Fatou Diome's *Belly of the Atlantic*: A Chronotope at Sea

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Abstract: In *The Belly of The Atlantic,* Senegalese author Fatou Diomé reassembles fragments of her past achronologically. Derived from Bakhtin's theory, the term "chronotope" suggests that her novel combines the collective history of the Atlantic with its liminality between continents. Weaving together multiple accounts within a broader structure, the narrator exposes readers to the reality of exile in France and to the deceptive neo-colonial relations that contribute to modern African diaspora. Shedding new light on Gilroy's concept of *Black Atlantic*, my pluridisciplinary approach explores the trope of the ocean as a potential *site of memory* in alignment with Nora's conceptualization. The intertextual quality of Diomé's work proclaims a mythical affiliation to her native island of Niodior while also reinstating her legitimacy as an independent woman. I argue that the rythmical resurgence of her metonymical uses of the ocean create chronicle patterns that anchor her identity as an emerging author.

Keywords: Immigration, diaspora, Atlantic, neo-colonialism, identity, memory, imagination

In a seminal work published in 1993, Paul Gilroy introduces *The Black Atlantic* with "some new chronotopes" (4) to solidify the transnational concept of migrations and exchanges between continents. Inspired by a vision of "ships in motion," Gilroy's use of Bakhtin's time-space concept allows him to organize his thoughts around this symbol: "The ship is the first of the novel chronotopes presupposed by my attempts to rethink modernity via the history of the Black Atlantic and the African diaspora into the Western hemisphere" (Gilroy 17). According to him, ships were historically "the living means by which the points within that Atlantic world were joined" (16). They could facilitate the circulation of goods and people as well as new ideas and books, thus promoting modernity: "They were mobile elements that stood for the shifting spaces in between the fixed places that they connected" (16). Following Gilroy's approach, I wish to take the living, mutable, unstable metaphor of the Atlantic world in Fatou Diome's novel "as one single complex, unique of analysis" and use it to produce "an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective" (15).

In her award-winning novel *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Senegalese Female author, Fatou Diome, skillfully weaves spatial and temporal elements to create an ingenious narrative derived from cinematographic techniques. Using flashbacks, or analepsis, to capture various life events with different focal lenses, as well as *raccords visuels* to create an unusual contiguity between scenes, the author delivers a master life puzzle to be solved intercontinentally. In other words, multiple individuals from a variety of nations could easily enter Diome's liquid world.

It is interesting to note that Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed the concept of "Chronotope" in 1945 from discourses on physics and biology to define "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Sheperd 146). In the glossary of *The Dialogic Imagination,* Emerson and Holquist explain that his term is in fact an optical tool for reading texts, which are to be understood as "x-rays" of extra-textual cultural forces (143). In an essay pub-

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lished in 1975, Bakhtin promoted the idea that a text could never be isolated from its intertextuality and from within the context of the reader's contemporaneity:

> Every word (every sign) of a text leads beyond its boundaries. It is [therefore] inadmissible to limit the analysis (of knowledge and understanding) exclusively to the text under consideration. Any understanding is an act of relating the text under consideration with other texts, and of reinterpreting it in the new context (my own, the present one, the future one). The stages of this dialogical movement of understanding are: point of departure – the given text; movement backwards – past contexts; movement forward – anticipation (and beginning) of the future context. (Sheperd 145)

It is therefore worth noting that not only did Bakhtin view the act of reading as a dialogue between text and its interpreters, but he also classified this exchange into three different motions in time and space. I contend that Diome's narrator, Salie, whose inner dialogues contained imagined conversations with readers, could be interpreted within the scope of these movements in time and space, bringing together an understanding of the ancient history of the transatlantic with its current history, whilst also anticipating different stories and a new beginning moving forward. Salie, who compares her writing process to a brew in a "witch's cauldron," (3) mixes appositions with atemporal realities following the logics of a conversation, thus delivering a fragmented, yet comprehensive narrative. Using a single word or a protagonist's surname to connect disparate scenes, her organizing principle follows a trail of words initiated by dialogic impulses with her readers, therefore connecting a diversity of chronotopes, each one living within its own world, time and space. The author's extradiegetic dialogues with her readers have a catalytic function: they direct a thread of thoughts while also infusing a mnemonic quality to the overall structure of the novel. Salie's reminiscences are compared to a reversed navigation across the waters, as indicated in the original French version "prenant mon sillage à l'envers" [taking the wake of my boat backwards] (Diome, *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* 13).

Inspired by her own journey as an emigrant, *Le ventre de l'Atlantique,* the original French version published in 2003, is the unique story of a woman's solo navigation through the disillusions of exile in metropolitan France. Seemingly constructed around the phone conversations with her younger brother who remained in Senegal, the novel addresses the naïve expectations of young men in post-colonial Africa. It also exposes the cruelties of human exploitation on both sides of the Atlantic. Offering different layers of understandings, the non-linear narrative requires readers to adapt to Salie's storytelling structure to make sense of the overall story and its relevance to the title: *The Belly of the Atlantic*. Alone in a foreign country, she searches for memories and poetic imageries that are often sourced in the local myths and legends of her native island Niodior. In summary, the use of Mikhail Bakhtin's term "chronotope" to interpret Diome's novel suggests that the Atlantic Ocean is an integral part of Diome's story, shaping characters, events, and the overall interpretation. The waters represent a liminal time-space which stands between Fatou Diome and the Sine-Saloum area in Southern Senegal. Diome's transcultural identities and memories travel between continents. In a similar fashion, the "belly" of the Atlantic is a drifting metaphor which opens a point of departure for her own writing. Lastly, the recurrent topic of modern slavery also suggests the contiguity of an ancient paradigm that is still very relevant today. With the accelerating number of migrant boats rescued in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic, the waters between continents continue to leave a significant impact on collective memory. To validate this affirmation, we can refer to recent cinematic works that explored the trope of the ocean to remember those who perished along the journey.

