Torso jutting towards the screen, gaze weaves between the heads. Jaw clenched, only a few random movements escape his control and express the passion that inhabits him. At Maldini's first tackle, his foot spontaneously lifts the backside of the boy crouched in front of him. The victim turns around, furious, but seeing the absorbed expression on the face of the responsible party, expected no apology, and reestablished himself a little further away. (16–7)

Like our first spectator, watching alone in her living room, the young man's engagement is total. Television connects the two, as does the particular intensity of their spectatorship. Until a power outage prematurely concludes the televised game in Niodior, they watch the same game, at the same time, with identical, intensely embodied, attention. Like the woman before a French TV screen, the young man unconsciously attempts to physically participate in the game he is viewing. Unlike the foot of the first spectator, however, his foot encounters the body of his understanding neighbor, not an inanimate table.

These paired scenes of television spectatorship provide information; they allow

readers to understand how the protagonist is linked to her place of origin, and they permit the novel to introduce and develop the sibling relationship that will remain central to the narrative. They also serve to define and distinguish two locations and experiences. Niodior is densely social and materially impoverished, while Strasbourg is relatively socially isolated and materially comfortable. For our spectator in Niodior, the televised game links him to his favourite player, whose name he has borne for years, and to his own dream of moving to Europe to play professionally. The television in the Strasbourg flat occupies a different function for its resident. Her love for Niodior and for the young soccer fanatic, her brother, passes by way of a game played in Spain and its star Italian defender.

However, these descriptions perform an additional function. They open a space of opacity and ambiguity that exists alongside the narrator's explanatory accounts of her circumstances and history. Transmitting an event taking place in a third location, the television occasions an intense embodied identificatory desire (never further explained or defined) that traverses the distance between two locations. Viewership thus triangulates and complicates what would otherwise be a linear trajectory between social and geographical poles.

A recalled Senegalese television broadcast and Salie's commentary upon its reception in Niodior similarly provide an occasion for readerly questioning and critique:

L'avion présidentiel a décollé de l'aéroport international de Dakar, ce matin à 8 heures. En effet, le Père-de-la-nation, accompagné de notre aimable ministre de l'Équipement, inaugure aujourd'hui à Tambacounda, une pompe d'eau offerte par nos amis les Japonais. En fin de journée, Son Excellence, monsieur le Premier ministre, s'est rendu au port autonome de Dakar pour réceptionner un cargo de riz offerte par la France, afin de secourir les populations de l'intérieur du pays touchées par la sécheresse. La France, un grand pays ami de longue date, fait savoir, par la voix de son ministre des Affaires étrangères qu'elle s'apprête à reconsidérer prochainement la dette du Sénégal [...]

The president's airplane landed at Dakar's international airport this morning at eight o'clock. Today in Tambacounda, the Father-of-the-Nation, accompanied by our beloved Minister of Infrastructure, inaugurated a water pump, a gift from our friends, the Japanese. At the day's conclusion, His Excellence, the Prime Minister, was found at Dakar's autonomous port in order to receive a shipment of rice from France intended to rescue inland communities affected by the drought. France, an old friend, made it known, through her Minister of Foreign Affairs, that she is preparing to reexamine Senegal's debt [...] (56–7)

The ironies do not require elaboration to be palpable to the reader. In this news broadcast from the 1970s, from Salie's childhood, the former colonial power and current lender is cast as an "old friend," steadfast in its generosity. Rice, indigenous to West

Africa and cultivated in Senegal, nonetheless arrives from abroad. The national news is more preoccupied with the apparent altruism of other nations, “the Japanese,” in addition to *La France*, than with the resources and perspectives of Senegalese people.

The chasm between the news and its Niodior listeners is clear from what we learn of the broadcast’s local reception. A Sereer audience, which does not include French speakers, watches the evening news on the state-run station, on Niodior’s sole television, the recent acquisition of the villager who becomes relatively rich after years working in Paris. The wealth and mobility of the president and the *Premier ministre*, the language of the broadcast and the broadcaster’s location in Dakar all contribute to the vast distance between the world of the viewers and that of the broadcast’s content. Indeed, Niodior’s television broadcast interpreter, one of the village’s few French speakers at the time, does not manage to provoke much response from the local audience, so distant is it from their experience. Salie makes this clear, with wry concision: “*Ici, on n’a pas besoin d’une pompe à eau, même japonaise*” (Here we have no need for a water pump, even a Japanese one) (58).

