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Mulira, Sanyu Ruth

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Yearning for Transformation:

Women Living in the Margins of Senegal and France, 1958-2003

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction

of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in African Studies

by

Sanyu Ruth Mulira

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Yearning for Transformation:
Women Living in the Margins of Senegal and France, 1958-2003

by

Sanyu Ruth Mulira

Master of Arts in African Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2014
Professor Allen F. Roberts, Chair

This thesis comparatively and critically examines *La Noire de...* (1962) by Ousmane Sembène and *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2003) by Fatou Diome as testimonial pieces of Francophone African literature that share common themes and threads despite the 40 years that separate them. Both narratives deal with issues of cultural alienation as induced by French Colonialism, yearning for transformation, and disillusionment within the Senegalese social climate. Featuring female domestic workers as protagonists, *La Noire de...* and *The Belly of the Atlantic* relate to each other in a way that is of special interest when considering a trajectory of female voices in Senegalese testimonial fiction.
The thesis of Sanyu Ruth Mulira is approved.

Ghislaine Lydon
Françoise Lionnet
Allen F. Roberts, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

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This thesis is dedicated to Sansa Mulira, Michael Sansa Mulira, Jessie Ann Smith, and Georgia Ann Gaston.
Introduction

In the introduction of Twelve African Writers, Gerald Moore suggests that African writers should be judged by “what [they] make of the conditions of [their] time and place in the continuum of history.”¹ In their respective pieces La Noire De... (1962) and The Belly of the Atlantic (2003), Senegalese authors Ousmane Sembène and Fatou Diome make concerted efforts to speak accurately to the social climates of their differing times and shared spaces. Sembène’s La Noire De... is a tragic piece that ends in the suicide of a young Senegalese maid in France. Written in the late 1950s, Sembène creates a story of temoignage (testimony) fiction that exposes the social ills of his environment that include: feelings of alienation, racial isolation, disillusionment, the idea of France as the Promised Land, and yearning for transformation within the Promised Land. Diome, well aware of the path that Sembène and others have paved for her, contributes an updated temoignage of Senegalese society in the 21st century. At the center of The Belly of the Atlantic is the relationship between Salie, a Senegalese maid and writer living in France, and her brother Madické, an aspiring football star who remains in Senegal. Working as a maid, Salie has come to terms with the fact that France is not the Promised Land, but struggles to convey this to her younger brother. Madické represents a new generation of Senegalese youth who are pushed from Senegal by globalization in the 21st century the same way that the cultural oppression of French colonialism pushed those of the first half of the 20th century.

When the narratives of La Noire de... and the Belly of the Atlantic are compared the central features are extremely similar despite the 40 years that separate their publications. Themes of alienation and yearning for transformation in the French Promised Land are enduring cultural issues in Senegalese society. Sembène and Diome wrote their narratives at differing

epochs, but they come to similar conclusions about conditions of their time and place in the continuum of history: they both call for Senegalese people to look within their home countries for individual transformation and personal progression, rather than remaining fixated on the colonial notion that France is the capital of the civilized world. For Sembène there is no room for a healthy relationship between France and Senegal, but for Diome this link is unavoidable. By looking at the shared cultural history of Sembène and Diome, this thesis strives to answer the following questions: What is the root cause of the enduring notion of France as the Promised Land through late colonial and post-colonial cultural historical contexts of Senegal? How does the myth of Frenchness mutate in a fashion that it can maintain a ubiquitous presence in the imagination of Senegalese youth (women in particular) through the colonial and post-colonial times? Finally, what alternatives does Diome’s piece offer young women in 2003 who have realized France is not the Promised Land aside from the solution of suicide that Sembène offers in 1958?

In answering my research questions it is my aim to examine the endurance of the French myth and its associated feelings alienation, racial isolation, disillusionment, and the yearning for transformation in the Promised Land which are central components of La Noire de... and The Belly of the Atlantic. With The Belly of the Atlantic Diome inserts her voice in the trajectory of female temoignage Senegalese literature offers new resolutions to the tragic experience of demystifying the myth of France the Sembène exposed forty years prior. The first chapter looks at the historical legacy of assimilationist colonial policies in Senegal which solidified the notion that France is indeed the Promised Land. The second chapter closely inspects the struggle of Sembène’s Diouana in her realization that France is not the Promised Land in the text and film versions of La Noire de... The third chapter moves on to a close discussion of The Belly of the
Atlantic, and the resolutions of Diome’s Salie as she tries to demystify the French myth for her younger brother. In the concluding chapter, the personal lives of Ousmane Sembène and Fatou Diome are briefly discussed in relation to the ways that their personal experiences have informed the outlook of their writings.

**Temoignage: Testimony**

“The reality to which African authors were to bear witness almost always began with their own personal experience.” - Kenneth Harrow

The decade of the 1950s has been dubbed the era in which African literature arose and planted the seeds for current traditions. Before the colonial era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries African peoples had their own modes of storytelling, oral traditions, written traditions, and the recording of histories. In *Thresholds of Change in African Literatures: The Emergence of a Tradition*, Kenneth Harrow suggests that the genre born in the 1950s was *temoignage*. Within the catalog of literature written in the colonial languages of English and French that held Africa and her peoples as subject matter, the viewpoints of Africans were rarely explored on a grand scale. Rather, works about Africans were generally written by Europeans. Due to the longstanding cosmopolitan nature of Senegal’s Four Communes, international literature had a presence in Senegal before African writers emerged. The 1950’s saw large waves of Africans taking pen into hand and testifying to their own African experiences in languages that could be understood by Europeans in addition to other colonized Africans in other locales on the continent. Thus, it can be said that English, French, and Portuguese were used as unifying languages amongst African writers who lived under colonial regimes. Writers had the ability to

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3 The Four Communes were territories in colonial Senegal where members of the community were official French citizens. An African person must either be born in one of the Four Communes or complete the process for naturalization.
testify to their shared colonial experiences to a wide audience by writing in English, French, or Portuguese.  

According to Susan Andrade, literature that falls under the category of temoignage initially served the purpose of answering “back to the colonial silencing and helped to consolidate disparate, religious, ethnic, racial, and class differences into a single national identity.”

Foundational francophone novels of this tradition are *L’Enfant Noir* (1953) by Camara Laye of Guinea and *L’Aventure Ambigue* (1961) by Cheikh Hamidou Kane of Senegal. Both reflect feelings of malaise and revolt that young African men felt in the colonial system, as they recount the stories of young men who leave their home countries for studies in France. The narratives that emerge from these pages are testimonies to the complex ambiguities of cultural hybridity through assimilation. The common thread these two novels have in common share with each other and other early francophone African novels is their main characters are at a crossroads between cultures. The central characters are usually the first in their families to distance themselves from the African cultural landscape and attempted to navigate the world of francophone culture. These authors as well as their created protagonists have become voices of a generation. Another important tie that binds this generation of writers is the role that education as well as travel to France plays in their testimonies. Writers of the first generation nearly all university-educated in France. Traveling to France to pursue their studies and then returning to Africa an enlightened, worldly, and transformed person becomes a fundamental tenet of what became their literary testimonies. French colonialism taught its subjects that France was prime

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4 Harrow, 30-37. Although the 1950s has been dubbed the ‘official’ era of temoignage literature, that does not mean that African peoples across the entire continent had not had sustained many literary movements in the centuries prior. In addition, many of the pre and post literary movements to Negritude had intentionally utilized local African languages instead of European languages to internalize their discourse.

location for an African person to evolve. Such narratives express disillusionment as their characters begin to question the grandeur of France and its culture. However, an irony lies in the fact that these characters must complete the cycle of departure and return for their testimonies to be deemed valid.

In identifying the narratives that compose foundational *temoignage* texts and those written within the same framework, one cannot ignore the influence of Négritude in francophone African cultural and literary history. Négritude was a literary movement founded by the first President of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, with his close colleagues Aimé Césaire of Martinique, and Léon Damas of French Guiana. As the story goes, each of these men reached the apex of the French colonial educational system and attended university in Paris. In the 1930s these men befriended each other in the Latin Quarter while completing their studies. Uniting over the realization that no matter how assimilated they were, they would always be black and not white, they decided to celebrate their blackness and their African roots. These men had become removed from their African roots attempting to survive the colonial system, and felt the need to rediscover their Africanity. Together they “began to develop the new literary programme of, which demanded of its poets a strong verbal rhythm, a wealth of African allusions, and a general exaltation of the African personality”8. The thematic impact of the Négritude movement on Senegalese culture will be further discussed in chapter one, but it is important to stress that Négritude was the precursory literary movement to *temoignage*.

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6 Harrow, 67-97

7 Moore, 23. Although the Negritude movement has been largely written about as a male dominated literary field, recent scholarship has started to focus on the writings of women who had a presence in the literary scene in Paris. In *Négritude Women* Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting focuses on the great contributions of Suzanne Lacascade, Jane and Paulette Nardal, and Suzanne Roussy-Césaire.

8 Moore, 24. The presence of an ‘African personality’ is a topic that has been debated at length. In fact, the essentialist nature of suggesting that an ‘African personality’ exists is one of the major criticisms of the Négritude movement. Scholars from Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, and Ousmane Semebene have written against the existence of such.
Négritude would provide an axis of an author’s authority based upon lived experiences of departure and return.

**A Transformation of Women?**

It should come as no surprise that Négritude was more influential in Senegal than in any other African colony and nation because of Senghor’s prominence in the country. For the purpose of this paper, it is important to make the connection between the popularity of the intellectual framework of Senghor’s Négritude and the yearning for transformation that informs the works of Sembène and Diome. In doing so, it is crucial to identify the fact that Négritude and *temoignage* literature are male dominated traditions. There is a near absence of direct female voices until Senegalese literature until the 1970s. *So Long Letter* by famed female Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ testified to the domestic female experience within a male dominated society. However, her work does not touch upon the experience of women in the assimilationist colonial context. What makes Sembène’s *La Noire de*… and Diome’s *The Belly of the Atlantic* iconic literary works is that they seek to expose the experiences of migrant women, until then largely unexplored in Senegalese literature. Diouana and Salie are not women confined to the Senegalese domestic sphere; they are independent women supporting themselves through domestic work abroad. These two women are not defined by their relationships with men. Most interestingly, the two narratives investigate how women have sought after transformative experiences in France, previously the exclusive quest of men. In this sense, the main characters of *La Noire de*… and *The Belly of the Atlantic* are trailblazers who attempt to become transformed through the male dominated experience of departure and return.
Countless articles and book chapters are devoted to the film and text versions of Ousmane Sembène’s *La Noire de*. Sembène is well known for his uses of gender, the female gender in particular. By looking at the relationships between men and women, and the ways in which African women face marginalization internationally, Sembène worked to articulate what he perceived to be the weakness and strengths of his society. The character of Diouana shines above the rest of his characters because of her fragility. The bulk of his female characters represent the endurance and vigor of traditional African culture. Diouana is one of the only female characters that Sembène has created to fall victim to the colonial complex-- she is the only one duped by assimilationist as well as *temoignage* rhetoric.\(^9\) Diouana is the single female character of Sembène’s who does not possess the strength to endure the cultural and sexual oppression that afflicts her. In contrast to the uniqueness of a delicate character like Diouana, Fatou Diome has built her career on exposing the wounds of alienated African women who have fearlessly sought out transformation. Unlike the women of Diouana’s generation, those of Salie’s know that failure is an option. Salie’s strength is defined by her ability to cope with the fact that France is not the mythical Promised Land of transformation and evolution.