La Pirogue (2012) by Senegalese director Moussa Touré, *Atlantics* (2019) by young French Senegalese director Mati Diop, and *Lo Capitano* (2023) by Italian filmmaker Matteo Garrone are all acclaimed movies inspired by actual stories of migrants' routes to Europe. Set in Dakar, these three films show how the local youth are obsessed with western life and economic values based on materialism. They explore the common theme of the Senegalese exodus across the ocean, which carries

the promise to liberate individuals from the local contingencies of human exploitation. The migrants' obsession with reaching Europe suggests the development of a latent modern economy of resistance. The liminality of waters shapes a reality that transcends constraints of local poverty and social oppression. Subjected to the coercive power of smugglers, migrants must reconceptualize their survival mechanisms. In Moussa Touré's movie "La Pirogue" the traditional fishing boat encapsulates a micro-society of Africa. The director offers an intimate perspective on the personal lives and spiritual beliefs of various African people. Based on real events, the movie introduces multiple diasporic narratives to counter Europeans biases held against migrants treated as a single entity in news stories. In *Lo Capitano*, Matteo Garrone relies on fantasy and imagination to deliver a harsh reality to the viewer. Fabricated dreams fuel the engine of the boat led by an inexperienced captain. Unlike the people in *La Pirogue*, the migrants in Garrone's movie are safely rescued with the help of the young hero's humanity and fervor. Mati Diop's movie gives us a distinct perspective on the topic. The ocean is strictly viewed from the land, from the beaches of the suburbs of Dakar. *Atlantics* addresses cruel urban inequity by empowering young female figures. Diop's movie shows how local modern slavery is powered by wealthy entrepreneurs who refuse to pay their workers, all the while living an ostentatious material life. In the story, the returning ghosts of the young men who lost their lives at sea use their living female partners to seek justice. In these movies, the waters of the Atlantic represent an organic obstacle to overcome. However, Fatou Diome's use of the oceanic metaphor is open to many interpretations. The metonymy of the belly privileges the devouring trope of the ocean, from the transatlantic slave-trade, the time of colonization, and in the aftermaths of decolonization. The ocean is nothing but a gap or an abysmal void. However, a close reading demonstrates that the belly is also a metaphor for the location of Niodior, her native island. Although most scholars privilege the first interpretation, I illustrate that we can expound on this metaphor. If the topic of people drowning in the ocean is very present throughout the novel, it is also concomitant with the stories, imagined or mystified, of the characters who find a better life in Niodior, the belly of the Atlantic.

According to Gilroy, the rapport with death and suffering emerges "continually in the literature and expressive cultures of the Black Atlantic. It is integral to the narratives of loss, exile, and journeying" which "serve a mnemonic function: directing the consciousness of the group back to significant nodal points in its common history and its social memory" (197). However, the temporality and historicity of the African diaspora can also become part of an "inside modernity" (191) when engendering acts of memory and narrativity.

Arguing that African people do not share the same slave-trading lineage, Polo B. Moji refuses to include Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic to shed light on contemporary discourse on diaspora. Moji criticizes Gilroy's concept, which proposes a narrow view of the African continent as a space lost in the moment of rupture of the Middle passage: "While Gilroy uses the ship to signal this originary movement between geographical locations, there is a way in which the ship leaves Africa behind" (Moji 299). Quoting Gilroy, Moji maintains that Africa is not a "site of loss or 'redemptive return'" (299). In regard to *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Moji warns against "the temptation to conflate the contemporary trans-Atlantic mobilities explored by this author who grew up on the island of Niodior in Senegal before moving to France, with diasporic schema in which 'time' begins with slavery" (299). In her estimation, Diome's feminist re-imagining of the Black Atlantic centers Africa and the Africanness novel. For instance, Salie's admiration and respect for her grandmother is amplified by the belief that she traces her lineage to the 13th century Serer dynasty. Alongside the Guelwaars warriors, the Serers were known for their resistance to the Islamic invasion during (European) medieval times. Bouncing back and forth between the French and Senegalese cultures, Salie explores an anchoring point in the matrilineal lineage pre-colonial history, and by the same token, finds her modernity outside of Western feminism. Her illiterate grandmother is "that female *Guelwaar*" who "opened a path" for her "through the shadows of traditions" (Diome 49).

Aligned with Moji's concentration on Africanness, Marame Gueye turns to Senegalese culture, languages and history to analyze Diome's novel. She uses Wolof idioms to interpret the novel and explains how the polysemy of the concept of returning (either to France or Senegal), could give way to a new term, as an alternative to clandestine immigration. As Gueye reveals, "The belief that life in France ensures a better economic future is reflected in the language that contemporary Senegalese use to describe emigration" (473). For example, to go to the *Kaaw* "suggests that someone has left for France, mainly to accumulate wealth" (473) before a successful return to Senegal. Finally, "*Dem Jolof* often suggests that the migrant has achieved economic stability and acquired the status of legal resident abroad [...] Jolof is the name of the prosperous kingdom of Wolof (1350–1549)" (473). In a similar fashion, the narrator in Fatou Diome's novel includes countless Senegalese proverbs and idioms to support her characters' decisions. These proverbs are often translated in French, but the recurrent desire to invite traditional phenomenology into her narration reflects her desire to include her ancestral lineage. For example, the local teacher who experiences ostracization in Niodior, is instructed to adopt a "Serer maxim which states that the eyes and the ears are the best guides" (Diome 50). However, the frequent recourses to common sailing metaphors are equally predominant in the text, particularly at times when Salie, the narrator ponders about her life. These proverbs or idioms enhance the importance of her mother's mother who continues to link her cultural heritage with ancient wisdom: "The imaginary little chain that my grandmother stretched between us restored my equilibrium. After every storm, she is the beacon rising from the belly of the Atlantic that sets my solitary navigation back on course" (134). Referred to as an African sister in the book dedication, the illiterate matriarch is a strong anchoring point for Salie who experienced stigmatization for being a child born out of wedlock. Furthermore, Salie's verbal logorrhea conveying an unconditional love for the woman who raised her is also indicative of a desire to locate this lineage in the Mediterranean basin: "So, *mater*? My grandmother, mother of perpetual maternity: *madre*, mother, *mamma mia, yaye boye, nenam, nakony,* beloved mama, my mammy-mummy, my real mother!" (Diome 49) The transnational vocalization of the word "mother" combines the plurilingualism of the various countries of the Mediterranean Sea with the desire to include its history from the antique culture of ancient Rome to the Greek navigators and merchants also known as the Phocaeans. Choosing to begin her sentence with the Latin translation "mater" suggests a cultural cognizance of this Western reference, yet it also refers to the French homonym "ma-terre" [my-earth] suggesting a matrilineage ancestry rooted in her native Africa. Written in different languages found on several European coasts at different times, such as Latin, Spanish, French (in the original text), Italian, and also from the African continent: Wolof, Swahili, Igbo, this prolific statement confirms Salie's intercontinental journey across the waters, as if she were on a quest to find her own personal epistemology amidst her cultural *métissage.* Focused on her mediterranean transcultural heritage, this enthusiastic assertion about her "real" mother is immediately followed by an indirect reference to the character of Penelope in the Homeric Odyssey who faithfully waits for Ulysses' return in front of her weaving loom: "With those soft hands that cut my umbilical cord and stroked my head – when, as a baby, I sucked the sap from her breast and fell asleep, replete – my grandmother never ceased spinning the thread that bound me to life" (49). Using multicultural allusions, the author does not restrict her phenomenology to her Africanness. In fact, it is fair to say that she prefers the inclusive modernity of the sailor.