What follows is a vision of independence and freedom unlike any other in the novel. Niodior, initially introduced as a bit of land, “*un bout de terre,*” on which its passive inhabitants are glued, just as bits of food adhere to one’s gums after eating, is almost immediately presented for a second time. It is a place of lack, an island barely large enough to host a soccer stadium. Yet here, in an entirely unexpected turn of tone and narrative trajectory, Niodior is presented again. On this occasion, the island appears independent and self-sufficient, a *de facto* republic of its own and a place of abundance:

Nichée au coeur de l’océan Atlantique, L’île de Niodior dispose d’une nappe phreatique qui semble inépuisable; un petit nombre de puits alimente tout le village. Il suffit de creuser quatre à cinq mètres pour voir jaillir une eau de source, fraîche et limpide, filtrée par le grain fin du sable. Nul n’attend non plus quelques kilos de riz français; cultivateurs, éleveurs et pêcheurs, ces insulaires sont autosuffisants et ne demandent rien à personne. Ils auraient pu, s’ils avaient voulu, ériger leur mini-république au sein de la République sénégalaise, et le gouvernement ne se serait rendu compte de rien [...] Le président Père-de-la-nation n’a qu’a offrir sa paternité à qui la lui demande, ici personne n’attend rien de sa tutelle.

Nestled into the heart of the Atlantic Ocean, the Island of Niodior possesses a seemingly limitless supply of underground water: a small number of wells nourish the whole village. One need only dig down four to five meters in order for water to flow, crystalline and fresh, filtered by the fine-grained sand. Nor is anyone waiting for a few kilos of French rice; farmers, pastoralists, and fishermen, these islanders are self-sufficient and ask nothing from no one. They could have, had they wanted, founded their mini-republic in the heart of the Republic of Senegal, and the government would have noticed nothing [...] The president, Father-of-the-Nation, need offer his paternity

only to those who request it; here no one expects anything from his care. (58–9)

Here the Atlantic does not appear as a cavernous being, possessed only of mouth and stomach. “Belly” or “abdomen,” a “*ventre*” can contain not only a stomach, but also a womb, and it is the latter which this passage suggests. *Niché(e)*, “nestled,” is also the adjective that describes the pre-natal Salie curled in her mother’s “belly” — “*un mystère niché dans son ventre*” (a mystery nestled in her belly) (82). Nested into a heart-nook of the Atlantic, Niodior is akin to a foetus within a mother’s body, an apt metaphor for a village of fishermen who depend upon the ocean for their sustenance. Here Niodior, rather than a location of lack and imprisonment, is cast as a place of abundance. The Atlantic, rather than a ravenous pit into which the dead are discarded, appears as the source of life.

Moreover, Niodior, unlike the nation that Senghor has ‘fathered,’ could possess genuine independence. The most famous ‘father’ of Negritude was also the first president of Senegal. He remains unnamed, but his identity is clear, and his State is the object of a forceful, if slightly oblique, critique. Senghor’s Senegal is neo-colonial. It is neither truly independent nor free, and his paternal “care” is neither wanted nor needed in Niodior. On the island, the essential pre-conditions for postcolonial freedom are present, and Senghor’s Senegal may as well be another country. The village possesses not only adequate but plentiful food and fresh water, and villagers are confidently self-sufficient. French rice is unnecessary and water abundant. It is not the imagined drought-stricken Sahelian country where, according to the ‘First World,’ desperate populations rely on the generous aid of their Northern brethren. Niodior is not only a place of abundance and self-sufficiency, nourished by the sea, it also exists as a state of political independence and democracy, albeit in the conditional past tense.