Numerous critical pieces have been written discussing the oeuvre of Ousmane Sembène. Scholars from all corners of the world have written about Sembène’s accomplished films and literary texts. A simple google search of Ousmane Sembène’s name yields nearly a quarter of a million hits of references to his career on scholarly websites and blogs alike. Samba Gadjigo, who grew up in Senegal admiring Ousmane Sembène and befriended him later in life, has built a career exploring the intellectual and personal life of Ousmane Sembène. Sada Niang has collaborated with Gadjigo on projects on Sembène, as well has written her own pieces putting his

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work in conversation with other Francophone African writers and filmmakers. Françoise Pfaff is
another scholar who has written extensively on the films of Ousmane Sembène, contributing
both text and article length critiques. Pfaff’s text *Sembène’s Cinema* (1993) has been widely read
and often cited. Due to the strength and notability of his pieces *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (1960)
and *Xala* (1973) in particular, and the social impact of his works in general, Sembène’s name
often appears in historical surveys of Senegal and West Africa.\(^\text{10}\)

With a career that spans only a fraction of Sembène’s, Diome has attracted much
attention from contemporary literary critics. Her work has been associated with that of other
African writers such as UCLA’s own Alain Mabanckou as the foundational texts of the
*migritude* genre. *Migritude* literature, a label coined by Jacques Chevrier, is of the post-colonial
tradition and displays the lives of young Africans who live a doubly cultured existence in both
Africa and Europe. Born after the early era of independence, *migritude* authors are able to see
how firmly the mental roots of colonization are planted in their societies.\(^\text{11}\) In addition to Jacques
Chevrier, scholars like Dominic Thomas have written extensively on both the work of Ousmane
Sembène and Fatou Diome, but has played a large role in drawing attention to Diome’s literary
voice. With the publication of more texts, Diome is sure to see even more attention paid to her
literary body of work. Nevertheless, she has already become a bit of a celebrity in the French
media having appeared on various daytime talk shows.

To date, I have not encountered any texts or articles that discuss *La Noire de...* and *The
Belly of the Atlantic* jointly. Ousmane Sembène’s position as a pillar of Senegalese and African

\(^{10}\) Many citations of Sembène in historical literature make reference to *Les bouts de bois de Dieu (1960)* for its
possible accuracy in recounting a historical and important period of time. *Xala* (1973) is often mentioned in
relation to the 1975 film version of the text that was banned by Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor
because the harshness of its satirical nature was deemed ‘unpatriotic.’

literature and film has been solidified in history. At the current moment, Fatou Diome is the literary voice of a generation of Senegalese migrants. Diome writes at the turn of the millennium bearing witness to a similar yearning for transformation that Sembène rend témoignage to in the 1950s. The fact that Diome consumes herself with writing about issues of identity, transformation, and the myth of France 40 year after independence in *The Belly of the Atlantic* underscores the importance of Sembène’s *La Noire de*... in the trajectory of feminized témoignage literature. The issues that he brings to light in his 1958 work still inform and shape the statements that current writers make within the continuum of Senegalese social history.

**Chapter 1**

**The Myth of Assimilation in Senegal**

“Either Africans would retain their old ways but remain permanently weak and under the thumb of Europe, or Africans would give up their old way and assimilate to the ways of Europe.” -Patrick Manning

Before examining Sembène and Diome’s novels, it is vital to look at the cultural history that has molded the society the authors wrote in. For both *La Noire de*... and *The Belly of the Atlantic* the authors assume that the audience is familiar with the history of colonial assimilationist policies which have canonized France as the Promised Land. In the first half of the 20th century Senegal was the premier colony of the French Empire with Dakar as the capital. Senegal was the place where the French policy of assimilation was most realized. As a result, the Senegalese people were most affected psychologically by the civilizing mission. The people who inhabited the colonial space of Senegal were believed to be the most adept subjects for evolutionary assimilation into the French cultural milieu. Their propensity for advancement through assimilation was considered unsurpassed by any other colonial subjects. In the words of

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Vincent Khapoya, the practice of assimilation “implied a fundamental acceptance of [the African] potential for human equality, but a total dismissal of African culture as of any value.”

The idea that Africans from the Four Communes had the ability to transform into ‘Frenchmen’ has been understood as a testament to their humanity. All people could be equal with the proper guidance. However, history has shown that the idea of assimilation existed more as an ideology and a myth than a utilized practice.

Before its conquests in Africa commencing in the mid-1880s, France was relatively unsuccessful in obtaining overseas territories. During the colonial period, France claimed ownership over 36% of the African continent in the name of the ”civilizing mission”. The ideological crux of the civilizing mission was greatly influenced by the works of people such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In his 1822 Philosophy of History Hegel declared Africa an unhistorical region of the world. Africa is the land of childhood that lacks self-consciousness because it has been shut off from the rest of the progressive world. In this text Hegel states that “the negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state.”

It was believed the all people had once lived in barbarism but only a select few, conveniently western Europeans, had been able to lift themselves from that state of being. Believing themselves to be the most evolved people on earth, the French felt it was their duty to share their culture with these untamed Africans. By any means necessary they set out to guide the barbaric races of the world towards civilization. Civilization was to be achieved through the

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13 Vincent Khapoya. “Colonialism and the African Experience.” The African Experience: An Introduction. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2009), 108. It has been widely accepted that the French recognized the humanity of their colonial subjects more often than not. However, the ability of these less evolved humans to elevate themselves to the level of humanity of French men was much debated in the colonial era. Furthermore, the ability of colonized people to self-govern no matter their level of assimilation was most debated in the first half of the 20th century. The aptitude for self-government was much discussed at the Brazzaville Conference of 1944.


process of assimilation. A nationalistic belief in the grandeur of French history, culture, and society was at the heart of the paternalistic civilizing mission and Senegal was ground zero.\textsuperscript{16}

The colony of Senegal would be the only French territory where the hope of reaching an assimilated status could be realized by its subjects. One of the reasons for this could be that Senegal was the only colony with a sizable French population and the residents would rather live amongst evolved Africans rather than barbaric subjects. The French founded their first port of Saint Louis in 1659; from that point the French were a constant and oppressive presence in Senegal and the West African region until the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century. In 1854, Louis Faidherbe was appointed Governor of Senegal after the right of electing deputies was withdrawn from all French colonies except for Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Reunion. It was during Faidherbe’s governorship that the concepts of direct rule and assimilation began to take shape in Senegal.\textsuperscript{17}

Having participated in the annexation of Algeria into the French national body, Faidherbe had originally set out to do the same with Senegal. Due to a number of factors not excluding the climate of the region, Faidherbe realized that it would be in France’s best interest to seek economic and social control over the Senegalese people but not annex the entire territory.\textsuperscript{18} He embarked on what has been called an active intervention in Senegal through the French colonial policy of direct rule in the 1850s.\textsuperscript{19} To distinguish themselves from their primary imperial rivals of the British, the French wanted to be seen as liberators rather than conquerors in Africa.\textsuperscript{20} Unlike the indirect rule of the British, the French were greatly opposed to the idea of allowing traditional African governing institutions to remain intact. Existing social structures had been an impediment to French during the era of conquest, as these familial, cultural, and religious ties

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Thomas. \textit{Africa and France}. 101
\item \textsuperscript{17} Crowder, 1-7.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 12-14.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Anthony Atmore & Roland Oliver. \textit{Africa Since 1800}. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 64.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Manning, 60.
\end{itemize}
were the foundations of resistance. The French found it effective to rule their empire from Paris directly through the governors of each colony. African Chiefs were appointed by the French in positions of power; but they existed within the colonial administration and not as independent traditional governing bodies.21 Such rulers usually did not come from traditionally powerful families in order to hinder alliances amongst ethnic lines.

Only Africans hailing from the Four Communes of Saint Louis and Gorée both established in 1848, Rufisque established in 1880, and Dakar was made independent of Gorée in 1887 were allowed to apply themselves to the rigmarole of assimilation to become Frenchmen/Assimilated peoples were known as *originaires*.22 By attending colonial schools, learning to converse and express themselves in French while abandoning nearly all facets of their traditional culture. *Originaires* from the Four Communes could become French citizens23. This was a status that many came to desire, but only few could ever obtain. Of a French education, Senegalese Governor General Chaudié had this to say in 1897:

> The school is the surest means of action by which a civilizing nation can transmit its ideas to people who are still primitive and by which it can raise them gradually to its own standards. In a world the school is the supreme element of progress. It is also the most effective tool of propaganda for the French language that the Government can use.24

Those who were not originally from the Four Communes, but had relocated to one of these cities could become a naturalized French citizen. In order to do so they had to prove their devotion to France or work for ten years in a French official position, learn to read and write French, and of

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21 The usage of traditional rulers in the French colonies greatly differed from that of the British colonies. The British used pre-existing ethnic alliances to divide people and create structures of power that relied upon British favorability. The French wanted to weaken such alliances to introduce alliances based upon affiliation with French rather than African culture.
22 Manning, 59.
24 Crowder, 26.
course provide evidence of possessing a good moral character\textsuperscript{25}. Ideally, under the assimilation system \textit{originaires} and naturalized Senegalese citizens were protected under French Napoleonic law, could vote, and could have access to the same legal representation as white French people. Nevertheless, Africans were black and the French were white, the color of one’s skin would never change. Africans who had the privilege of becoming evolved peoples (évolués) because they were able to adopt French language, religion, culture, and economic outlook could never truly be white men—but could only imitate one. Race eventually came to be the only thing that could hold back an African person who had jumped through every hoop.\textsuperscript{26}

The true desire to transform Africans into Frenchmen was short lived, but the rhetoric remained.\textsuperscript{27} If all Africans were assimilated and none were merely subjects, then who would maintain and construct the empire through cheap labor? Those who could not or refused to assimilate led a much harsher life than their Évolué peers. These subjects, \textit{indigènes}, could not leave the colony and were required to donate free labor to the government, corvée labot system. The structure of the colony became dependent upon strict social stratifications to maintain a steady stream of labor. Within the ideology of assimilation, allowances were not made for a situation in which the majority of Africans could become assimilated French citizens.\textsuperscript{28} Instead, the rules for assimilation were continually refined to limit the number of people who could qualify for citizenship.\textsuperscript{29} The people in the surrounding areas were left subjected to a set of policies called the \textit{indigénat}, which in 1904 allowed for people to be legally punished by French officials without judgment in court. These punishments included fines and prison sentences

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 20.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Manning, 60-69.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Only men were allowed to become French citizens, the position of women was tied to their association with a man—their social status depended upon that of their husband or father.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Khapoya, 109-120.
\end{itemize}
without limitation. French citizens could also declare themselves the owner of land they considered to be vacant, even if it was the possession of an indigene. Although all Senegalese were permitted to practice Islam, a head tax was enforced in 1900 to curb the tradition of polygamy.  

Indigénat policies heightened the desire of Senegalese people to keep chasing the dream of assimilation. Assimilation was the key to being recognized as a full human being in the French colonial system, and the stakes were unbelievably high. In the eight years between 1914 and 1922 only 94 people in Senegal were granted naturalization. And later on in 1936, outside of the 80,000 black citoyens in the Four Communes of Senegal, only 2000 of the 14,000,000 black French West Africans held French citizenship. Thus, anyone born outside the Four Communes had nearly no access to the privileges of assimilation.

Assimilated Fathers of a Nation

The policies that governed the process of assimilation became increasingly restrictive as the years passed. Thus, those who were able to successfully become French citizens were easily seen as national role models. Most educated members of Senegalese society attended university in France, of course after a French designed education in school within the Four Communes. Few people from outside these Communes were able to experience life outside of the colony. One opportunity was through the French West African regiment of the Tirailleur Sénégalais, served as a well-known tool of the French Colonial Empire. Founded in 1854 and dissolved in the mid-19th century, the soldiers of the Tirailleur hailed from nearly all the French West African colonies and fought in the name of France all over the globe. However, these soldiers did not receive nearly the same benefit of cultural acceptance as their évolués peers. For those who could

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30 Manning, 68-71.  
31 Crowder, 20.  
not strive for official citizenship, the status of _regular_ through joining the military was not a bad option as they were relieved from the bulk of _indigénat_ restrictions.\(^{34}\)

Nevertheless, those seeking transformation rarely look up to those who have not completely assimilated. The goal of for many colonial subjects was to get as close to French citizenship as possible. Thus, it is important to examine the lives of some individuals who stand as national symbols for Senegalese society because of their perceived completion of assimilationist transformation. Albert Memmi makes one of the most important contributions to comprehending the colonial mentality in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1965). The crux of his argument in this text is that in order for a person to be colonized, they must come to accept the role that they are given by the colonizer. To even yearn for transformation, there must be an acceptance of ones inferiority on some level. Yes, this acceptance could be born of a simple desire to survive, but over time it morphed into a mere fact of life.\(^{35}\)

Two of the most important assimilated men in Senegalese history were Blaise Diagne and Léopold Sédar Senghor. Blaise Diagne was the first African to be elected to the French National Assembly in 1914. After an illustrious career as a poet, scholar, and statesman Léopold Sédar Senghor was elected the first president of independent Senegal in 1960. These two men who were able to move up the ranks of French colonial hierarchy clearly lived as exceptions to the norm. However, their stories of success solidified their place in the collective consciousness of their society. Their lives became examples of what Senegalese people should hope to attain, rather than narratives of the price that some have to pay to be accepted as French nationals.