Initially resistant to her grand-daughter's desire for schooling, the illiterate grandmother, after a successful meeting with the local teacher, becomes wholeheartedly supportive of her decision. Again, Salie takes advantage of sailing metaphors to describe the opinionated matriarch: "It was exactly the same with school. We navigated together; she wasn't about to abandon ship" (Diome 49–50). Rather than defying masculine authority, Salie, who inherited her grandmother's strength in action and conviction empowers herself with an identity that liberates her from limited beliefs. Therefore, her actions suggest a developing economy of resilience. Living alone in France, Salie, a woman of color who has recently divorced her white French husband, must find the means to sustain her life. From

the perspective of an exile, Salie finds unlimited freedom in the neutral space of international waters where she can pursue reinvention. Just as the young hero of Garone's movie "Lo Capitano," proclaimed his new identity while shouting "I am the Captain!" at the end of his perilous journey, Diome's symbolic nautical exploration gives way for self-fashioning. Therefore, I argue that the waters constitute the perfect environment for the rebirth of the author-narrator.

Tracing the Contours of a Belly

The title of the novel invites the readers to view the ocean as a living organic body. It is referred to in metonymical terms: a belly, a mouth, the arms, an eye, etc. Although the fluidity of the anatomy does not allow localization in geographical terms, the metaphor of the belly often refers to the native island of Niodior. Sometimes it is also represented by other parts of the body. This mutability implies that the morphology of the Atlantic should not be perceived from a two-dimensional angle, such as placing the head in the northern parts of the globe and the feet in the south pole, but rather as a whole body living on the shores of Senegal. Furthermore, the image of the belly suggests two opposite connotations that are both widely used throughout the novel. First, a devouring trope, which echoes numerous sea tragedies, and second, a birthing quality that reminds us of pagan figurines or pregnant earth goddesses used to invoke fertility. The fluidity of the interpretations of the belly are equally exploited by Fatou Diome. In the text, the metonymy of the belly also invites the reader to think of the Atlantic as a feminine body, a place for gestation, but also a connection to her own grandmother, who raised Salie, alone and against all conventions. Diome proclaims the legitimation of her birth in response to the customary law established by local men under a palaver tree. Blaming her mother "for having imported this foreign name to the village: not one of the founding ancestors had that name" (51), the council of elders refuses to accept Salie. Consequently, Salie's quest for recognition makes her vulnerable until her teacher explains that her patronym means "dignity" (51). This episode induces the need to recount the story of her birth. Borrowed from magical realism, the scene gradually presents the atemporal event in an extraordinary *mise en scène* of the natural surroundings:

> In the yard, the breath from the coconut palms could no longer dry the sweat that drenched the young woman squatting on the white cotton. My grandmother made her drink cup after cup of the steaming herbal infusion. Shafts of light from the sky's one red eye fell on the Atlantic, ordering it to deliver to the world the secret hidden in its belly. The first shadows of night thickened the hair of the coconut palms and ran alongside the fencing, when a cry rang out. The only midwife in the village was away; unpredictable as ever, I'd chosen that moment to be born. (Diome 45)

Oscillating between the tragic position of single motherhood and the gentle complicity of the island and the elements, sole witnesses of her birth, the narrator reveals the hidden pregnancy:
"The island had slipped into dusk's black robes, and the rain was falling heavily when my grandmother plunged me in the basin containing an herbal bath. 'Born in the rain,' she'd murmured, 'you'll never be afraid when they spit as you go by. The dolphin's baby has no fear of drowning; but you'll have the daylight too" (48). Empowered by her role, the matriarch attributes the absent father's name to the child against all Muslim traditions:

> While I lay enthroned on my white cotton bed, my roots grew over the world's filth, without my knowing: diluting my mother's blood and the streams of my bath, the rainwater filtered down through the soil, to where the Atlantic becomes an invigorating spring. That night, my grandmother watched over her daughter and her illegitimate baby. The pitiless sun melted the cover of night and exposed us to the eyes of morality. (48)

The Belly of the Atlantic is a creative biography where memories stimulate the author's imagination to create a metaphorical world inspired by the geography of the island. Niodior is a site of origins which serves to locate the source of memories in the liminal and atemporal space of the novel. Unlike

