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Reconfiguring Senegalese filmmakers as *Griots*: Identity, migration and authorship practice

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Abstract

This article aims to designate the notion of 'Griot' *– the oral transmitter of history in West African cultures to the eclectic filmmakers from the post-independence period of Francophone Senegal who utilized film as an instrument to reassemble their nation's lost image and carve an independent national identity that seeks liberation from the remnants of French imperial rule. Figuratively performing as* Griots *in the postcolonial film corpus, directors Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty and Mati Diop fabricated an original filmic language that represents the cultural milieu of Senegal after the French colonialism. In these directorial endeavours, the incorporation of narration elements plays a pivotal role in simultaneously manufacturing the agencies of Senegalese people and accelerating the continuum of decolonization in the country's visual domain. Including the historical framework of Senegal's cinema and illustrating the analogy between* Griots *and these filmmakers, this research will take a closer look at the corresponding postcolonial narratives of Ousmane Sembène's* La Noire de... *(1966), Djibril Diop Mambéty's* Touki Bouki *(1973) and Mati Diop's* Atlantics *(2019) in an effort to unravel their tumultuous identity politics, critiques of (neo)colonialism and filmmakers' role as national raconteurs.*

Keywords

postcolonialism
national identity
migration
Senegalese cinema
African directors
France
narrative theory
Griots

Résumé

Cet article vise à dénoter la notion de 'Griot', le transmetteur oral de l'histoire dans les cultures ouest-africaines, aux cinéastes éclectiques de la période post-indépendance du Sénégal francophone qui, ont utilisé le cinéma comme un instrument pour reconstruire l'image perdue de leur nation et se tailler une identité nationale indépendant visant à se libérer des vestiges de la domination impériale française. En jouant métaphoriquement un rôle de Griots dans le corpus cinématographique postcolonial; Les réalisateurs Ousmane Sembène, Djibril Diop Mambéty et Mati Diop ont créé un langage cinématographique original qui représente le milieu culturel du Sénégal après la periode colonialiste française. Dans leurs efforts de mise en scène, l'incorporation d'éléments narratifs joue un

rôle central aussi bien pour montrer l'agencement des populations sénégaises que le processus de décolonisation dans le domaine visuel du pays. Comprenant le cadre historique du cinéma sénégalais et illustrant l'analogie entre les Griots et ces cinéastes; cette recherche examinera de plus près les récits postcoloniaux comme La Noire de… *(1966) d'Ousmane Sembène,* Touki Bouki *(1973) de Djibril Diop Mambéty et* Atlantics *de Mati Diop (2019) dans le but de démêler leurs politiques identitaires tumultueuses, les critiques du (néo)colonialisme et le rôle des cinéastes comme conteurs nationaux.*

Introduction

Being one of the countries of the West African region, Senegal was subjected to colonization by the French Empire starting from 1848 to its eventual independence in 1960. Even though the French had its domineering power over the continent of Africa and particularly on Senegal since the mid-centuries, the official colonial towns in Dakar and Gorée were established in the nineteenth century by the French Second Republic under the administration of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. From slave trades to digging gold mines and exploiting the rich African land, France had several objectives to justify their colonial activities in Senegal. In order to legitimize these blatant colonial complicities, the French authorities frequently framed African people as uncivilized and primitive beings who desperately need western civilization to fulfil their potential and reach economic welfare.

The historical process of legitimizing the exploitation and colonization of Africa constituted a major discourse regarding the positioning of African people as primitive beings, bound to be colonized by the imperial West, both economically and culturally. Political philosopher Frantz Fanon argues that language serves as a key tool for the colonial forces to destroy a certain culture and dehumanize native people by degrading them to animals (1963: 42). The French Empire, as the governing power of Senegal, deliberately used social mechanisms such as language to assimilate the African cultures and eradicate the 'senses of self-hood' of the African people. Kenyan writer and academic Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o notes that

> [t]he biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism against that collective defiance [of the colonized] is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities, and ultimately in themselves.
>
> (1997: 3)

This notion of 'cultural bomb' Thiong'o discusses, therefore, plays an essential role to manufacture the power dynamics between the colonizer and the colonized as well as functions as the eraser of the natives' identities and cultures. Following Fanon's arguments on the dehumanizing aspects of imperialism, Edward Said combined Michel Foucault's conceptualizations of knowledge and power with Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, suggesting a discursive mechanism to approach and analyse ideological structures of the West (1978: 7). Said's thinking on the relationship between West and East, therefore, can be borrowed here to understand how

the cinematic medium become a key element to construct West's superiority on representational grounds.

