Fatou Diome’s *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique*: From Island Girl to Atlantic Woman

The novel’s protagonist, Salie, is born out of wedlock into the rigidly traditional society of Niodior, a small Senegalese island. Salie experiences limitations based on her social status and, especially, her gender. These limitations, in turn, guide her need to define her identity and her role and purpose as a migrant to France. The protagonist’s story marks an important contribution to immigration/exile discourses in that it exposes how gender, in general, and girlhood, in particular, can be powerful motivators leading to migration in addition to more frequently discussed causes such as finding (better) employment or pursuing educational opportunities.

Fatou Diome’s first novel, *Le ventre de l’Atlantique (The Belly of the Atlantic)* was published in France in 2003 and became an instant success.¹ The author, born in 1968 on the small Senegalese island Niodior, was raised by her grandmother, moved to the city of M’Bour to attend high school at age thirteen, and eventually began studies in Dakar. She migrated to France when, as a twenty-two-year-old, she married a French man. After her marriage ended, she relocated to Strasbourg where she studied to receive a doctorate in literature. Her first publication, *La préférence nationale (The National Preference)* is a collection of short stories that appeared in 2001. She still resides in Strasbourg and hosted a monthly cultural TV show (*Sleepless Night*) from fall 2004 to fall 2006.

It is tempting to see and emphasize the many parallels between the author’s biography and events narrated in *The Belly of the Atlantic* and

¹ See, for example, Emily Brady’s *Time Magazine* article, “Out of Africa, Hot in France,” and her assertion that the novel, published on 1 August 2003, had made it to “the top of the French best-seller lists” by December of the same year.
thus to treat it as an autobiographical novel. My emphasis here, however, is on the fictional work, and on exploring how the narrator’s story — a girl’s story — informs our thinking about emigration or migration from Senegal to France, about relations between the two countries, and about the challenges that the traditional society on Niodior faces in the twenty-first century. On the surface, Diome’s novel emerges as a text that appears to be mostly about soccer. Indeed, soccer anchors the narrative in time and with reference to actual events: between June 29th, 2000 — the day Italy and Holland play to compete for the European Cup — and June 18th, 2002, when South Korea plays Italy in the World Cup. The performance of then soccer idols like Platini (French) and Maldini (Italian) are constant topics in the phone conversations between the narrator and her younger brother. While soccer is an important element for both the structure and the content of the narrative, it is not its only dimension. A central concern within the novel highlights how traditions and practices of gendering affect children and their respective individual male and female futures and roles in society, as well as their roles as Senegalese emigrants to France.

Emily Brady stresses that the narrator, Salie, has “a more than passing resemblance” to the author. Some of these are that both the author and the narrator were raised by their grandmothers, married a French citizen, and left behind a younger brother when they moved to France. In addition to sharing biographical commonalities, the author and the narrator also share certain dispositions. Regarding literature and reading, for instance, Fatou Diome tells Hervé Mbouguen that she reads “many authors” and that she has “dozens” of favorite writers, mentioning examples from different countries and cultures (“Interview de Fatou Diome”). Likewise, the novel’s narrator provides a list of names such as Molière, Marx, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Descartes, Bâ, Yourcenar, Beauvoir and thus gives additional examples of the historically and culturally diverse reading interests of the creator of the fictional protagonist (Belly 41). From these examples, it is clear that the author draws from her own life for the narration. Because of my exclusive focus on the fictional work, it is important to note that the similarities between author and narrator may well serve to give additional weight to the social responsibility and project that emerge from the novel.

Jean-Marie Volet describes Diome’s 2003 novel as “[riding] the wave of soccer-mania that swept Senegal following their victory over defending world champions France in the opening match of the 2002 World Cup.” An interesting angle for future work with this novel may well be this focus on soccer and how Diome introduces the subject to possibly attract a particular readership. The intended audience seems to be boys and young men who also constitute the dominant group of emigrants from Senegal.