African proverbs, the creative metaphorical syntax expands the breadth of the readers' imagination by mapping out a vaster geography in a circular narrative. Facing exile, Salie must retrace the origins of her birth before thriving in a world destroyed by the legacy of colonialism. Poetic-based descriptions alternate with political analysis like a syncopated rhythm that softens the verve of the author. Salie exposes the deception that lies behind masculine discourse at home along with the faulty politics of immigration in France. The cyclical appearances of the narrator's comments on the villagers' illusions are often nuanced by her poetics who infiltrate the story in a reminiscing way, like waves on the beach, thus inviting the reader to enter the exotic anatomy of Niodior. Paradisiac images abound throughout the novel creating a non-linear pattern purposely. They also beautify the image of Africa. Emerging like a pregnant belly in a bath, the island imposes *her* existence from Salie's viewpoint who proclaims her lineage through the embellishment of her mythopoesis. Alternatively, the villagers of Niodior in Senegal continue to mystify the metropole. These oppositional views call for the neutral presence of atemporal elements of nature whose theatrical presence in the narrative structure serves to determine the veracity of their claims. These personifications evolve in the background with human characteristics. Their uneventful presence and tropical nonchalance support the protagonists' lines. They do not judge, nor do they get involved, but their human-inspired actions nuance the truth behind the tales. They also create a safe harbor where Salie's nostalgia can be expressed freely. Finally, they represent an organic link to the Senegalese dynasty of the Serer kingdom of Sine and Saloum, which existed long before the French. Additionally, the geography and climate of the tropical vegetation of Niodior contrast with the living conditions in Northeastern France. Writing from the perspectives of the fauna and the flora produces a neutral, yet mutable space that transcends "nation particularities" and gives the author an opportunity to escape from, what Paul Gilroy calls, the "constraints of ethnicity" (19). Whereas local legends support the dissemination of cultural values, beliefs and practices, the author's depiction of the natural surroundings create a mythopoesis that takes *her* world beyond the economic misery and historical amnesia of post-colonialism: "This thought hits me every time I retrace my path and my memory glimpses the minaret of the mosque, rigid in its certainties, and the coconut palms, shaking their hair in a nonchalant pagan dance whose origin is forgotten" (Diome 2).

Reorienting Sky Imaginaries

According to Gilroy, the space of the Black Atlantic refutes all Manichean duality. Its constitutive attributes are a tradition of "non-tradition," an "irreducibly modern" expression, an "ex-centric" position, and an "asymmetrical cultural ensemble" (198). The Atlantic in Diome's novel expresses the author's desire to endorse a transatlantic identity that fluctuates between modernity and traditions. The liminal *topos* of the waters separating continents combines cultural polarities from both Northern and Southern countries. Diome's heritage combines history and contemporaneity from both polarities.

The *in-media res* approach of the incipit plunges the reader directly into the plot, thus suggesting the entry into a non-linear narration. The opening of the novel invites readers to enter the private apartments of Salie in France, where she can vocalize her thoughts freely. Asked by her brother Madické to watch the European Cup on his behalf, Salie follows the footsteps of Maldini, the Italian soccer player, while also appealing for her readers' attention: "Why Am I telling you all this? Because I adore football? Not that much. Why then?" (Diome 1-2)

The intimate conversation allows her to establish a firm distinction between herself, and the Senegalese community left behind. Unlike her stepbrother, Salie, who was raised alone by her grandmother, acquired different values: "I am not starstruck. I don't crane my neck gazing up at the sky. My grandma taught me early on how to pick up stars: all you have to do is place a basin of water in the middle of the yard at night and they'll be at your feet. Try it yourself" (2). The semantics echo the simplicity and straightforwardness of the act. However, the poetic intention found in this singu-

lar memory is decisive for the fashioning of her personal phenomenology. Contrasting with the triviality of the match broadcasted on TV, the interpretation of this contemplative gesture gives the readers a taste of her imagery, a key component for her creative signature. It is important to note that the reflection of stars on the water is a symbol for self-empowerment. Rather than chasing stars, she pulls them to the ground. By contrast, the circulating movement of soccer players seems pointless. Salie's position between western and non-western territories finds an anchor point in her celestial imaginaries. In other words, she tells us that she can easily bypass postcolonial politics if she takes a circumpolar approach between Northern and Southern polarities.

The novel starts during the 2000 European cup and completes a narrative loop with the 2002 World Cup. The lack of chronology impedes the reading of the plot, however this strategic choice also highlights the circularity of time and space, which takes the reader into a spiral enhanced by the interplay of macrocosms and a microcosmos: "Better than the terrestrial globe, this round ball enables our underdeveloped countries to catch the west's fleeting gaze, which usually dwells on the wars, famines and ravages of AIDS in Africa. Yet to combat these, the west wouldn't consider donating the equivalent of the budget for a championship" (Diome 172). Addressing world politics, the narrator's repetitive use of parallelisms invites the reader's gaze from the prosaic football game to the intricacies of her own desires: "It's 29 June 2000 and I'm watching the European Cup. It's Italy *v.* Holland in the semi-final. My eyes are staring at the TV, but my heart's contemplating other horizons" (2). The use of a parallel in her syntax indicates that Salie refuses to endorse the customary role of caretaker. Her aspirations are significantly greater. Found in the opening chapter, this declaration is a *mise en abyme* of the entire novel. This scene also informs the reader about the simultaneity of events occurring between Niodior and Strasbourg, France. When Madické calls, we learn that the soccer match is also being watched by her community. Just like a telephone cable, the live broadcasting can be viewed as an invisible (umbilical) cord that connects Salie to her native land. There, the boys watch the same channel and idealize life in Europe. "I picture a young man glued to a battered old TV set, watching the same match as me. I feel him next to me. Our eyes meet on the same images. […] All our emotions are synchronized […] because we're right behind the same man: Paolo Maldini" (4).The live broadcast anchors Salie's liminal position into a physical reality where space merges with time. Finally, the recurrent issue of famine in Africa explains the inexhaustible race for success and wealth. The repetitive alternance between the economic necessities of the villagers of Niodior and the exotic clichés regularly resurface within the musicality of a narration that reinforces the trope of hunger: "Over there, people have been clinging to a scrap of land, the island of Niodior, for centuries. Stuck to the gum of the Atlantic like bits of leftover food, they wait resignedly for the next big wave that will either carry them off or leave them their lives" (2). Compared to insignificant crumbs, the villagers have little choice but to entrust their destinies to the water currents. Hypnotized by Western life, the youth quickly understand the injustice of North-South politics: "These kids know ice cream only through images. For them it is a virtual food, eaten only *over there* on the other side of the Atlantic, in the paradise where that plumbs kid had the good sense to be born" (7).