In the context of the Senegal and the West African region, the French colonial state attempted to control the tools of representation to perpetuate hegemonic ideals over its colonies throughout several decades. Edward Said further argues that 'nations themselves are narrations. The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them' (1994: 11). Thus, forming the dominant regime of representation was the key element in French imperial rule to prevent the colonized to have an agency, a sense of community, a liberated African identity and, most importantly, a national narrative. For this reason, the film was the necessary medium to recreate this colonial rhetoric, assimilate local cultures, paint western civilization as the ideal and maintain the dominant colonial ideology in the colonized people's consciousness.

The effects of colonialism in the cinematic practice

When it comes to constructing a national image, the French imperial state realized the importance of cinema way earlier than most of the other colonizing forces in the world. In order to disseminate that very national image and convey the French values and culture, cinema became the most viable medium for the French authorities (Harris and Ezra 2000: 2–3). The cinema arrived in Dakar, Senegal, around the first years of the twentieth century along with Christian missionaries with films and projectors to show early French films of the time. However, in that particular era, filmmaking was not seen as a strategic colonial apparatus to mobilize audiences and reinforce cultural hegemony (Ukadike 1994: 30–31). In fact, only the French audiences living in the colonies were able to see these films for their entertainment. Scholar James E. Genova notes that

> [t]hose who made films about Africa and Africans did so within a conceptual universe that already carried centuries-old tropes of the 'primitive native'. The images of Africans produced by non-African filmmakers and projected almost entirely to audiences outside the continent participated in an extant hegemonic representational environment in which they added their own inflections but did not offer any ruptures with the past.
>
> (2013: 24–25)

Cinema at that time was part of the colonial regime as solely an organ rather than a tool to build hegemonic power over the colonized. The realization of cinema as an ideological tool occurred when the African audiences were allowed to be admitted to movie theatres and started to distribute films around 1920s. By the 1930s, the colonial officials were complaining to the French imperial state regarding the changing demographic of the film audiences and the ongoing actions of Africans distributing and purchasing films (Guise 1932). Minor movements and alterations that were taking place in the film-viewing practices of the colonies therefore forced the imperial apparatus to take action.

In 1934, France imperial state issued the Laval Decree and set the pattern of film politics that France conducted until the independence of its colonies (Genova 2013: 27). This decree, named after Pierre Laval, a colonial minister and a future Nazi official, was the first legitimate intervention of French colonialism in the African cinema. Giving the utmost power to the colonial state, the decree legitimized the censorship and made France in charge of distribution, production and the audiences of the films to be shown in Africa. Concluding his argument, Genova claims that once the Africans entered the cinematic field, colonial state immediately sought to regulate film industry in favour of the French imperial rule and to prevent the emergence of anti-colonial struggles in West Africa, particularly in Senegal (2013: 28).

Film scholar Nick Browne suggests that 'both the narrator and the spectator are constitutive of the film's discourse' (1976: 26–38). The filmmaker builds a narrative, and the viewer brings their own vision, intellectual capacity and understandings to shape the final outcome of that particular narrative. It can be said that what the French imperial rule tried to establish was reminiscent to that of Browne's argument. They meticulously controlled, filtered and monitored the relationship between the film and the African audience via gatekeeping and censorship. The issuance of Laval Decree, therefore, was an effective strategy on preventing the anti-colonial awakenings and postponing the cultural and cinematic developments in Africa.

The liberation of France after the Second World War opened further debates surrounding the film activities in the colonial states. Due to the turbulence and the damages of the Second World War, France was not paying enough attention to its dominant strategies in the colonies. In the meantime, the national consciousness among the African nations was on the rise and the anti-colonial movements were surging. In order to reclaim its authority, to repair the metropolitan economy and to stop the ongoing momentum of liberation in the colonies, France regulated its interventions in the cultural fields of Africa. Unlike the early years, France's post-war politics on the African film production was much more progressive in terms of representation. Despite controlling the cinematic field and monopolizing the distributions, both Genova and Manthia Diawara argue that representing 'positive images' of African people was the main aspect of the newly regulated film politics of France in the colonies after the Second World War (Genova 2013; Diawara 1992). Since representing African people as primitive showcased their own failure in the so-called colonial mission, French authorities approached cinema as a method of rebuilding the 'saviour' image of colonialism as well as the political sovereignty of France.