Blaise Diagne was born on Gorée Island in 1872 to a Serer family. Having been born in one of the Four Communes he was able to attain the legal status of an _originaire_ and pursue his


education in France. Until he was elected into the Chamber of Deputies in 1914 he had a career in the military.\textsuperscript{36} Some of his biggest contributions to the Senegalese people were within the area of military reform. In fact, it is said that he was able to win the election in 1914 because he ran on a platform that openly demanded equality for blacks and whites within military service.\textsuperscript{37} Because of Diagne’s advocacy, in the fall of 1914 laws allowed for *originaires* from the Four Communes to serve in the *Troupe Colonial* army instead of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* army which was reserved for *indigènes*.\textsuperscript{38} This demand was attractive to France at this time as they were in the midst of the World War I. The French needed all the willing and able fighting bodies they could get, and eligibility for black men to fight in the *Troupe Colonial* was wedded with obligatory inscription.\textsuperscript{39} In return for the service of *originaires* in the *Troupe Colonial*, in 1916 Diagne was able to persuade Government to pass an amended citizenship law that solidified the right of full citizenship to all *originaires* in addition to all of their descendants. No longer could their dedication to the French Republic stand in question and potentially lock residents of Gorée, Dakar, Rufisque, and Saint Louis out of the assimilationist social structure.

By 1919 Blaise Diagne was appointed Under Secretary of States for Colonies. While in this position he became President of the Pan-African Congress. It was at this point in his career that Diagne’s limits were tested. While, he believed that Africans should have a voice in the governing of their home countries and societies, he was a man of his times. He still believed that the best way for Africans to involve themselves in government was within the colonial framework. Needless to say, Diagne was far from a revolutionary and felt comfortable in his role

\textsuperscript{36} Pascal Blanchard. *La France Noire : Trois Siecles de Presences*. 2012
\textsuperscript{37} Crowder, 21.
\textsuperscript{38} Manning, 79.
\textsuperscript{39} Crowder, 21.
as a model assimilated African French citizen. To this affect he declared in 1921: “We French natives...wish to remain French, since France has given us every liberty.” Despite the lack of a revolutionary impulse, Blaise Diagne was a trailblazer in Senegalese society. If it were not for him, the careers of many young and assimilated Senegalese men who came after him, like Léopold Sédar Senghor, would not have been conceivable. His first election changed the course of colonial Senegalese government forever, as from 1914 onwards there was always black representation in the French Chamber of Deputies.

Senghor, despite truly being the Father of the Senegalese nation, was very much an enigma. Born in Joal, Senegal in 1906 to a Christian Serer family he was not born with the status of an originaire. However, he grew up with the economic resources to obtain the same education as those born within the Four Communes because his father was a successful groundnut merchant. After obtaining his bacclauréat in Dakar, Senghor moved to France in 1928 and became the first black man to complete his agrégé and teach in a French secondary school. In the 1930s he began writing poetry, in 1945 he began his political career in Senegal, and in 1960 he commenced his 20 year post as President of Senegal. Nothing about Senghor life was ordinary; but his life became the dream of many ordinary people.

As a founder of Négritude, Senghor attempted to provide his peers with a cultural sense of self that exalted the passionate intellectual traditions of Africans, while simultaneously glorifying the balancing affect that the structure of French culture could offer. As a man who lived between two worlds, the Senegalese and the French, he naturally thought that the mixture of the two mondes would result in the formation of an ideal society. Thus, Senghor pushed for a

40 Crowder, 22.
41 Moore, 18.
42 Ibid.
43 Moore, 16-17.
symbiotic relationship between Senegal and France during colonization and after independence\textsuperscript{44}. In 1937 at the Chambre des Métier de Dakar, Senghor delivered a speech entitled, “Le problèm culturel en AOF” and had this to say about his outlook on ‘francophone’ culture: « Nous sommes engagés dans le même destin. Notre milieu n’est plus africain, il est aussi français, il est international ; pour tout dire, il est afro française. »\textsuperscript{45}

The bulk of Senghor’s literary career was spent in Paris—he wrote of about the glory of Africa while living at a distance. He even founded the journal and publishing house \textit{Présence Africaine} in Paris with Alioune Diop in 1947. In its early years the legendary \textit{Présence Africaine} became a literary body in which Africans from the continent and the diaspora could critique French colonialism alongside their Parisian contemporaries. Famed writers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre wrote pieces for \textit{Présence Africaine} where they denounced the oppressive nature of French colonialism. Because of his literary career, Senghor became the embodiment of critiquing colonialism and exalting the beauty of Africa.\textsuperscript{46}

Despite his literary critique of colonialism, as a national figure Senghor tied Senegal so close to France that it seemed like Paris was only a metro ride away.\textsuperscript{47} While he condemned the oppressive leadership of French colonialism did not denounce the implementation of European political systems. In fact, in both the political and cultural realms Senghor believed that the Senegalese people would be best served by a future that advocated for the fusion of the European and African elements of their civilizations.\textsuperscript{48} This belief is cultural dualism can be summed up in his famous re-appropriation of Comte Arthur de Gobineau’s phrase: “l’émotion est nègre comme

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 21. 
\textsuperscript{46} Manning, 176. 
\textsuperscript{47} Moore, 21. 
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 20-21.
Senghor coined the term “African Socialism” early in his political career. In his opinion the best form of government for newly independent African countries would be a fusion of European socialism with traditional African notions of communalism. His political career was much like his literary career. Although he wrote about the beauty and passion of mother Africa, he expressed himself within the French literary tradition. Consequently, he believed that Africans should be in political control of their own countries, but he believed in the sensibility of European political structures and an enduring relationship with France. Most symbolic of Senghor’s notion of cultural fusion is that after he served as the first President of Senegal from 1960 until 1980, then he accepted a position with the esteemed Académie Française. Successfully, straddling les deux mondes Léopold Sédar Senghor’s career has been equally important to Senegalese cultural history as it has to French cultural history.

The career of Senghor is important to the history of the Senegalese people because he exemplified a man who was able to become successful despite the racism and obstacles that he faced in the French colonialism. He was also the leader who ushered Senegal into independence. He was seemingly able to recognize the horrors of the colonial system and not demonize French culture at the same time. Both Senghor and Blaise Diagne cherished the Senegalese and French portions of their realities. The difficulty with these two men being recognized as the fathers of their nation is that they do represent an exception to the rule. Their roles as trailblazers are important because they represent tenacity and endurance; but their success relies upon the fact that they were successful in spite of their blackness. In the case of Senghor, his blackness was something he did not fully realize until he was in France surrounded by white French people.

These two men had to come to terms with the truth that they would never be considered

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50 Manning, 153-160.
51 Moore, 23.
completely equal to white Frenchmen. Thus, there is a disconnect between the trajectory of their success stories and the aspirational dreams of Senegalese people who never had the luxury of ignoring their blackness. This begs the question, how much of their success was dependent upon the fact that their blackness was something they had to discover?

**Assimilated Mothers of a Nation?**

In contemplating the effectiveness of national role models such as Blaise Diagne and Léopold Sedar Senghor in the lives of ordinary Senegalese citizens, one must also contemplate how effective these role models are for women. If it can be difficult for a young Senegalese boy who has grown up in a rural community to attempt to model his life after that of Diagne or Senghor, how difficult can it be for a young woman in the same situation? Furthermore, do young women have national assimilated figures to look up to in Senegal? At this point in my research I have not come across any widely celebrated Senegalese female figures from the colonial era. Of course this does not mean that such women did not exist, it just means that records of their lives are difficult to discover. Of the difficulty of locating female historical narratives, Susan Andrade suggests that researchers take a closer look at the private lives of the available male figures. This suggestion comes from a standpoint that sees the public and private sphere as being intimately intertwined. There were many great women who held power in the assimilationist colonial complex; however their stories are often overshadowed by those of their great men.

In *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa*, scholar Hilary Jones explores the powerful role that many women played in the colonization of Senegal by looking at racially mixed relationships in 19th century St. Louis. The métis of Senegal were a self-conscious group who were the products of African mothers and European fathers. The

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52 Andrade, 1-3.
children of these unions went on to become the first political and administrative rulers in the colonial government who were not solely of European origin. As previously discussed, Diagne was the first elected official who was neither of European nor métis origin in Senegal. Culturally, the métis exemplified the notion of living between two worlds. Members of the métis community spoke French, practiced Catholicism, partook in a catholic education, and dressed in a bourgeois manner. They also spoke Wolof, maintained traditional kinship networks, and understood Wolof cultural customs. Essentially, the métis people were caught between the worlds of the colonizer and the colonized.\textsuperscript{53}

As Jones explains, “colonialism is an act of conquest or domination by one state over another forged through violence.”\textsuperscript{54} To firmly implant itself into Senegalese society during the mid to late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, French colonialism had to invade the intimate spaces of home. Unlike their British counterparts, French authorities saw women as one of the key colonial reproductive agents. To achieve direct colonial rule where French authorities could be an integral part of the public and private spheres familial mixing was paramount. What is interesting about the social and racial classification of the métis is that, the French fathers rarely claimed these children publicly. The creation of the métis was solely utilitarian. There was a need to have an intermediary class in between the rungs of white and black. The French quickly realized that they could not force loyalty on behalf of the traditional rulers, as their cultural influence could easily be used for revolutionary purposes.\textsuperscript{55} The métis that had no distinct loyalty to the French nor the Africans, could be more easily manipulated to serve the colonial interest as they would merely

\textsuperscript{54} Jones, 6.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 9-15.
want to maintain a comfortable social status. Because of their desire to hold on to their comforts, the metis were a powerful sustaining agent to the French colonial enterprise.56

Rather than delve into the metis culture, it is of interest for this paper to discuss the African women who birthed these metis children. Signares were the African country wives of French men. These marriages were not official and titled mariage a la mode du pays. These marriages were not ‘until death do us part’, but rather until the husband decided to return to France. The practice of taking country wives is certainly not exclusive to Senegal, as using marriage to forge bonds in colonial territories was common. There is little record of who these women were, but in Senegal they were considered to be exotic and seductive beauties. Signares did possess special rights because of their marriages to French men. Most notably, before the abolition of slavery Signares could own their own slaves.57 Signares “embraced the new cultural influences coming from the Atlantic world but also upheld continuity with the social and cultural values of Senegal’s mainland.”58 Although Signares were not political rulers, they were truly trailblazers in the sense that they physically bonded themselves to France. They were not évolutées, but they birthed children who could live outside the rigid paradigm of assimilation. With their bodies, Signares were tools of empire.

It is not surprising that Signares were not applauded as mothers of the Senegalese nation in the same fashion of the assimilated fathers. Despite their integration into the families of French men, they were not integrated into the larger French cultural world. Rather than penetrating French culture, they remain in the fringes. The power they were given in the colonial system could not translate across national boundaries. Signares were not afforded the sort of cultural capital that could elevate them to the status of Évolués. The world of the evolved was

56 Ibid., 90.
57 Ibid., 21-36.
58 Ibid., 35.
reserved for men only. Women, even those who bore French children, would always remain in colonial subjugation. Eventually Signares became less useful as the metis began to intermarry and become a self-sustaining ‘racial’ and cultural group. Young women, in the works of Sembène and Diome, do not have female role models to look up to in their quest for the French myth. Assimilated mothers of the nation do not exist. Young Senegalese women are left looking both outside their culture for validation, and outside of their gender affiliation. They must not only mimic the privilege of Frenchness but also mimic the privilege of maleness. This is why Sembène’s Diouana and Diome’s Salie are trailblazers. These women were brave enough to imagine a future that no woman had ever truly realized.