The following paragraph introduces another contrasting parallel between the sensations of Salie's feet in a relation of contiguity between the European asphalt and the Senegalese sand. This cinematic technique called in French, a *raccord visuel*, is frequently used throughout the narration to create visual continuity between scenes. The use of close-up shots allows the author to transport her readers from one continent to the next in a single sentence, elevating her vision: "I tread European ground, my feet sculpted and marked by African earth. One step after another, it's the same movement all humans make, all over the planet" (3). This technique invites her readers to move focalization from a close-up lens to a globalized and synchronous movement, while also acknowledging the ambiguity of her position between two worlds: "In Africa, I followed in destiny's wake, between chance and infinite hopefulness. In Europe, I walk down the long tunnel of efficiency that leads to

well-defined goals" (3). The repeated use of parallels in the syntax confirms the simultaneity of opposite movements and perceptions and leads the narrator to address the ambivalence of her position *vis-à-vis* her family: "I walk on, my steps weighed down by their dreams, my head filled with my owns" (3). The redundance of parallelisms emphasizes the inner splitting identities of the narrator. Conversely, Madické, who is obsessed with his Italian idol, agrees to be named after him. In fact, it is customary for the village boys to endorse the identity of their favorite European soccer players. In a series of repetitive injunctions starting with "Tell him," Salie pleads with her readers to share her lucid perspective with Madické, whose identity is now absorbed by another persona: "Tell him above all that I saw him, in Niodior, chasing the bubble of a dream over the warm sand. Because one day, on waste ground, my brother turned into Maldini. So tell Maldini […] that Maldini is my little brother, swallowed up in his dream" (Diome 6).

Coined by W.E.B. Du Bois during his travels to Europe, the concept of double-consciousness translates this (un)conscious ambivalence: "Striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness" (Gilroy 2). Salie's vacillation between two cultures includes her own inclination to adopt the lifestyle of a modern educated woman. For instance, when she returns to Senegal, as an emerging writer in France, she must comply with the tradition to organize a feast for the entire village, a role usually reserved for men. Cast out by local women for her "western" individualism, she explains how her education had created a circumvallation between her village and her rising aspirations: "My pen went on tracing the path I'd taken to leave them. Every notebook I filled, every book I read, every dictionary I consulted was one more brick in the wall dividing us" (Diome 120).

The novel unveils the immigrants' reality and their ambiguous identifications with desires imported from Europe. It also shows how Western values broadcasted on the media have the power to erase traditional African values, already tainted by preexistent colonial mentalities and local economies. Lastly, *The Belly of the Atlantic* is an opportunity to address the issue of French men scouting around West Africa for young soccer players. Sold to European clubs, these young men become mere commodities for their sponsors and teammates.

The Siren Song

In a desperate attempt to discourage local boys who are planning to reach Europe illegally, Ndétaré, the instructor recalls the unfortunate story of Moussa who, "too, listened to the siren song…" (Diome 62). Originally bought by a French soccer club like a bargain-priced item, Moussa is expelled from the club as a consequence of his poor performance: "Recruited for his potential as a striker, Moussa had never scored even one goal, in spite of intensive training and his countless gris-gris" (67). Harassed by the other club members, he finds consolation in one of his litanic proverbs: "The waves may strike, they only sharpen the rock" (67). Unfortunately, and as the narrator recounts with cynicism: "months passed, and the rock of the Atlantic still hadn't surfaced" (67). It is interesting to note that the metaphor has been changed in the English translation to the exact reversed image of the rock trying to pierce the soccer ball: "Le rocher de l'Atlantique ne perçait toujours pas le ballon de France" [The Atlantic rock still couldn't pierce the French [soccer] ball] (Diome, *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* 116). Contrasting with the title of the novel and the roundness of the ball, the rock of the Atlantic displays an unusual sharpness that somehow predicts defeat. In the French version, the rock (piercing the French ball) represents the Sine-Saloum region where Moussa comes from. The use of a metaphor to symbolize a regional identity invites us to reflect on the relationship between international players and the colors they endorse on the field. Locked in the antagonistic rhetoric of black and white, which according to Gilroy, "has grown to be associated with a language of nationality and national belonging as well as the languages of 'race' and ethnic identity," (2) these African recruits, who are playing for European clubs, complexify the relationships between ethnicity and national discourses. On a global scale, African men agree to play on behalf of a nation during the

game while also being targeted for their differences. Additionally, they must endure racist slurs from other team members after the match. To survive this alienating situation, African sportsmen, who are literally "imported" along with exotic artifacts, may find solace in, what Gilroy calls "cultural insiderism" or an "absolute sense of ethnic difference" (3), which can help them re-establish a sense of self in the face of inquisitive prejudices. Moussa had brought with him a collection of African masks, which came into the possession of the French talent scout shortly after his arrival. Owing to his financial obligations, Moussa is then sent to Marseille where he is forced to work on a boat. Following his expulsion, the undocumented Moussa returns home to face shame and dishonor. He drowns himself whispering his last wishes: "Atlantic, carry me away. Your harsh belly will be softer to me than my bed. Legend says you give shelter to those who seek it" (Diome 75). His death mirrors the tragedy of migrants who, according to Salie, would "cross the Sahel on foot, die in the hold of a plane or on a raft launched on the slaughter-water from the Strait of Gibraltar" (171), just to survive dishonor and humiliation at home.

Unfortunately, the tragic tale of Moussa remained unpopular. Focusing on their goal to find a better life on the other side of the Atlantic, Madické and his friends continue to plan their departure. When Salie comes to visit, she joins Ndétaré in his attempt to reason with the boys. However, it is impossible to decolonize their minds corrupted by Western values: "After the historically recognized colonization, a kind of mental colonization now prevails: the young players worshipped and still worship France. In their eyes, everything desirable comes from France (Diome 32). Unlike the elders who lived under a colonial regime, they never learned French, a language that is still used in the bureaucratic world of Dakar: "That language wears trousers, suits, ties, shoes with laces; or skirts, suits, sunglasses and high heels" (9). Former colonized subjects endure what Paul Gilroy calls a "culture of oppression" (160), which produces systemic racism in Europe, a direct consequence of racial discourse of superiority inherited from colonialism and slavery.