Early developments in the postcolonial films

The proclamation of Laval Decree and the constant regulations concerning the African involvement in the creative field by the colonialist regime have hindered the film developments in Senegal for decades. Many filmmakers and cultural activists seek alternative forms of expressing themselves under the French imperial state. Towards the end of the colonial rule in the West African region, a cultural activist, philosopher and filmmaker

named Paulin Soumanou Vieyra emerged as a key figure in the anti-colonial movement demanding 'a cinema in the service of people, representing the true face of Africa' (2004: 71). Vieyra paved the way for the emerging cinema industrial complex to turn into an advantage of the native people and articulated a counterhegemonic film politics that was necessary to rebuild Africa's own identity.

Following the lead of Vieyra, filmmakers and cultural activists in West Africa gathered around to establish Groupe Afrique de Cinema (GAC), an organization hoping to make films regarding the genuine struggles of the African people living in the colonies. However, the French imperial state did not grant the permission to make films in the West African region (Genova 2013: 81). Resisting the limitations and material conditions caused by the infamous Laval Decree, Vieyra and a group of determined filmmakers went on to Paris to study cinema and shoot their film on their own. The result was the creation of first film ever directed by a Black African: *Afrique-sur-Seine* (Mélo Kane et al. 1955), a short feature film telling the story of the nostalgias and encounters of African students in Paris (Diawara 1992: 23). Even though the colonialist restrictions forbid Africans to make their first film on their native land, it also caused Paris to be filmed from non-western eyes for the first time through Vieyra's 'anthropological gaze' (Pfaff 1996: 225). The film, therefore, ignited necessary aesthetical debates in film circles and paved the way for the soon-to-be emerging African cinema. Concerning to these achievements by African cineastes, Genova notes:

> The aesthetic innovations of African directors would have only a marginal impact if there was not a concomitant elaboration of the materialist infrastructure through which to distribute the new image-Africa and engage with African audiences in the articulation of their own postcolonial identities.
> (2013: 86)

James Genova argues that economic and materialistic side of the cinema industrial complex was inextricably linked to its representational aspect. Consequently, in the decolonization process in the post-independence period, Paulin Vieyra proposed government officials to take film industry into consideration in order to break free from the remains of colonialist domination and build an independent economy (1958: 115–16). Vieyra and many other cineastes around that time knew that the film's aesthetic qualities and representational politics would not matter unless the promotion and distribution aspects of filmmaking are adopted by the postcolonial African filmmakers. They campaigned for the economic resources to be held solely by Africans to gain full independence and autonomy on every aspect of cinematic medium.

Western and Latin American influences

Since many colonies in West Africa declared independence from France during the 1960s, cultural activists and filmmakers, as previously discussed, discovered cinema's crucial role in reconstructing African identities. This act of nation-building through cinematic lenses caused many scholars to criticize western cinematic influences in African films, claiming that Africa should have its own film language. David Murphy suggests that

African films in the independence era should be approached and analysed within its cultural context, stating that 'Africa and the West are not mutually exclusive worlds that possess their own authentic and unchanging identities; they are hybrid entities that influence and modify each other' (2000: 241).

Unlike many other scholars, James Genova shines a light on the parallels regarding the Third Cinema movement in Latin America and the newly emerging postcolonial cinema in Africa (2013: 92). Teshome Gabriel defines the Third Cinema as 'the cinema of the third world which stands opposed to imperialism and class oppression in all their ramifications and manifestations' (1982: 2). One can connect the similar political and cultural patterns that occurred in these movements regarding its linkages with colonial powers and social liberation. Just like Solanas and Getino's efforts and explorations in the Third Cinema movement, filmmakers from the West African region deployed film as the centre of their cultural activism.

Manthia Diawara, on the other hand, divides certain film forms produced in the independence era into three movements: 'Social Realist', 'Colonial Confrontation' and 'Return-to-the-source' (1992: 141). He argues that each of these film movements was tackling necessary issues in postcolonial African period, ranging from economic and political turmoil (social realist), to history (colonial confrontation), to identity and soul-searching (return-to-the-source). Diawara concludes his argument by claiming that all these diverse approaches in film – excluding return-to-the-source – have either borrowed from or were influenced by European auteur cinema and Third Cinema movements in order to construct its own cinematic language.