Chapter 2

La Noire de…

In a 1978 interview with Françoise Pfaff, Ousmane Sembène stated: “The filmmaker must live within his society and say what goes wrong within his society”. 59 In Sembène’s view, a film should not hide or embellish reality. The short story and the film of the same name, “La Noire de”, are known as Sembène’s first pieces dedicated to declaring what is wrong within his society. Nearly every creative piece of work that Sembène made is critical of Senegalese society of the past and his present. In the two manifestations of La Noire de..., Sembène denounces the myth of French cultural superiority and the ritualistic attempt of African peoples to assimilate into French milieu. In “La Noire de”, Sembène tells the tragic story of an African maid from Senegal who kills herself after moving to France with her employers. Her suicide is sparked by the realization that France it is not the promised land. 60 Sembène was inspired to write “La

Noire de” after reading of the suicide of an African maid in France in the 1950s. Through the central character of the Diouana, Sembène demonstrates that the constant desire for his fellow Africans to look towards France for a sense of belonging is both self-defeating and ultimately destructive. Becoming French is an unattainable goal that will lead its seeker down a path of despair and hopelessness like Diouana.

France, in the minds of former French colonial subjects, is the mythical Promised Land. Many African peoples viewed France not only as a place where one can be reborn, but it is also the place where anything is perceived to be possible. This dream originates from the colonial era. Africans who found themselves under the grip of French colonial rule had their minds saturated with notions of French superiority. To be French meant to be woven from an elite human cloth. Black people who had the unfortunate luck of being born in Africa could only seek salvation through attempting to be French.61 Written in the concluding years of French colonial domination in Senegal, “La Noire de” originally appeared as a text in the 1962 book entitled Voltaïque (translated to Tribal Scars). Each story in the book deals with different destructive elements of colonialism that have left tribal scars on the minds of African people.

The text of “La Noire de” (“The Promised Land” the English title), is set in the year 1958. The film, released in 1966, is set in the years following independence. The fact that the narrative remains the same can be seen as deliberate on the part of Sembène because in the short years that separate the text and film the lives of the Senegalese working class had not greatly changed nor improved. It is also striking that Sembène chose the date of 1958 as the temporal space of La Noire de... because 1958 was the year that General Charles de Gaulle founded the Fifth French Republic and allowed the African colonies to vote on a referendum. In this referendum de Gaulle offered France’s African colonies the choice of self-governed autonomy as

61 Blanchard.
separate states in the French community, or they could opt for immediate independence from France. All of the colonies except for Sekou Toure’s Guinea, which voted for immediate independence, opted for inclusion into the French union. The people of French governed Africa were not ready to cut all their ties with France, they feared becoming isolated and weak independent bodies after generations of direct control.\footnote{Atmore & Oliver, 224-225.} The fact that in 1958 the French colonies who eventually gain independence two years after this referendum deemed themselves too feeble for immediate independence is important to take into account with recognizing that Sembène chose this very year to situate his narrative of Diouana. Diouana, like her country in 1958, felt too feeble to live a life that did not incorporate the Promised Land.

It is clear that Sembène felt that the independence of Senegal in 1960 was simply a transfer of power from the hands of French white men to their black imitators.\footnote{Françoise Pfaff, The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène, a Pioneer of African Film.(Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 113-114.} In another novel, Xala, Sembène brazenly extends his belief that the first independent government of Senegal was composed of black men who were equally greedy and self-righteous as the white men.\footnote{Jarmila Ortava. Problemes de la Societe et de la Culture dans les Oeuvres des Ecrivains Africaines : Exemple de Sembène Ousmane. (Listopadu : Universita 17 Listopadu, 1973), 5.} Thus, in the transfer of Diouana’s story from text to film, her general economic and social situation is left unchanged after independence. Diouana, like many of her contemporaries, dreams of France because she is dissatisfied with her life at home in Senegal. Psychologically, France is a geographical answer to all of her problems. Having been raised under the domination of the French, it is safe to assume that throughout her life she has been taught to believe in the superiority of the French culture. In France, she believes that her occupation and social class
will be of no importance. Once she is physically in France she will have the freedom to shape her own niche in a world where no one knows her. Here, she can recreate her own public image.\textsuperscript{65}

Diouana moves to Antibes, France with a white family whom she has worked for in Dakar for three years. In Dakar, she worked as a caretaker for the children and she assumed that she was being brought to France to hold the same position. However, Diouana’s life becomes worse than she could ever imagine when she arrives in France. As the only domestic worker that the family has in Antibes, Diouana is expected to cook, clean, and tend to the children all at once. Having dreamt of a life spent on the beach with the children and in the shops spending her money on the latest fashions, life in France proves unbearable for Diouana. France was her dream that becomes a nightmare. Seeing no escape, Diouana takes her own life. The Promised Land proves to be a personal hell.\textsuperscript{66}

“To be French is to relate vertically to an ideal image of the French nation, not to find common ground with other immigrants who have embarked on this process of becoming French”, to become French means the cultural transformation is complete.\textsuperscript{67} The previous quote from Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih is a superb statement to commence this analytical review of the French myth through the lens of Diouana’s narrative. To escape one’s African nature to become French means to be exceptional—without match. The overarching theme of “La Noire de” is that Diouana expected to be \textit{exceptional} once she crossed over into France, the fact that she found herself treated worse than ever before is why she could not go on living. To stay true to the chronological progression of Sembène’s work, it’s only fair that the short story of “The Promised Land” be looked at first. Within both forms of this narrative, the myth stands as a

\textsuperscript{65} Pfaff, \textit{The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène, a Pioneer of African Film}. 113-115
\textsuperscript{66} Ousmane Sembène. \textit{La Noire de...} (New Yorker Video, 1966).
prize to be attained at the end of the ritual of departure and return. The process of the ritual is the act of becoming assimilated. Becoming a true French person (speaking the language, wearing the clothes, living in the country and earning Francs) is the goal at the end of the process. One who succeeds in the ritual act of assimilating is rewarded with Frenchness.  

The text version of the work offers the audience a developed presentation of the French myth as it is understood by Diouana. The film version of the work offers the audience a glimpse into Diouana’s failed attempt at assimilation. Together, these different manifestations of the same story articulate a complete and whole image of the French myth and the ritual of assimilation. The text of “The Promised Land” presents an external view of the tragedy of Diouana. Although her internal thoughts are the meat of the story, the text reads from the outside. This external view is solidified in the fact that on the first page we are aware that Diouana commits suicide. Thus, the story gives the reader background of what events led her to take her own life. Within the text, there are three characters that play a paramount role in conveying Diouana’s road to suicide. Of course there is Diouana herself, Madame, the French lady of the house, and Tive Correa, the town drunk. It is through these three characters that the story is formed.

In the beginning “Diouana wanted to visit France and return home from that country so renounced for its beauty, wealth and pleasant living. You made your fortune there. Already, even before leaving African soil, she could see herself on the quayside, just back from France, rolling in money and with clothes for everyone. She dreamed of the freedom she would have to go where she wanted, of not having to work like a horse. She could not bear it if Madam refused to take her.”

This quote succinctly points to the roots that the French myth has planted in Diouana’s mind. France is where all life’s pieces can fall into place. In the text, Diouana found the family

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that she worked for in a newspaper ad. From then on she was a part of the household. In Dakar, there was a cook and a house-keeper and she fit in as the babysitter. After three months of being the only house worker in Antibes, she grows to loathe the previous kindness of her Mistress that led her to believe France would be the Promised Land. During her short residence, she did not have the opportunity to experience a world outside of the apartment nor to perfect her broken French. She still struggles to say Monsieur, and instead mumbles Missie instead. In Dakar, her blackness was never felt to be an issue. The majority of people around her had been black, both the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’. In France, Diouana is the only ‘have not’ and the only Black person around. She soon discovers that her blackness in France is the mark of her place in society. Her blackness comes to infect every aspect of her daily life in France. Even the children taunted her in their games chanting that she was a “Negress, black as the darkest night.” Soon, as Sembène writes, the “venom entered her heart, she had never had any reason to hate people before”, but could not keep herself from it now. The abuse that she endured and the lies of prosperity that she believed could only breed hate in her heart.

Diouana misses having a sense of belonging, a feeling that she only realizes existed in Senegal once it is absent. She feels like a slave in Antibes: “Sold, sold…bought, bought, she said to herself over and over again. I’ve been bought. I do all the work here for three thousand francs. I was enticed here, bound and now I’m chained like a slave.” She is not even allowed to write home to her family to tell them the truth about her life in France, her bosses take her stamps. She is alone, isolated, and desperate. The last straw for Diouana is when her Mistress proclaims that on top of being lazy that she is also dirty. Upon exiting the bathroom after a bath the mistress

71 Ibid., 94.
72 Ibid., 95.
73 Ibid., 98.
stresses that Diouana is filthy. When Diouana explains that the children are responsible for the mess, the Mistress retorts: “The children? That’s not true. The children are clean. You may be fed up, that’s quite likely. But I’m not having you tell lies just as the natives do. I don’t like liars, and that’s what you are.”74 It is at that moment that Diouana returns to the bathroom and slits her throat from ear to ear.

Her bosses are stunned; they cannot understand why she would want to die. They tell the police: “I can’t think why she killed herself. She was well treated here; she ate what we did, and slept in the same room as my children.”75 To them, she should be satisfied with whatever life awaited her in France; at least she was no longer in Africa. They cannot see that she is alone, that she has lost her sense of belonging that she felt at home. In their opinion she should have never expected to live her own life in France; she was there to work for them. She belonged within their home doing whatever they asked of her. As a part of the society that has created the myth of Frenchness, they do not see how someone like Diouana could hope for more in life. Shouldn’t she know that she will always be black? Shouldn’t she know that she will always be in the process of assimilation and never reach the end goal? She should know that she will never have the freedom to live the French life that she dreams of. The papers read the day after Diouana’s death: “At Antibes, a homesick black woman cut her throat.”76 To those in France, she is nothing more than an African woman who could not handle the real world, she could not handle France.

The character of Tive Correa, the town drunk who attempts to advise Diouana against going to France, serves as a fortuitous African presence in the text. He may be a greasy, poor, drunk man in Dakar; but he stands to remind the reader that Diouana’s view of France has been formed through the rose colored lens of the colonizer. The myth of France as the Promised Land...
was a colonial tool to keep Africans striving for a life that exists beyond their reach.\textsuperscript{77} Having already “sailed away in the fullness of his youth, bursting with ambition” to France and having returned “a wrecked man”, Coerra knew that the realization of the French myth does not await Diouana in France.\textsuperscript{78} Coerra knows that all that lies in France is despair, a despair that only those who travel to France can know. If a young person stays in Senegal and dreams of France, the truth is never known. Coerra knows that a young and wide eyed woman like Diouana who feels that Africa was “no more than a sordid slum” is not emotionally prepared to know the dismal truth.\textsuperscript{79} Coerra is a reckoning force within the text. He must be drunk; anyone who can know the dismal truth about France and survive in Senegal must numb the pain that the truth causes. However, the method that he uses to deal with reality also dampens the power of his words. Because he is a drunk, his words of wisdom can be easily dismissed by those who are not ready to hear his message.

Within the text, the alienation of Diouana is more progressive than it is in the film. Because of the fact that the ending of suicide is presented on the first page, the reader is taken on the journey that led to the fatal end. The reader is made fully aware of the hope that Diouana had for what she expected to be a wonderful life in France. However, as stated previously, the tone of the text is very much external. The reader is told the story of Diouana and then given passages that expose her internal thoughts. The film takes on an internal tone because Diouana is the only storyteller. Not only can the audience visually see the life of Diouana, but only she has the voice to tell them her story. Nearly the entire narrative of the film is told from the perspective of her

\textsuperscript{77} Thomas \textit{Black France}. 128.
\textsuperscript{78} Sembène. “The Promised Land.” 92.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., 94.
thoughts. In the film, the viewer is shown the “total process of humiliation, debasement, betrayal and lost hope leading up to [the] violent act” of her suicide. At this point, it is important to illuminate the fact that her suicide is not made known to the viewer until the end of the film. It is not revealed until the end that her psychological oppression leads to her demise. There are two important elements of the film that differ from the text that play a paramount role in illustrating Diouana’s road to suicide; the existence of her boyfriend and an African mask that Diouana gives as a present to her employers before moving to France. Although there are many other facets of the narrative that are tweaked in the film, these two elements emerge because the flashbacks to her life in Dakar are more developed in the film than they are in the text.