Mesmerized by the tasteless parade of furniture stocked by the local TV owner, also nicknamed "the Man of Barbès," the boys are systematically lured into his fabricated tales about France. A former immigrant in what he claims to be a mythical land of riches; the man had indeed earned his money scarcely and miserably. Under her poetic plume, Diome expresses the effect of the man's stories on the villagers attracted by his seductive wealth: "The moon moved slowly across the Niodor sky, hypnotizing the coconut palms, slowing the breath of people exhausted from a long day's struggle to survive" (Diome 58). The abundancy of insular metaphors in the text are designed to express the reality of Diome's characters. They serve to unveil the truth in diplomatic, yet also poetic terms. Using liquid metaphors to convey her people's despair, Salie shows how Moussa had found a reciprocal mirror of his sentiments in the sea. Living in poverty was, in his own words, "like holding your breath under water, hoping you'll reach a sunny shore before the fatal gulp" (63). Found by local fishermen "just at the place where the island dips its tongue into the sea" (77), Moussa's tragic destiny echoed the disempowering injustice on this side of the world: "Even the Atlantic can't digest all that the earth throws up" (77). Away from insular mentalities and archaic traditions that leave little room for compassion and tolerance, Salie must embrace her fate with conviction: "Exile is my geographical suicide. Stripped of my history, I am drawn to foreign lands because they don't judge me according to errors of fate, but for what I have chosen to be; they are the gauge of my freedom, of self-determination" (162).

Anchoring Blue Ghosts

"The magical curtain of ads is torn. The younger boys scatter, echoing the last notes of their favourite song: Miko! Miko! Miko! Sunk in black, the yard looks like a marine graveyard. Only the bluish glow from the old television weakly illuminates the spectator's faces. The silence is proper for contemplation" (Diome 11). This eerie atmosphere presented in this passage of *The Belly of the Atlantic* bears a striking resemblance to Mati Diop' s cinematic work *Atlantics.* Nearly twenty years

after the publication of *Le ventre de l'Atlantique*, Mati Diop, the niece of Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty, created a fantastic drama set on the coast of Dakar and possibly inspired by Diome's novel. Beautifully filmed from its line of horizon, the ocean empowers female characters who advocate for social rights on the land. The camera uses blue light to suggest the omnipresence of the ocean throughout the movie. Focusing on the people who remained on the land after a sea tragedy, Diop incorporates blue-colored tinted filters throughout the entire feature, thus enhancing the red or orange color of the land. The contrast blurs the separating line between the land and the sea. At night, it is as if the ocean had infiltrated the city, penetrating the flesh of young girls who are mourning the loss of their friends and lovers. The ghosts of the young men who attempted to migrate take possession of their feminine counterparts. We see a band of girls walking at night with cloudy eyes like zombies. The opacity of their gaze suggests the unraveling of symbolic blindness. The return of the dead on the land implies the ambiguous necessity to dig for the truth and reveal the local power relations that catapult the youth to embark on dangerous waters. In the movie, the possessed girls face the local entrepreneur who refuses to pay his employees under false pretexts. This other aspect of modern slavery, scrupulously denounced by Mati Diop, is the main reason for the current Senegalese diaspora. The ghosts confront their boss who has been flaunting his wealth all over town. Unaware of the haunting embodiment, the living female partners seek justice on behalf of their lost companions. Without showing the sea accident, *Atlantics* exposes the economic injustice lived daily in the Suburbs of Dakar.

In the movie, a greedy, wealthy and pitiless entrepreneur is the counterpart of one of Diome's characters: Hadji Wagane Yaltigué. Depicted in the novel as a rich city man, he frequently loses young inexperienced fishermen: "The death of some of his employees had affected him less than the loss of the net" (Diome 81). Yaltigué's greed and lack of compassion are limitless: "After all, there'd be poor men ready to trawl the belly of the Atlantic to earn their crust until the end of time; they turned up in droves at the fishing port every day" (82). Hoping to be hired, the men audaciously risk their lives, or at the very least envy those who are selected for the fishing job: "The frequent loss of entire crews wasn't sufficient to give work to all these men, who were jealous when they saw the sun patiently make love to the sea, a sea they'd wooed for days on end, with only their black skin to offer it. Quite often, this creature of their dreams would deign to give herself in a sky-blue wedding dress whose train concealed a vast tomb" (82). Combined with the blue imagery, this feminine deification of the sea, pictured like a disempowering goddess who controls humans' fate, contradicts the ghastly image of a devouring ocean. Evoking the sculptures of British artist Jason DeCaires Taylor placed in the depths of the Ocean near Lanzarote, Spain, to honor the memory of massive drownings of migrants, the suggestive power of Diome's black and blue imagery resonates with the collective memory of the African holocaust. Found near the Canary Islands and in the *Museo Atlántico* in Granada, DeCaires' sculptures display a fractured world where tourists coexist with victims of modern diaspora. According to Jessica Millward, the vision of cast-iron walking dead figures placed at the bottom of the sea automatically triggers the collective memory of African slaves thrown overboard: "Despite DeCaires' Taylor's platitudes against naming the sculptures as a monument to the Atlantic slave trade, that so many make this connection speaks of a need to reconcile with the horror of chattel slavery" (Millward). In other words, his work concretizes the continuity of the African diaspora in the waters by displaying a tangible site of memory, *lieu de mémoire*, in the organic and mutable space of the Atlantic.

Despite his disinterest for the history of former French colonies, Pierre Nora claims that, after their independences, those societies "awakened from their ethnological slumbers by colonial violation," by undergoing "a process of interior decolonization" that involved their collective memory but no "historical capital" (Nora 7). A pioneer in the study of "the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists," (7) Nora distinguished *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, from *milieux de mémoire*, as the real space of memory. While these concepts explore how

groups construct and relate to their past through symbolic representations on earth, his analysis can nonetheless be applied to the relationship between humans and the water environment. Rivers, lakes and oceans can also be considered "sites of memory" through human interaction and cultural significance. As illustrated by Gilroy, the ocean may hold memories related to historical events and economic activities, such as human trafficking.