Emerging film forms and aesthetics

The first films of the post-independence period in Senegal were produced solely to educate and inform the public regarding the colonial complicities of the French Empire. For this particular reason, those films were overtly didactic and reflected the political tumults of the early independence era (Ukadike 2002: 18). Retaking control of their own image and the uprising sense of nationhood has entailed filmmakers like Ousmane Sembene, Med Hondo and Paulin Vieyra to link cinema with social development. The possibility of decolonizing the mind of the Senegalese people as well as creating counterhegemonic representations of the imperial rule inspired these filmmakers to tell socially responsible stories that were based on African traditions.

> The cinematic language that Sembène, Vieyra, Hondo, Cissé, and other pioneers of West African film embraced was that of docu-fiction derived from the conventions of orature rooted in local cultures [...] It was critical for West African filmmakers to anchor their cinematic language in autochthonous traditions because by so doing their product would be read broadly according to the intentions of the cineaste.
>
> (Genova 2013: 93)

As Genova mentions above, films in the early years of independence were in hybrid form, converging the lines between documentary and fiction, and

were heavily nourished by local cultural elements. In order to transmit their political texts to the targeted audience and forge a new film language, cineastes seek alternative forms to tell their stories and challenge the imperialistic film practices. Directing the camera towards the landscapes, using panoramic visions and the deliberate usage of silence became the characteristic features of their films (2013: 93). Such unique directorial touches not only contributed to the emergence of an African film form but also helped them to reflect the contradictory aspects of postcolonial experiences. Films by these filmmakers, therefore, characterized and catalysed the necessary cinematographic discourse in the independence period (Harrow 2007: 1–2).

Developing alternative methods in the film form inevitably ignited heated debates regarding the aesthetics of African cinema. After the early period of didactic and political films, the new generation of filmmakers emerging in West Africa, particularly in Senegal, returned to the African oral traditions to seek creative autonomy in their art (Ukadike 1994: 92). In search for what the quintessence of African cinema should be, newbie filmmakers tried to absorb religious rituals, spiritual languages and poetic resonances into the postcolonial films. Creating unconventional atmospheres, commemorating the oral history of Africa and applying magical realism, Djibril Diop Mambety's *Touki Bouki* (1973) and Souleiman Cisse's *Yeelen* (1987) mark the first few instances of cinematic exercise regarding the search for 'authentic' aesthetics of West African film (Murphy 2000: 241). These filmmakers managed to subvert conventional film styles and contents as well as methodically tried to fulfil Africa's cinematic potential.

Reconfiguring filmmakers as the *Griots* of the nation

The term *Griot* refers to the oral transmitters of history in West African local cultures. Comprehensively defined by scholar Christopher Miller, the *griots* function as the 'spokespersons and ambassadors, matrimonial go-betweens, genealogists and historians, advisors and court-jesters' who has the utmost importance of transferring their culture to broader audiences (1990: 81). In addition to having the responsibility of preserving knowledge regarding their history, *griots* perform certain rituals and narrate local stories. Genova describes them as the 'living libraries and interpreters of the wisdom contained therein, adapting it to contemporary circumstances' (2013: 16). In the *Black African Cinema*, Ukadike emphasizes the mobilizing force of the *griots*:

> The peripatetic nature of his performance enables him to recount to listeners the history of the entire community. His audience can in turn pass such knowledge on to the others who are not present, in an endless transmission, passing from mothers to sons and daughters, generation to generation.
> (1994: 204)

This further proves that the *griot*'s aims and responsibilities display a paralleling nature with that of the emerging filmmakers in West Africa and in Senegal. Transmitting local stories to native and foreign audiences and showcasing the everyday life of Africans, cineastes in Senegal functioned as *griots* in pursuit of reaching national and transnational audiences.

1. A direct quote from the film *La Noire de…* (1966) where Diouana gives an inner monologue after she decided to kill herself in the bathtub of her French employers' house.

They carried a holy mission of rebuilding the African dignity, identity and culture after the colonial rule ended. The vital role played by many filmmakers and anti-colonial activists, therefore, reinvented the roots of their cultural figures while simultaneously vocalizing a national narrative that encapsulates the postcolonial condition of the Senegalese people. For the scope and purposes of this research, an analysis of Ousmane Sembéne's *La Noire de…* (1966), Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973) and Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019) will be conducted in an effort to unravel their tumultuous identity politics, critiques of (neo)colonialism and filmmakers' role as national raconteurs.