The character of the nameless boyfriend in the film replaces Tive Correa as a fortuitous and reckoning presence. He also helps Diouana find her job with the French family. He knows that she is in need of employment and tells her to go to the marché aux bonnes to find employers. The maid market in the film resembles a slave market, foreshadowing her eventual treatment as an slaved domestic worker. All of the women on the street corner beg the Mistress to take them on as workers, however, it is Diouana who is chosen because she is the only woman in the crowd not reaching for the Mistress. She exhibits from the beginning a more servile demeanor.

However, when Diouana finds out that she is going to be taken to France, her boyfriend is quickly annoyed by her happiness. To him, there is a difference between working for the family in Dakar and moving with them to France. Like Correa, he too is shown to have more knowledge of the French myth than Diouana, knowledge that leaves him annoyed by her happiness. He knows that she will never truly belong in France and that she will always remain an outsider. The

81 Pallister, 76.
82 Sembène. La Noire de...
worldliness of the boyfriend is initially made known in the scene of their first meeting. When they pass each other on the street, he is dressed in European garb, button up shirt and slacks, and Diouana is dressed in traditional Senegalese garb. But, during a later flashback scene the boyfriend’s dedication to Africa is displayed in a hanging portrait of Patrice Lumumba. Although he has adopted features of European culture, his main loyalties lay with Africa. He is not one to chase the myth; he knows that nothing better awaits him in France. But he is not able to demystify the myth for Diouana before she leaves.\(^8^4\)

Once she is in France, Diouana begins to dress in European clothing. She also wears a straight hair wig, however underneath lies her natural braided hair. To Diouana, she simply wants to become more and more Europeanized while she is in France. But, her Mistress appears threatened by her new appearance. The Diouana of Antibes does not look like the Diouana of Dakar. For the Mistress, this transformation is one of rebellion rather than a desire to belong. Her insults of Diouana become increasingly harsh as the days progress.\(^8^5\) In the film, the Mistress carries out most of the speaking parts as the bulk of the dialogue are the internal reflections of Diouana. Among her insults of Diouana, she yells “nous ne sommes pas en Afrique.”\(^8^6\) With those six words from the Mistress dripping with distain, Diouana’s dreams are shattered. She knows she is not in Africa and she has dreamt of leaving Africa her whole life. However, her dreams of France never included constant cooking and cleaning. With the statement of “nous ne sommes pas en Afrique” coupled with the constant cleaning demands of the Mistress solidify the fact that the only France Diouana will know is the one inside of the apartment. Coming to France

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\(^8^5\) Pfaff. *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène, a Pioneer of African Film.* 120.  
\(^8^6\) Sembène. *La Noire de...*
in reality meant the end of Diouana’s freedom and the end of her individual identity. She was now only a fixture in the lives of her employers.\textsuperscript{87}

One scene in the film that accentuates the objectification of Diouana in France is when her employers have some friends over for dinner. The dinner guests and her bosses sit around the table and talk about her as if she is an animal that does not internalize the harsh words that they speak. At one point, one of the men asks Diouana to come to the table and plants a large kiss on her cheek. He claims that as a French man he has never kissed a real Nigger before. Although she says nothing, Diouana looks at this man with eyes filled with wrath and pain.\textsuperscript{88} Having noticed the emotion in her eyes this man exclaims: “Since independence, the niggers have lost a lot of their disposition.”\textsuperscript{89} In other words, Africans had lost their natural ability to endure sexual harassment and racial objectification without showing emotion. Her emotion is a marker of her humanity, a humanity that this table of French people feel she could not possess.

The ultimate symbol of Diouana’s objectification within the film is the African mask. The mask makes the journey with Diouana from Dakar to Antibes, and is brought back to Dakar by her employer after her death. This mask appears to have been carved from the bark of a baobab tree. Not ironically, the mask is lacking a mouth. The defining feature of this art piece is that it has sad, large eyes marked by a frowning brow line. The mask was initially a gift that she gives to her employers, symbolizing the trusting and positive relationship that she believes to be ahead within her tenure.\textsuperscript{90} This mask is the physical manifestation of her hope that through her relationship with her employers, she can access the French world—the French myth. In the home of her bosses in Dakar, the mask sits among other collected pieces of African art. This collection

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{89} Pallister, 78.
\textsuperscript{90} Pfaff. The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène, a Pioneer of African Film. 122.
of African art can be said to signify an acceptance on the part of the bosses of African culture, and thus an acceptance of Diouana as an African individual. In the home in Antibes, the mask is the only piece of African art. In fact, in the scene where Diouana enters the French apartment for the first time, she shares the frame with the African mask which hangs on the wall when she walks through the front door. The imagery of the mask and Diouana sharing the frame are clues that her Africanity has followed her to France. Her Africanity cannot be escaped. Furthermore, the mask is the only piece of African art that has traveled from Dakar to Antibes with the family. The dwindling size of their art collection directly correlates with the dwindling acceptance the French family has for Diouana’s individuality as an African person. There is less room in France for artistic vestiges of Africa and there is less room in France for Diouana to possess a unique identity. In France her employers want her to remain as lifeless as the mask.

In the scene where Diouana slits her throat in the bathroom, the mask lays in a pile with her other belongings. The act of taking back the mask signifies the fact that Diouana has given up on the hope that the mask represented. She completely gave up on assimilating the French culture. When the trust that she had in her employers vanished, she lost the will to live. After her death, the husband of the Mistress travels back to Dakar to give Diouana’s family her belongings, including the mask. However, when he delivers these things to Diouana’s mother along with some money, she refuses to accept them. Her daughter is dead and having her belongings or the wages she earned will not assuage the pain. After this scene, a little boy from the neighborhood places the mask over his face and stares down the husband. He then proceeds to follow him through the village. After becoming increasingly uncomfortable, the husband runs away from the masked boy following him. Francoise Pfaff suggests that at the end of the film,

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91 Sembène, La Noire de...
92 Ibid.
the mask comes to embody Diouana’s story. Her pain, her hopes, and her loss are all within the mask. “The haunting mask reflects Africa’s determination to search in its traditions the strength of liberating itself from western tutelage.” Although killing herself was the only way that Diouana could reclaim ownership of her body, the remaining mask that was left by her side carries on the message of her suffering. It is the overwhelming realization of the legacy of Diouana’s pain embodied in the mask that causes the husband to run away from the little boy. Her story and the grieving of her death by her family are all too much for him to feel.

The overall lesson of “La Noire de” as both a text and a film is the same: one can never escape their blackness no matter their proximity to Frenchness. Even if Diouana is aware of the fact that she will never be white, she is not aware that her blackness will always hold her back from truly being French. Diouana was not able to continue paying for her blackness for the rest of her life. Three months was all she saved up for. Her fragility is born out of her naivety of the impact race can have over her life in Europe. Suicide was the only way that Diouana could reclaim her own body, to declare that she is in fact a human being. Her suicide is her last and eternal cry for the recognition of her humanity. When Diouana crossed over the sea in a ship, she was expecting to find a new and enriching reality in France, instead she found a reality quite similar to that of her previous ancestors who crossed the same waters in chains. No longer is she Diouana, an individual person deserving of love and respect by her peers, she becomes a peerless domestic worker. Her presence is only acknowledged in relation to her domestic function. Even when she dies, the world that surrounded her in Antibes goes on without skipping a beat. In the film, the scene with her dead body in the bathtub fades into a scene where the bathtub is clean.

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94 Ibid., 123.
and void of any remnant of her tragic death. Just as the bathtub can be wiped clean of her blood, the minds of those in Antibes are wiped clean of her memory.\textsuperscript{97} Diouana’s lost hope is captured in the poem of \textit{Longing} that ends the short story. Here is an excerpt:

“Diouana,
Our sister,
The slave-ships no longer ride the bar
Terror, despair, the wild hunt,
The cries, the shouts are silenced,
But the echo in our memory.
Diouana,
The bar remains.
Centuries have followed centuries,
And the chains are broken,
Termites have eaten away the yokes.
On the flanks of our Mother Africa,
Stand slaves’ houses
(monuments of our history)
Diouana, proud African girl,
You carry to your grave
The golden rays of out setting sun,
The dance of ears of fonio,
The waltz of the rice-shoots.”\textsuperscript{98}

In the words of actor Med Hondo, Ousmane Sembène was “le premier artiste à avoir fait de l’image Africaine une valeur; une valeur fondée sur la défense de la dignité africaine: c’est un intellectuel devenu unique en son genre.”\textsuperscript{99} Sembène’s reputation, as stressed by Hondo is largely attributed to his cinematic career commencing with a first feature length film as strong as “La Noire de”. Hailed as the first African film of value for its frankness and honesty, “La Noire de” set up Sembène for an illustrious career in African storytelling. Even though, suicide is not common in Senegalese culture, almost all Senegalese viewers could identify with Diouana’s

\textsuperscript{97} Pfaff. \textit{The Cinema of Ousmane Sembène, a Pioneer of African Film.} 119.
\textsuperscript{98} Sembène “The Promised Land.” 100.
hopeful spirit on some level or admit to knowing someone just like her. She believed in the myth of France, and had enough fire in her underbelly to seek out the dream and carry out the ritual. But, the intensity of her internal fire was too strong to withstand the letdown of reality. One of the special attributes of the film is that the audience is able to hear the internal thoughts of Diouana rather than simply watching her actions unfold as in the written text. In the film we are able to experience the rich wealth of emotions that lie within her. The textual version of Diouana’s story is voiced by an external narrator, and the film presented from her internal perspective. With both external and internal views of Diouana, an audience who has taken the time to read and watch La Noire de… has digested two halves of the whole.

Once “La Noire de” was published in Voltaïque in 1962, Sembène knew that he wanted to reach a wider audience with the message that the myth of France was just a dream, nothing more and nothing less. Just as Diouana is nearly illiterate in the French language in the story, many of the people that Sembène wanted to reach in Senegal were illiterate as well. Turning his story into a visual product allowed him to reach those who dream of France but cannot even read the French language. They could see and hear his message on film. In the words of Sembène:

I became aware of the fact that using the written word, I could reach only a limited number of people, especially in Africa where illiteracy is so deplorably widespread. I recognized that the film on the other hand was capable of reaching large masses of people. When the message could only be accessed through his writing, he felt that only the elite would have access to it. Ironically, it was only for them that the myth had any potential to become a reality. Ultimately, Sembène believed that films like La Noire de… could serve as an ècole du soir which could educate people who could not read.

101 Rofheart, 2.
102 Mortimer, 64.
103 Rofheart, 23.
Chapter 3

The Belly of the Atlantic

“Diome’s work points to a reconfiguration of the migration experience through the connections and affiliations that individuals have with each other locally... within the communities in Senegal” - Mahriana Rofheart. 104

The semi-autobiographical novel The Belly of the Atlantic by Fatou Diome is a text that weaves together many established and emerging themes of post-colonial African literary discourse. The central narrative of the novel taking place between 2000 and 2002 is the relationship between a sister and brother, Salie and Madické, which develops across the Atlantic from the shores of Senegal to France. Salie, the older sibling, lives in Strasbourg, France, and Madické resides on their home island of Niodior, Senegal. Through the relationship that exists between Salie and Madické, Diome discusses themes of yearning for French identity, neocolonialism as globalization, labor migration, and alienation. The primary tension between Salie and Madické is that the younger dreams of moving to France to play professional football. Madické dreams of having a future that mirrors that of his idol Maldini who is a Senegalese football player on the Italian national team. Madické feels that if he can enter the European Union by legal or illegal means, he can find a way to make his dreams come true. Salie, who is also the narrator of the text, dedicates herself to dissuading her brother from joining her in France. One of the strengths of Diome’s novel is that while she allows her character of Salie to demystify the dream of France, she does not allow her to propagate an idealized image of the African home. Salie is the premiere character of the text because she successfully lives in the margins of both Senegal and France and copes with her spatial and cultural alienation. In The Belly of the Atlantic, Diome paints a realistic and hopeful picture of immigration and attempts to demythify France through the resilience of Salie.