Imbued with cultural and historical significance, the Gorée island, which was from the 15th to the 19th century, the largest slave trading center on the African coast, is now a museum and memorial to the victims of the Atlantic trade. In a radio interview aired on *National Public Radio* on November 28th, 2024, African American author Ta-Nehisi Coates explains how his visit there gave him an ever-lasting impression to be "walking with ghosts" (*The Message*, Democracy Now). The feeling of familiarity experienced by the author was concomitant with the sudden realization created by the immensity of the Atlantic which separates the coast of Dakar from the beaches of his native Maryland. This sensation reported by Coates leads me to believe that, by his sole presence there, he manifested a conscious and personal connection with a collective memory that reunites past and present memories together.

According to Nora, "the passage from memory to history has required every social group to redefine its identity through the revitalization of its own history" (15). However, this task can only be complete if accompanied by the desire "to go in search of its own origins and identity" (15). Additionally, "a third aspect is needed to complete the picture of this modern metamorphosis" and that is what Nora calls "a distance-memory," which is created by "the illumination of discontinuity" where "the present itself became a sort of recycled, up-dated past, realized as the present through such welding and anchoring" (16). The "lapse" of time is therefore "experienced as a filiation to be restored" (16). In a similar fashion and as a direct consequence of her reflections on her writing process, Salie compares her work to an excavation of a site, sustaining the idea that her historical capital is embodied in her ability to remember the past, and transmute it into prose: "It's always at this time that my memory chooses to project films shot elsewhere, under different skies, stories buried deep down inside me like ancient mosaics in a city's subterranean tunnels. My pen, like an archeologist's pickaxe, unearths the dead and discovers remains, tracing on my heart the contours of the land that witnessed my birth and my departure" (Diome 159-160). Filled with emotions caused by her estrangement, Salie acknowledges the paradox of using her suffering as a pervading instrument for creativity: "Homesickness is my gaping wound, and I can't help but dip my pen in it" (160).

The Color of Seaweed

Salie's reflection on her writing process emphasizes the intertextual relation between the gap created by the waters and her source of inspiration. Emerging like a chronotope in the liminality of the ocean, her work sheds light on the possibility of a *renaissance* after a symbolic death. Her solitude propels her entire being into a theatrical world that fills her consciousness with prevalent regrets and multiple queries:

> An outsider everywhere, I carry an invisible theatre inside me, teeming with ghosts […] To leave is to become a walking tomb filled with shadows, where the living and the dead have absence in common. To leave is to die of absence. You return, of course a different person. On going back, you seek but never find those you left behind. […] My dance between the two continents is fraught with questions. (Diome 162)

Combined with a prolific imagination, the distance induces a multiplicity of chronotopes that never truly reveal her subconscious. Yet, it is precisely the liminal detachment of her position that brings about an abundant syntax, rich in metaphors and *double-entendre*. For instance, the anaphoric use of the term "words" at the beginning of successive sentences, which mirrors the flow of tears, also produces "the gift of its words" (160). Struggling with the limited power of signs, she uses personifi-

cations to fill the gap between signifiers and signified, hoping to express her emotions effectively: "Words too limited to convey the miseries of exile; words too fragile to break open the sarcophagus that absence has cast around me; words too narrow to serve as a bridge between here and elsewhere. Words, then, always used in place of absent words, definitely drowned at the front of tears to which they lend their taste" (160). The fascinating use of water imagery gives rise to a refreshing modernity formed in the act of writing. Fatou Diome can indeed reclaim her identity in the arms of the Atlantic: "Leaving means having the courage necessary to go and give birth to oneself; being born of oneself is the most legitimate of births" (Diome 162).

Rather than defying patriarchy, Salie's strength resides in the empowering liminal position she holds between continents, borders, cultures, generations, legends and histories. Each trip back to Niodior is the occasion to demonstrate her unique difference: "The urge to return to the source is irresistible, for its reassuring to think that life is easier to grasp in the place where it puts down its roots. And yet, for me, returning is the same as leaving. I go home as a tourist in my own country, for I have become the *other* for the people I continue to call my family" (116). Cast out by local women, the unconventional Salie spends most of her time with Ndetaré, the uprooted teacher. Unlike most women who "rush to sacrifice themselves on the altar of motherhood" (130), she expresses her artistry blatantly, giving birth to a unique *otherness*: "Back home, I missed being elsewhere, where being 'the other' is my fate in a different way" (127). This pervasive ambivalence encourages her to embody a transcontinental culture through her empowering legacy: "Always in exile, with roots everywhere, I'm at home where Africa and Europe put aside their pride and are content to join together: in my writing, which is rich with the fusion they've bequeathed me" (127). Standing *over* the ocean with one foot on each continent, her multicultural heritage entitles her to play with semantics and double meanings, thus re-establishing a link between signified and signifiers. Using the French expression *mot-valise*, translated in English by "portmanteau word," she transposes the literal meaning of the combined words to the symbolism of her very own paradigm: "And finally suitcase words whose contents are contraband, whose meaning, despite the detours, leads to a double self: the me from *here* and the me from *over there*" (160). The embellishment of Niodior contrasts with the cold climate of Northeastern France where she feels vulnerable and guilty for having chosen her destiny. Consequently, she fears the blaming "wound-words" of Madické who wants to rejoin her: "I don't have a magic wand to part the waters; I only have a pen that tries to forge a path that he can't take" (149). The original French text in *Le ventre de l'Atlantique* uses the combination of the homonyms "maux-mots" (Diome 243) to highlight the playfulness of language, inviting her readers to *differ* or *defer* meaning in the Derridean sense while also amplifying the sonorities of signifiers. Aligned with a post-modern generation of authors such as Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, Fatou Diome uses the French language to reinvent herself. The very possibility of writing is collateral to the absence/ presence created by exile and isolation, yet it is also an occasion to demonstrate the emptiness of signifiers and their inability to anchor their own signified. This limitation of language can, against all odds, catapult her writing into a fertile inventiveness. Represented by the Nguidna lake where Salie used to play as a child, this new space of creation transmutes her writing into a powerful and fruitful contemplation. Based on her remarks about this small lake being "shallower than a witch's cauldron" (Diome128), we can naturally deduce that this place is a primary source for reinvention. The allusion to the symbolic container where Salie claims to "brew" her creativity validates the liquid paradigm and the circular narration. This round body of water is nothing else but another chronotope within the chronotope of Niodior. If the island is a belly, the inland lake is a "lidless eye" which "irrigates the memory" of her childhood, "causing reminiscence […] to germinate and sprout" (128-129). To expand the metaphor, this reflective centered eye, where "a few narcissistic coconut trees and migrant palms from the Arabian desert, feign sentry postures so as to admire themselves" (128-129), invites Salie to reflect narcissistically on her own creative process. The Nguidina lake is also a living site of personal memories that bring about her