Here are the few, perhaps only, instances of the word “republic” in the novel, and the only occasion that the narrator raises, as if in passing, the idea that economic independence is an essential pre-condition for substantive sovereignty and freedom. The passage thus powerfully evokes the material conditions that genuinely *postcolonial* political freedom would require and, in the energetic ease of its prose and in the abundance that it summons, creates a visceral, if brief, experience of liberation. In its precise and attentive description of past and possible plentitude, it opens, for this reader at least, a small space of freedom.

For Patrice Nganang, Diomé’s novel is joined to a history of forced migration and freedom’s opposite. He views *Ventre de l’Atlantique* as part of an African literature of emigration that continues a literary tradition inaugurated by the earliest Anglophone slave narrative.⁴ However, in Nganang’s *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine* (2007) (Manifesto for a New African Literature), the novel also figures as literary heir to a very different text, Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) (Notebook

of a Return to the Native Land). Césaire's surrealist *Cahier* ends with an unrealized return to origins that is seemingly impossible. The poem concludes inconclusively, at sea, and with a word for movement so non-linear and indeterminate that it prompts Césaire's own neologism—"reversion."

Le Ventre de l'Atlantique offers us a marine territory of longing and imagination that is integral to the experience of migration and that is also (if only briefly and at intervals) uncorralled by oppositions that do not do justice to the complexity of the narrator's own diasporic experience.

A critical engagement with freedom, as well as intense evocations of it, is found where we might least expect it—in passages which neither thematize oppression nor articulate historical experience through the binary terms often employed to challenge it. At times, Diome's novel does what Césaire's surrealist poem does: it invites us to think of ourselves outside of the words and possibilities inherited from colonial discourses. Where the novel leaves its readers at sea, in the Atlantic, it asks us to imagine what genuinely *postcolonial* freedom might be.

If, alongside the Atlantic of the Trade and postcolonial Afro-European migration, we foreground the Atlantic of Salie's island village and her particular "exile," we encounter an ocean that swallows those whose desires and social experiences that neither colonial nor postcolonial orders have publicly tolerated. We also find an Atlantic that has nourished living desire, feeding a could-have-been island republic and giving our writer-narrator an exilic freedom. In this Atlantic, we glimpse, almost touch, subjectivities and political possibilities ungoverned by the categories that European colonialism created.

Notes

1. All translations into English are my own.
2. Salie says, for example:

Pour mesdames les touristes venues réveiller leurs corps en carence d'hormones, pas d'inquiétude : en échange de quelques billets, d'une chaîne ou d'une montre même pas en or, un étalon posera ses plaques de chocolat sur leurs seins flasques.

As for Mesdames Touristes come to reawaken their bodies in a cascade of hormones, not to worry; in exchange for a few bills, a necklace or a watch, not even of gold, a stallion will place his chocolate slabs on their slack breasts. (Diome 231)

White women tourists come to Senegal for cheap exotic encounters with young African men who they approach as virile stallions, possessed not of discreet human parts but of chocolate slabs. In Salie's configuring of the encounter, both parties are objectified but only one, the white woman with her flaccid breasts, is endowed with human traits. Racist dehumanization evokes the Trade, as does the exchange of mere trinkets for access to African bodies. In the present, so the passage implies, the historical Trade finds an equivalent in a different kind of buying of black people. The trade in football players is a theme through much of the novel, one which perhaps culminates in the sarcastic announcement found in its final pages. Salie declares 2002 to be "*l'année internationale de la lutte contre la colonisation sportive et la traite des footteurs!*" (the international year of struggle against the colonisation of athletics and the trade in footballers!) (281–2).

3. Souleymane Bachir Diagne describes this much-cited sentence as Senghor's immature formulation of Negritude and argues that it does not represent Senghor's Negritude thought, particularly in its more developed forms.
4. Readings of the novel sometimes echo this identification. For example, Nganang places Diome's novel within a long African literary tradition of emigration that begins with Olaudah Equiano's memoir, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), a text of forced Middle Passage migration: "*Le ventre de l'Atlantique de Fatou Diome ne continue donc que le tangage du bateau que cette narration fondatrice signifie*" (Fatou Diome's *Belly of the Atlantic* thus simply continues the pitching and heaving of the boat [the slave ship] which this foundational narrative constitutes) (Nganang 234–5).

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