104 Ibid., 75.
Born a child out of wedlock on a small and isolated island, Salie entered the world an alienated individual. The traditional fate for a child such as her was immediate death but she was saved by her grandmother. Her mother, shamed by her unwed status, quickly remarries and becomes preoccupied with her legitimately born son, Madické. Since Salie’s life is a constant reminder to her mother’s personal shame, she was reared primarily by her maternal grandparents. Her grandparents are superbly nurturing and accepting of whatever goals she sets in her life to mitigate the rejection that she receives from others.  

What solidifies her otherness in Niodior is the fact that she has an uncommon last name. The family names of Niodior’s founders are recognizable to everyone, the fact that her paternal ancestors are from elsewhere is her scarlet identifier. Ironically, although she will always be an outsider, her last name means dignity. She is bound to isolation, but also bound to dignity. To fill the emptiness of social alienation and isolation, Salie buries herself in her studies from a young age. She is mentored by a local teacher and learns to speak and write perfect French. She sees her book knowledge and her French linguistic skills not as her ticket to escape a harsh and bleak African reality, but her ticket out of a social condition she was born into. She is able to acknowledge that her harsh treatment is not fair without becoming resentful of her social position. She learns at a young age to use the alienation as fuel for progression. Thankfully, Salie is able to have a close relationship with her younger brother despite the fact that he was seen as the child more deserving of their mother’s love. Salie feels that the love she received from her grandparents more than sufficed for the lack of love from her mother. Nonetheless, she does not want to live her whole life trapped in her

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106 Diome, 51.
The only non-familial ally that Salie had on the island in both her childhood and in her quest to demythify France is her old French teacher Monsieur Ndetare. Ndetare too was an outsider on the island. Considered a dangerous agitator by the government in Dakar, he was banished to the island after a long career as both a trade unionist and head of a primary school. Bound to the island, he could be easily recognized by locals through his European clothing, academic French, and devotion to Karl Marx. To Salie, Ndetare gave her the keys to open the doors to the world, the real world were France was simply another location in which to live but not the Promised Land. Of her intellectual debt to Ndetare Salie states:


To him she owes the tools with which she was able to commence her own ambiguous adventure. It was Ndetare who convinced her grandmother to allow her to register for school. Before formally registering, Salie had to lie to her grandmother in order to sneak out of the house and listen to Ndetare’s French lectures from the back door of his classroom. Not coincidentally, Ndetare becomes the French teacher of Madické as well. Until enrolling in courses with Ndetare, Madické had only attended Koranic schools because his father found it more important for him to learn about god than to learn how to decode the language of whites. Madické saw learning French as the first formal step in his quest for the Promised Land. In addition, Ndetare serves as the soccer coach for Madické’s soccer team in the informal island league. In assuming this position, the banished agitator from Dakar attempts to reorient the goals of his players. He

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108 Diome, 48-50.
109 Ibid., 41.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid., 42-45.
112 Ibid., 53-55.
tries to set them on a path of education rather than soccer, to employ their minds and not merely their bodies in the successes of their futures. In doing so, Ndetare is devoted to reminding these boys of those that the Atlantic has swallowed, and expose those who are living a lie.

Salie does not move to France to change her economic status, not to impress those at home, and not to reach the Promised Land. She claims that she immigrates for a freedom of mind. For her, there is solitude in exile. At a young age, she married a French man and moves with him to Strasbourg. They are divorce soon thereafter as his family is unwilling to accept a union between a white man and a black woman. Of her marriage Salie says: “once in his country my skin cast a shadow over the idyll- his family wanted only snow white” Rather than returning home, Salie works as a house cleaner and takes university courses in Strasbour. She does not see her life as a failure because she had not unrealistically hoped for riches. She has simply hoped for a different life experience. She feels equipped to handle the alienation that she is faced with in France because she faced alienation her whole life in Senegal. Her familiarity with this alienation is a survival tool that she knows her younger brother does not have, his dreams are not calibrated for life at the margins. Despite her personal need to seek freedom, she is well aware that the “obligation to help is the migrant’s heaviest burden.” So, although she cannot offer monetary support consistently, she is ever more dedicated to offer moral support to Madické. She sees being realistic with Madické about his aspirations to play profession football in Europe as the best form of support she can offer. Madické, like many young boys around him, wants to be a soccer player. Only one television exists on their island, but it often

\[115\] Diome, 26.
\[116\] Nathan, 78-81.
\[117\] Diome, 27.
has bad reception. So, Salie must watch the games in France so that she can report to Madické the stats of the game if he is unable to watch. Soccer is his entire life. Salie straddles the line of being supportive of her brother’s aspirations, while standing strong in her belief that he should follow his dreams in Senegal.\textsuperscript{118}

Although the central narrative of the text is the relationship between Salie and Madické, their stories are sandwiched between those of others in their community who have tried to tackle the myth of France. Salie has the uncomfortable position of being someone who has to be honest about the attraction of France, while simultaneously remaining critical of a blind desire to immigrate to France\textsuperscript{119}. With the narratives of failed soccer players, failed migrants, and Senegalese nationalists, Salie builds a foundation upon which to stand. Frankly, there is only one Senegalese football player from Niodior, Maldini, that she can affirm has found success in Europe. She hopes that most of all Madické will keep these stories in the forefront of his mind, and realize the hard road he will have ahead of him if he hastily and clandestinely moves to France. However, Salie’s opinion is always taken with a grain of salt in the eyes of her community and in the eyes of her own brother. Only those who find wealth abroad, or who lie about having found wealth, are the authority on life in France. It is them who maintain the myth that France is the land of endless opportunity, all one needs is to set foot on European soil and success is theirs.\textsuperscript{120} Thus, those who return poor must be lazy. What Salie wants Madické to realize at the very least is that those who are successful in France are the exception and not the norm. The sort of life he should hope for in France is the same life that he should hope for in Senegal. There is no fault in wanting to explore the world, but there is no shame in building a life

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 21-27.  
\textsuperscript{119} Nathan, 77.  
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 80.
in Senegal that does not have France on the horizon. Security and stability should always be the goal of one’s life, at home or elsewhere.

Because the text is written from the perspective of Salie, the reader becomes acquainted with Salie through her opinions of the lives of those around her. The reader is able to get inside the mind of Salie more than they are able to see the course of her life from the outside. The way in which Salie internally engages with the narratives of those in her home community shows how she interprets the lingering gaze of her peers towards the Promised Land. It is with the narratives of the members of her home community that Salie shares in that text that attempts to explain why France is not the Promised Land, and not the ideal location for a big dreamer like Madické. In the view of Madické France is paradise and “in paradise, you don’t struggle, you don’t fall ill, you don’t ask questions: it’s enough to be alive, you can afford everything you desire.” 121 What Madické fails to recognize is that he can look no further than the members of his own community to realize that more often than being the Promised Land, France can be a personal hell. This personal hell can lead one to eventually be swallowed in the belly of the Atlantic, or to be reduced to living a lie.

Moussa, a young man from Niodior, found himself swallowed in the belly of the Atlantic after his voyage to the Promised Land turned into a personal hell. Moussa is the penultimate cautionary tale of the text. Raised as the oldest and only son of a poor family in Niodior, Moussa felt an obligation to succeed. His soccer ball became a ball filled with the air of hope. After having been seen by French scout, Jean-Charles Sauveur, Moussa was taken to France and placed on the national team. Soon, his family and all the children of Senegal could watch him on television—living the ultimate dream. What they could not see on TV was the contempt that he

121 Diome, 25.
endured from his fellow players. Eventually Moussa buckled under the pressure of being called ‘darkie’ and ‘Tarzan’ from his the players who were supposed to be his support system. Moussa was cut from the team, and obligated to pay back his start up debt of 100,000 francs to scout Jean-Charles Sauveur. Of course, Moussa had no official work papers. He was forced to take a job working on a boat importing and exporting goods. Too ashamed to tell his family he had been cut from the team, he all but vanished on them. His father reached out with letters begging him to remember his roots and not fall into being and individualist. He must bear the immigrants burden and send money to his family in Niodior. If he had fallen into trouble, his father advised him to save his money and come home immediately to spare the family further embarrassment.\textsuperscript{122}

One night, Moussa decided to explore the city of Marseilles while his boat was docked. Like many young black men, he was stopped by the police and asked to produce his papers, papers that he did not possess. His boss refused to acknowledge that he employed Moussa as he did not want to bear the fine of hiring those who are sans-papier. After a brief stint in jail, Moussa was given an IQF, an Invitation to Quit France. Within days he was dropped off on the tarmac in Dakar, left to find his way to Niodior on his own. Because he returned to Niodior without luggage filled with gifts in hand, it was not too hard for people to realize that he had indeed come home a failure. The only person who did not shun the defeated Moussa was Ndetare, he was his only friend upon his return. Everyone had loved him while he kicked around the soccer ball filled with hope, but when that soccer ball had deflated and was depleted of hope no one was around to love him.\textsuperscript{123}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 64-69.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 70-75.
\end{itemize}
There is a legend in Niodior, of a fisherman who throws himself into the Atlantic chanting: “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.”\textsuperscript{124} Soon after being enveloped by the waves, the fisherman’s wife followed. Once these two were submerged in the ocean, it is said that two dolphins began to jump and play in the water side by side near the shore. It is believed the fisherman and his wife were transformed into dolphins in the belly of the Atlantic when life on dry land proved too much to handle. With each passing day of living in the alienation of his failure, Moussa desired more and more to become a dolphin like the fisherman and his wife.\textsuperscript{125} One night, he gave himself to the ocean while whispering: “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.”\textsuperscript{126} Not long after the night of his death, Moussa’s body was recovered by fishermen because “even the Atlantic can’t digest all that the earth throws up.”\textsuperscript{127}

Ndetare uses the story of Moussa as a cautionary tale for his students like Madické who have their dreams fixated on France. Moussa lived a dehumanizing existence in France because of his clandestine status.\textsuperscript{128} He calls for them to remember that Moussa was their brother, that there are no guarantees in life that they too will not end up looking to be swallowed in the belly of the Atlantic. The Atlantic has silenced Moussa, and those who have narrowly escaped the same fate remain armed with their voices. In the text, the man from Barbès serves as a migrant, who through knack for storytelling had turned his reality of failure into a tale of success. The man from Barbès has the advantage of being on the of few people in his community to even possess knowledge of the French landscape, thus even his ability to state that his has laid eyes on

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 75.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid., 75-76.
  \item \textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 76.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 77.
  \item \textsuperscript{128} Coly, 103.
\end{itemize}
the Eiffel Tower buys him social capital in Niodior. As the owner of the only TV on the island, the man from Barbès has no difficulty drawing a crowd to recount the majestic tales of his life in Paris. To the boys who gather weekly to view the European soccer matches, he tells that Paris is unlike anything they could imagine. That the god of the French “is so powerful [,.] he has given them untold riches so to honour him they’ve built churches everywhere, gigantic buildings with amazing architecture.”129 Although he admits to having never seen the mosques of Dakar and Touba, the man from Barbès is sure to tell these wide eyed boys that the Senegalese people have not been as blessed to build structures to Allah that can compare in beauty to that of the French.130

The only luxuries of Paris that the man from Barbès tells Madické and his friends about are material. He can tell these boys that he has seen that all families have their own apartments, their own cars, electricity, running water, TV’s with multiple channels, washing machines, and vacuums. But, he cannot truly tell these boys what it feels like to possess these items. The man from Barbès does not know what it is like to possess these items; he just knows what is like to lay eyes upon them. He has no firsthand experience with the luxuries of France because he lived a life of alienation. Salie states that “his flood of tales never hinted at the wretched existence he’d led in France.”131 In reality, the man from Barbès was reduced to pick pocketing of metro riders to pull enough change together to buy scraps of food. Because he was a sans-papier, he did not qualify for the wonderful social security benefits that he tells the young boys about. Not unlike Moussa, all he had was his body. No one knows that the money with which he bought the only television in Niodior came from a night watch job in a supermarket and not from the money trees

129 Diome, 56.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., 59.
that line the Champs Elysée. He never tells these young boys that he was just another ‘Nigger in Paris.’