authorship. Salie conceives her new identity in the *eye* of the belly. In English, the homonym Eye/ I becomes a symbolic space for, what Nora calls, the "individual psychology of remembering," which is considered to be the primary step for self-construction: "the responsibility is mine and it is I who must remember" (Nora 15).

In her final chapter, the author reflects on the question of her origins, and it is worth noting that, in the syntax, we realize that it is the nations themselves, and not Salie, who determine where she belongs: "Home? Over there? As I am a hybrid, Africa and Europe ask themselves confusedly which bit of me belongs to them" (Diome 182). Oscillating between the "blue-cold" French personality and the "red-hot" temper of Senegalese people, Salie's confusion reappears amidst a transnational history deeply rooted in African legends. The combination of two cultures is compared to the mixing of two paint colors in a pot: "I prefer mauve, that temperate colour, a mix of African red heat and cold European blue. What makes mauve so beautiful? The blue or the red?" (183). Salie's cultural blending reflects the vitality she finds in her own act of writing: "I seek my country where the arms of the Atlantic meet to form the mauve ink that tells of incandescence and sweetness, the passion for existence and the joy of living. I seek my country on a white page, a notebook that can fit into a travel bag. So, wherever I put down my suitcases, I'm at home" (183). Using the metaphor of the dark-coloured ink released by a cephalopod, Fatou Diome embraces the ocean as a paradigm for life, mixing atemporal histories and memories and allowing for a new time-space to celebrate her very own story: "Scraping, sweeping the ocean depths. Dipped in squid ink, writing life on the crests of the waves" (183). Playing with the musicality of homonyms and the abundant polysemy of maternal expressions, she invites the reader to create an analogous relationship between the French word *mère* [mother] and its homonym *mer* [sea]. Whereas the English version of the text, which also plays with the evocative sonorities of the phonemes Live/ Leave, suggests an inexhaustible vibrancy contained in her transatlantic departure: "Amid the roar of the paddles, when the mammy-mummy murmurs, I hear the sea declaim its ode to the children fallen overboard. Leave, live freely and die, like seaweed in the Atlantic" (183). The alliteration of the nasal consonant *m* and the liquid consonant *l* and *r* combined with the sound of dental consonants *d* and interdental fricatives produced by the pronunciation of *the* bring to the translated version a sense of acceleration which conveys the rushing movement of waves ashore.

Conclusion

Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of literary chronotopes includes the ones that represent worlds interpreted in the author's order of manifold events, and the ones of the narration itself that can be read sequentially and appositionally. In his analysis, both events are inevitably tied to each other and are constitutive of a single reality:

> Every work has a beginning and an *end*, the event represented in it likewise has a beginning and an end, but these beginnings and ends lie in different worlds, in different chronotopes [*sic!*] that can never fuse with each other or be identical to each other but that are, at the same time, interrelated and indissolubly tied up with each other. We might put it as follows: before us are two events – the event that is narrated in the work and the event of narration itself […]; these events take place in different times […] and in different places, but at the same time these two events are indissolubly united in a single but complex event that we might call the work in the totality of all its events […] (Sheperd 158)

Consequently, the writing process transforms the finished work into a textuality that combines multiple temporalities and spatialities into a single unit. In *The Belly of the Atlantic*, the narration offers a multilinearity of voices and stories embedded into the text via the use of intertexts. The undeniable importance of the readers' participation in the constitutive narrative allows Salie to construct in her own right the sequencing and ordering of her storytelling. In the words of Bernhard Scholz, a chronotope is "a principle of sequentially and appositionally ordering a manifold of events.

It orders these events into what are generally known as 'plots.' A chronotope must therefore not be thought of as somehow being present *in* the literary works as one of its elements. Rather, [...] it must be thought of as a principle of generating the plots of narratives" (qtd. in Sheperd 160). Throughout the novel, Salie alternates between dialogues with her brother and her exchanges with readers. Each conversation challenges her rival identities. Towards the end, when her new identity emerges, Madické's demands become more pressing. On the precipice of success, Salie, who has been seen on TV by a relative in France, finds herself caught in a delicate position with her family. Waiting for Madické's phone call, her inner speeches remind us of the neutral tone of a diary entry. Her reflections and doubts suggest that she refuses to jeopardize her career and sacrifice her dreams for her brother's goal. However, she decides to make him a financial proposition in exchange for the promise to settle down in Niodior. With Madické's last phone call, the omniscient narrator vanishes, and the readers learn with Salie that her brother opened a grocery shop. His subsequent invitation to come back suggests that life in Senegal has taken a better turn. On Salie's end, her public appearances convert her potential dignity into an established certitude. Being a successful woman of color entitles her to a greater legitimacy. Unlike most immigrant chronicles, Diome's narration is first and foremost a testimony of liberation from socio-cultural imprints. Forming new bounds with her native island through deifications of the natural surroundings transforms her narrative into a formidable agency, bridging time and space across sky imaginaries and into the unique corporeality of the blue Atlantic.

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