The man from Barbès symbolizes the death of reality that Salie and Ndetare are struggling to resuscitate for Madické. In his chapter devoted to *The Belly of the Atlantic* in his text *Africa and France*, Dominic Thomas writes extensively about the character of the man from Barbès. Of Diome’s strategic characterization of him in Salie’s narrative Thomas writes:

Man from Barbès emerges as the emblem of opportunity and therefore of power, but in reality, contextualized within global capitalism, he stands paradoxically as an instrument of continued oppression since his master narrative both relegates him to a position of perpetual subjugation and triggers successive migrations that perpetuate a myth that ultimately serves the capitalist interests of European markets that control the economy and further marginalize Africa.

Not unlike Lépold Sédar Senghor, the man from Barbès speaks of Paris as if it is only a metro ride away from Niodior. Rather than truthfully telling these young boys his struggles in Paris, he keeps the myth alive. It is of no concern for the man of Barbès to prepare his young audience for the reality of Paris because his identity relies on the false understanding that he had lived the dream. The man from Barbès is the physical embodiment of globalization in Niodior. To quote Dominic Thomas once more:

“[Globalization] is the closer integration of the countries and people of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication, and the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and (to a lesser extend) people across borders.”

Through the television that the man from Barbès furnishes his community, Madické and his peers can see the world, the television is their telescope into the Promised Land. They can keep abreast with the current music, popular football teams, even the current cuisine of Paris and the

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132 Ibid., 57-60.
world at large. While their mouths water longing for the taste of the new coca lite, their ears are filled with the sounds of the man from Barbès voice reinforcing the belief that one would have to be an idiot to come back from Paris poor.135

At the beginning the novel, Salie states that it has been ten years since she left Niodior with her French husband.136 In those ten years she has seen many people come and go between Senegal and France, but she has not seen anyone reach the Promised Land. She knows that even though France opened its doors to immigrants after World War II in order to rebuild the country, many of these people came to reside in the slums.137 It would seem that the only character in the story that can accurately be defined as successful is Madické’s football idol, the Senegalese Maldini. The games Madické demands Salie keep abreast with are those of Maldini. In all the years that Salie has followed his career, she confirms that he has never even won a title playing with the Italian national team. In her opinion, Maldini is collapsing from the weight of his fans, the young boys whose hopes and dreams are dependent upon the longevity of his career. As long as Maldini remains on the field, with or without wins, Madické feels that he stands a chance in professional football.138 “Emigration was the clay out of which [Madické] planned to model his future, his entire life,” and in the novel it becomes increasingly difficult for Salie to gently help him imagine an alternative life path.139 An angered Madické believes that his sister is being selfish, that she wants to keep the riches of France to herself. If Salie can survive in France as a woman, what would stop him from surviving as an agile young man?140

135 Diome, 58.
136 Not much is said about Salie’s husband, this can be considered as intentional on the part of Diome. He remains nameless as he was overcome by the racist inclinations of his family and viewed Salie as a perpetual outsider.
137 Ibid., 123.
138 Ibid., 157-158.
139 Ibid., 116.
140 Ibid., 123.
Soon, Salie realizes that in order to curb Madické’s hunger for France she must plan an alternative life route for him, one that does not directly include Europe. Without a new plan it would be nearly impossible to convince her feigning brother that in France “you’re black first, citizens incidentally, outsiders permanently, and that’s certainly not written in the constitution, but some can read it on your skin.”\(^{141}\) She is placed a crossroads in trying to find a way to make her life in France guide Madické in becoming a Débrouillard in Senegal. To be a Débrouillard is to be “a clever soul who with little at hand, gets along against the odds.”\(^{142}\) She cannot tell him that Niodior is paradise, because if it was she would have never left. But, she can convince him that with her help life at home can be enriching and fulfilling. Having lost faith in the power dynamic of ritual within context of Niodior, she feels that now she has to set up a rite of passage doorway for Madické to walk through for his future. A doorway where on the other side is a life path seductive enough for him to abandon the idea of France. Salie secretly saves a nest egg for Madické, enough money for him to open a small store in Niodior. When she reveals that she has saved this money for him, Madické feels betrayed because she had adamantly refused to buy him a plane ticket to France claiming financial difficulty. Despite his hesitation, Salie sends him the money anyways and waits. Salie waits for nearly two years to hear what Madické has done with the sum of money. All the while, she continues to watch the weekly football matches.\(^{143}\)

In June of 2002, the Senegalese national football team beat the French team in the World Cup. This win ignited waves of pride throughout the Francophone African world, but also instilled feelings of confusion for the ‘Senegauls’.\(^{144}\) ‘Senegauls’ were unsure whether to

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\(^{141}\) Ibid., 124.  
\(^{143}\) Diome, 150-162.  
\(^{144}\) Senegauls is a term used by Diome on page 174 of the novel to label Senegalese people who have taken to heart the colonial belief that they are descendants of the mighty Gauls.
celebrate the win of their home country or mourn the loss of their dream country. Finally, media broadcasted headlines about Africa did not focus solely on famine and AIDS. Salie hoped that with this victory, the Senegalese players would finally be brave enough to expose the racism that they endure in the sport—that they could use this win to reach out to the young boys watching the games on tiny TV’s across the Atlantic. She fantasized about the triumphant players speaking publicly about how “the same people who applaud them when they score a goal make monkey noises, throw bananas at them and call them dirty niggers when they miss a shot or falter in front of goal.” In the forefront of her mind, Salie wishes that Madické does not take this victory as yet another sign that football is his only life path. Not long after the win of Senegal over France, Salie receives a call from Madické. In the elapsed time, Madické has opened a small grocery store. The store is a success! Below is an excerpt from Madické during this conversation:

Who’s talking about leaving? Maybe some of my friends still think about it, but I’m not interested any more. I’ve got a lot work in the shop; I’m always having to reorder stock. I think I’m going to build an extension; it’s doing really well. I even managed to hire a big TV, and we all watched the World Cup Final at my place…The old fisherman, for instance, he’s got into the habit of coming and helping himself. But it’s OK, we all help each other out. And, anyway, with a bit of money you can have a good life here. Over there will never really be your home. You should come back.

Finally, Madické has realized that one’s agility should not only be reserved for reaching the Promised Land. France can easily deplete the physical, mental and emotional energy of a wide eyed boy like Madické. One can use their agility and drive to bring the Promised Land to their home. Through a partnership between Salie and Madické that spans the Atlantic, they have saved Madické from being swallowed into the belly of the Atlantic. Instead of fixating on the resources that are not available to him in Niodior, Madické filled a void that he identified in his community. The man from Barbès is no longer the only person in town who can supply young

Diome, 177.
Ibid., 180-181.
Coly, 104.
boys with a glimpse into the outside world while filling their hearts with empty dreams. Madické can now supply his peers with this telescope into the west, while reassuring them that after all life is not so bad in Niodior. Anyone can construct their own Promised Land on either side of the Atlantic. With business of the grocery store Madické is given a long-term purpose in Niodior, a place he is now proud to call home. He will not fall into the trap of incarceration, exploitation, and shameful repatriation. 148 And, Salie is able to reassert herself within the social milieu of the community. She is no longer the penniless, divorced, child born out of wedlock—she is the emigrant who has contributed to her hometown.

_The Belly of the Atlantic_ can be read as a pot pourri of experience that demystify the allure of France for African youth. Salie, writing from the rift, chronicles her quest to convince her bother Madické to never leave their home island of Niodior. However, while dissuading Madické to come to France Salie must remain honest about her own attraction to France. Nevertheless, Salie resides in Strasbourg. What she must tackle is not whether France is a desirable place to live, but if France is a place to yearn for _à tout prix_? Ultimately, she concludes that one must move to France with eyes open and aware of the difficulties ahead149. Because Salie grew up an outsider in Niodior, she yearned for France as a locale where she could be anonymous. Conversely, Madické longs to move to France so that everyone can know his name. The aims of these two siblings could not be more dissimilar. Salie straddles the Atlantic with one foot in Senegal and one in France, existing in the margins within both locations. Because she is not an economic migrant, Salie does not feel ashamed of the fact that she has not obtained material wealth in France. She is happy that she has found the solitude in her exile. The allure of

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148 Thomas, _Black France_. 188.
149 Nathan, 77.
France is that there her life at the margins can be one of her own making.\textsuperscript{150} What she struggles with is how to satiate Madické’s desire to emigrate \textit{à tout prix} and explain to him that he will have to transition from a life in the center to one on the margins. Madické does not only want to be in the center, but he wants to be at the epicenter.

In \textit{The Pull of Postcolonial Nationhood: Gender and Migration in Francophone African Literatures}, Ayo Coly states that the postcolonial nation is held hostage by globalization. Young and able members of the community become so preoccupied with leaving African for Europe that their homes become underdeveloped. A large part of \textit{Débrouillard} brainpower is spent planning an escape rather than revitalizing their communities for a brighter future. Some young people feel so strongly about leaving Senegal that there is a saying: “Il faut partir ou mourir”\textsuperscript{151}. The worst death is considered to be that of man or woman who never had the chance to see the riches of Paris, the capital of the Francophone African world. Leaving Senegal may be like a death in itself, but once your feet are planted in the hexagon you are reborn. The cycle of departure and return is a defining time of a person’s life. Of the impulse to complete the cycle psychologist Mamadou Mbodji writes:

\begin{quote}
Le besoin de partir est si intense et la difficulté de satisfaire aux indications légales si grand que l’unique solution pour les migrants reste le passage par trafiquant […] l’utilisation des circuits clandestins devient presque inévitable.\textsuperscript{152}
\end{quote}

Without leaving Senegal how could a young man hope to be president if all the nations Presidents have studied in France? Without leaving Senegal how could a young person hope to even be a university Professor if most professors obtain their degrees in France?

They will leave by any means necessary. In the second chapter of the text, Salie says that “the third world can’t see Europe’s wounds, it is blinded by its own; it can’t hear Europe’s cry, it

\textsuperscript{150} Coly, 106.
\textsuperscript{152} Mbodji, 306.
is deafened by its own.”  

Madické and millions of people like him cannot see the potential difficulties that await him in France because he is so blinded by the lack of opportunity that they feel plague their own communities. This is where Diome, underscores the larger purpose of her novel. Her main goal was to layout the rapport that takes place within families from across the Atlantic. In doing so she wanted to highlight the ways in which separated families can make sense of their different realities. The moment one decides to leave and go ailleurs, they can no longer see the danger in illegal immigration. There is nothing wrong with legal immigration, but illegal immigration and all the consequences that come with it leave Senegalese people without the peace of mind to support their home communities. When one can only envision France, they cannot envision opening a store that is needed in their community. It is imperative that those who move northward not only help their families at home recognize the wounds of Europe, but that they help them find solutions to heal the wounds of the third world.

Chapter 4

The Imagined Alternatives of Sembène and Diome

“After the historically recognized colonization, a kind of mental colonization now prevails: the young [football] players worshipped and still worship France. In their eyes, everything desirable comes from France.”-Fatou Diome, The Belly of the Atlantic. 

Ousmane Sembène’s La Noire de… and Fatou Diome’s The Belly of the Atlantic both use the narratives of alienated Senegalese women to expose mental colonization. Diouana’s story depicts the tragedy of mental colonization, while Salie stands as a woman determined to tackle the mental colonization of her younger brother. The colonization of the mind causes African youth to long for life in France that does not exist. The France of transformation, riches, and

153 Diome, 26.
155 Mbojji, 311.
156 Diome, 32.
endless possibilities does not exist. Diouna, and others like her, meet a tragic end because they are overwhelmed by reality. Diouana could not fathom how to carry on if there is no land of transformation. On the contrary, Salie never dreamt of transformation. Salie just wanted the liberty to live outside the confines of her close knit community. She wanted the possibility to be seen as Salie and not as the child who was born out of wedlock. Having been accustomed to isolation, the alienation she experiences in France is not devastating. What Salie fears is that Madické would meet the same fate as Diouana in France. The ability for Diome to imagine an alternative to tragedy for Salie and Madické that Sembène does not afford Diouana has as much to do with the differing life experiences of the two authors as it does the 40 years that separates them.

**Sembène, the Miliant Artist**

“*The major ideological principle that characterizes [Sembène’s] work is the recognition of rights of women in society and the affirmation of their economic, social, and cultural role in the dynamic determination of African people.*”157 Frederick Ivor Case

With the story of “La Noire de/The Promised Land” Ousmane Sembène successfully sets out to create the interior problems of his own society. In these works, Sembène made a conscious choice to not focus solely on French racism towards African peoples. Instead, he opts to present an internal narrative of how Africans perceive themselves to be culturally disadvantaged.158 Furthermore, he chooses to focus on the painful struggle of a member of the working class. Throughout his life and career, Ousmane Sembène stood in firm opposition to not only racial discrimination at the hands of white Europeans, but also social discrimination between Africans of various socio-economic classes. Thus, “La Noire de” needs to be seen as a tale of economic

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158 Ortava, 18.
isolation within Africa and Europe. This facet of the narrative is one that holds a personal place for Sembène.

Born in 1923 to a southern Lebu family, Sembène himself was not a member of the elite class. Sembène traveled to France at a young age as an economic immigrant and worked as a fisherman, mechanic, docker, and soldier in southern France. At the age of 23 Sembène left the armed forces as he realized that in taking part in the French military, he was contributing to strengthening Frances oppressive hold on the colonies. And that same year, 1946, he took up residence in France. His motivation to move to France is uncertain, but it seems he wanted to see with his own eyes what the hype of the colonial metro pole was about. As an economic immigrant, Sembène experienced first-hand isolation similar to Diouana's. He was a laborer on the fringes of French society. He too came to realize that one’s physical presence in France does not award one access to the myth of France. The myth of success and assimilation can prove to be even more distant because once one is in the country of France reality sets in. The narrative of demystification was not only a literary and cinematic creation for Sembène, but a distilled account of a reality he had lived.

While living in Marseilles and working as a docker Sembène realized that as an African worker he and his peers had no job security or benefits. He believed that he was a part of an exploited economic and racial class of ostracized immigrants. As far as the French were concerned, African dockers were nameless and faceless laborers. Quickly it became apparent to a young Sembène that race was just a variable in a more complex equation of systematic oppression. It was at this time, the early 1950s that he started to work as a labor rights organizer in Marseilles and his Marxist inclinations formed. After a debilitating back injury took time off

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of work and Sembène penned his first novel *Docke Noir* (1956). This first novel recounts the narrative of a young African docker in Marseille who attempts to deal with cultural isolation.\textsuperscript{161} In his own words Sembène declared “I’m not a militant of any party, I’m a militant through my art.”\textsuperscript{162} Despite having joined the French Communist Party in 1951 and then founding the African Independence Party Marseille Chapter in 1957, Sembène stated that he joined the communist party by necessity. He never expected the elite class of home country to fight for the type of freedom that would benefit the working classes. It was his opinion that any revolution would have to begin with culture, and he eventually saw cultural liberation as the key to economic liberation in the context of Africa.\textsuperscript{163}

In 1960 Ousmane Sembène relinquished his French citizenship and returned to a newly independent Senegal. Upon his return he no longer participated in overt political activism but truly commenced utilizing his art as his means of activism.\textsuperscript{164} As a result, nearly all of his texts and films are centered on issues of identity, cultural history, and cultural liberation. “Marxism caused him to reject the notion of an ahistorical, immutable African identity”, a notion that he saw as a crisis of the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{165} Although he saw defense literature like Négritude as a necessary step in cultural liberation, he felt that it was a step that was not as useful for the working class as it was the bourgeoisie. Only those who had separated themselves from their Africanity would feel the need to defend their past. Members of the working class had not been afforded the ‘luxury’ of becoming assimilated; they were never able to separate themselves from their African past. Having a minimal colonially induced inferiority complex of his Africanity,

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 96. 
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 99-115. 
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid.,126-157. 
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 143-159. 
Sembène felt compelled to defend his present and protect his future. In his works Sembène always sets out to break the cultural hierarchy set in place by assimilationist colonial policies and affirm the ability of African people to reconfigure their independent societies on their own terms. Furthermore, Sembène’s works like La Noire de... are acutely aware of the pitfalls of allowing African culture in general and Senegalese culture in particular to remain rotating on a European centered axis.

The bulk of Sembène’s creative work falls within the genre of social commentary. His films and texts seek to articulate less favorable views of history and humanity. At a time when most writers were still in the romantic haze of Négritude literature and other affirmational styles of writing, Sembène published a text about the darkness of alienation. Yes, some African peoples in the wake of independence were able to find strength in their africanity, but many were still left yearning for assimilation. Tribal Scars, the larger text that the story of Diouana is a part of, marks Sembène’s shift from colonial to post-colonial writing. In conjunction with attacking lingering cultural hierarchies from the recent colonial era, Sembène attempts to make foray into addressing gender hierarchies as well in La Noire de... Despite not prescribing to individualist thought as a Marxist, Sembène recognizes that within his society women are marginalized for their gender in ways that men are not. Gender does add another layer of oppression to Diouana’s life. This is why the title of the story is La Noire de... rather than The Tragedy of Diouana. To those around her in France, Diouana is simply a nameless black girl. Once she is gone, yet another black girl will come to take her job. For Sembène, Diouana is symbolic of all black girls whose desire for transformation leaves them vulnerable to emotional abuse.

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167 Murphy, 126-132.
168 Ibid., 50.
Salie = Fatou?

“Exile is my [Salie] geographical suicide. Stripped of my history, I am drawn to foreign lands because they don’t judge me according to errors of my fate, but for what I’ve chosen to be.”- Fatou Diome, *The Belly of the Atlantic*.169

Literary critics of *The Belly of the Atlantic* draw parallels between the character of Salie and Fatou Diome. Diome has never affirmed or denied the suggestion that this text is in fact semi-autobiographical. Nevertheless, the shared life experiences and character traits between Salie and Diome cannot be ignored. Born in 1968 to a Serer, Fatou Diome is from the Senegalese island of Niodior, as her protagonist. Like Salie, Diome was raised by her grandparents, has a younger brother, and she was married to a French man before moving to Strasbourg in 1994. Following her divorce in 1996, Diome began her formal education and writing career while supporting her by working as a maid. *The Belly of the Atlantic* was her second publication after a book of short stories, *La Préférence Nationale*, was published by Présence Africaine in 2001. Salie is the main character of *La Préférence Nationale*, but this work chronicles her life in France. Currently, Fatou Diome is completing her doctorate in French Language and Literature at the University of Strasbour. The title of her doctoral thesis is: *Le Voyage, les échanges et la formation dans l'œuvre littéraire et cinématographique d’Ousmane Sembène*.170

It could be seen as ironic that Diome is writing her doctoral work on Ousmane Sembène, but this is hardly surprising. Diome situates her writing in a genealogy of Francophone literature that explores bilateral cultural relations between Senegal and France. As discussed in chapter 2, Sembène was one of the first Senegalese writers to challenge what he saw as an unbalanced flow of desire between Senegal and France. With *The Belly of the Atlantic*, Diome inscribes herself into a long genealogy of writers. As an admirer of Sembène’s work, Diome writes of

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169 Diome, 161.
170 Mbouguen.
contemporary struggles with mental colonization acutely aware of the intellectual foundation Sembène has paved for Senegalese writers. In The Belly of the Atlantic Diome assumes Sembène’s call for creative peoples to “live within [their] society and say what goes wrong within [their] society.” 171

Rather than writing a cautionary of immigration like Sembène, Diome writes a novel that calls for her readers to recalibrate their dreams. In this updated account of mental colonization, Diome tries to imagine alternatives to the end of suicide that has plagued her community since the era of Diouana. Forty years after independence, Senegalese people who immigrate to France legally can live happy lives, when their dreams are grounded in reality. If people immigrate illegally and hope to magically become successful in France, they have an excruciatingly difficult road ahead of them. Many of these migrants will be swallowed in the belly of the Atlantic. In order to keep one’s life on dry land, migrants should not hope to be the exception to the rule. Figures like Maldini in the text, as well as Blaise Diagne and Léopold Sédar Senghor in history, are famous because in the shadow of their light lay many stories of failure. Salie is aware that although she has carved a life for herself in France, there are many women just like her who have failed to do the same. Rather than help Madické come to France where she knows the chances of failure are high, Salie creates an alternative future where Madické can find sustainable success.

Both Ousmane Sembène and Fatou Diome have left their marks on the Senegalese literary history. Ousmane Sembène is a pillar of Senegalese literature and film, while Diome has secured her place as a voice of her generation. Sembène, the militant artist, had a career punctuated with controversy over his representations of Senegalese history and culture. Many

171 Pfaff.”The Uniqueness of Ousmane Sembènes Cinemas”.19.
viewers, including Léopold Sédar Senghor, have taken issue with the unrelenting nature of his social statements. However, the brash quality of his creative messages solidified his place in history. Adopting the mission of Aimé Césaire’s creative mission, Sembène wanted to be the voice of those without a voice: “Ma bouche sera la bouche des malheurs qui n’ont point de bouche,” as Césaire wrote.172 After his death in 2007, the strength of Sembène’s artistic militancy prevails. Diome, a writer who has been greatly influenced by Sembène, sets out to not only expose the problems of her society but offer solutions. Diome’s 21st century solution to the mental colonization that Sembène identifies as all-consuming in 1958 is one of grassroots community improvement that involves ceux qui restent et ceux qui partent.173 If the France a young Senegalese boy or girl dreams of living in does not truly exist, the most logical option should be to make one’s home the place of their dreams.

When considering Diome’s Belly of the Atlantic within a literary trajectory largely defined by the career of Ousmane Sembène and evolution can be identified. Senegalese youth still yearns for transformation in France, and this yearning is directly linked to a colonial mentality that places France as the apex of civilization. What makes Diome’s text unique in this lineage is the fact that she appears as dedicated as Sembène to keep Senegal at the center of its own discourse. Senegal is the proverbial home of all Senegalese people, those who stay and those who leave. Whether a Senegalese man became an evolue or not in the colonial era his home would always be Senegal. Whether Diouana had acclimated to her life in Antibes or not, Senegal would still be her home. Whether Madicke could have built a football career for himself

172 Jacques Chevrier, La Litterature Africaine, (Paris: Librio, 2008), 29. Although both Sembène and Césaire had the best of intentions for being the voices for the voiceless, the air of paternalism in their quests cannot be ignored. Césaire more than Sembène could not lose sight of the privileged position he was in to have his voice heard, and how this privilege could put him at a great distance from comprehending the NEEDS of the voiceless. 173 This is a nod to the title of Diome’s most recent novel Celles Qui Attendent (2010) that chronicles the lives of women who stay behind in Senegal while their clandestine husbands and sons leave for economic opportunities in Europe.
in Europe or not, Senegal would forever be his home. Salie is a trailblazer within this literary trajectory because she never loses sight of her home—of Senegal. Salie remains grounded in her Senegalese home despite the reality that she has constructed a comfortable life for herself in Strasbourg. She will never call herself a French national simply because she has a French citizenship; her identity is grounded in her eternal origins. In a 1995 Interview with David Murphy, Sembène stated: “I don’t have to search for an identity. I’m an African. For me, Africa is the centre of my world.” 174 La Noire de... is the penultimate work of Sembène’s career that adheres to the world view that African peoples can meet a tragic end when trying to place Europe at the center of their world. Aware of the legacy of tragedy, Diome creates a novel that images an alternative existence for migrants in which Africa remains at the center of their identity.

174 Murphy, 169.
Bibliography