These case studies are all produced after the independence of Senegal and belong to the postcolonial cultural domain of the country. Although each film has its *sui generis* narrative, there are paralleling storylines, patterns and directorial approaches that position these films' stylistic and narrative similarities open to scholarly inquiry. Leaving Senegal behind, experiencing self-alienation in European habitats and class-based conflicts emerge as the central issues that each film's protagonist professedly confronts, questions and endures. United by such narrative patterns, visual motifs and authorship practices, these three films display the remains of colonialism in the Senegalese culture and how the colonized subjectivities are constantly being reminded of the traumatic character of the colonial experience in different settings and periods.

In that regard, cinema as a medium played a prominent role in Senegal's road to decolonization. Emerging as a key tool to construct the dominant regime of representation, cinematic field was seen as a battleground to be conquered for both the French imperial rule and the anti-colonial West African cineastes. Unflinchingly challenging France's imperial power, activists and filmmakers like Paulin Soumaonu Vieyra and Ousmane Sembéne implemented their own film politics to gain access to the economic resources of filmmaking. Showcasing the constant exploitations done by the French imperial rule through their postcolonial films, cineastes tried to mobilize West African people to liberate their minds, identities and culture from the remains of colonialism. These filmmakers in the West African region, therefore, developed certain film forms and aesthetics based on African culture and oral traditions in order to seek creative and economic autonomy to rebuild their nations.

Vocalization of a suicide: *La Noire de…* (1966)

> Never will I be a slave. I did not come here for the apron or the money. Never will she see me again. Never will she scold me again. Never again Diouana. Never will I see them again.
>
> (*La Noire de…*, Sembéne 1966[1])

Pioneering Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembéne's first feature, film *La Noire de…* (1966), holds the distinction of being one of the first postcolonial films produced not just in Senegal but also in the history of world cinema. The film tells the story of an ill-fated postcolonial subject, Diouana, a Senegalese maid who migrates to Antibes, France, in order to serve her White employers in a domestic household. Even though she

embarks on this journey searching for a better life in France, the only thing Diouana finds is modernized enslavement, hostility and discrimination, which lead to her ultimate self-destruction. The French title *La Noire de*, which translates into English as 'the Black girl of' or 'the Black girl from', therefore indicates the entire premise of Sembéne's film. It is a story of the colonial subjugation of a Senegalese woman, who is unable to materialize her dreams, feel a cultural belonging and come to terms with her identity because of the excessive amount of self-alienation she experiences in a postcolonial setting. Diouana's inability and disobedience to submit herself as the 'inferior' African subject, in that sense, manifests itself as a struggle about the very notions of belonging and identity in the narrative.

Consciously drawing a portrait of the post-independence period of both Senegal and France, the film opens with a panoramic vision of Antibes, where Diouana gets off the ship and is picked up by her employer, waiting for her arrival in the port. By preferring such wide angles that reflect the city ardently, Sembéne not only introduces the European setting of the film but also contextualizes what the protagonist's dreams are made of. Diouana's gaze at the city through the car window or her hesitant yet hopeful glance at the employer's apartment at the beginning of the film, therefore, insinuates the perception of France as the 'foreign ideal' in the postcolonial subject's mind (Dima 2014: 62).

This ideological positioning of France as the empire of civilization is supported and bolstered up even more by the constant imagery of the modern architectural planning, the French natives wandering around and people enjoying the bright city ambience in the beginning sequence of the film. 'C'est beau la France',[2] says Monsieur to Diouana, perpetuating that very ideal in her mind. Thus, it becomes apparent in her first days in France that Diouana wants to embody the western lifestyle and beauty standards to resemble and get accepted by the French people (Kalisa 2009: 61). For instance, she often reads French magazines, covered with the images of White European women, representing a western beauty ideal. Instead of wearing African clothing and displaying her natural hair in the house, Diouana wears the gown Madame gave her and prefers to put a straight-haired wig on. According to Homi K. Bhabha, 'mimicry' is an act of imitating the colonizers, exercised mainly by colonized subjects (1984: 126). Although this act can be done as a parody of the imperial figures, it can also be a way for the colonized subject to replicate and perform colonial powers and use it in their favour, as a 'camouflage'. Thus, Diouana does these things not only to blend in but also to mimic that very westernized outlook of the *Metropolé*.

Soon after her arrival at Antibes, Diouana's infatuation with glamour and chic outfits disturb the employers, which eventually leads Madame to buy an apron for Diouana to make her wear and look more like a 'maid'. The authoritarian control over her appearance, Madame's frequent scolding and the overbearing amount of domestic work entrap Diouana in the confinements of the apartment. 'Is France this dark hole?', she asks to herself, looking through the window in the dead of night, having been unable to leave the house even for once. Consequently, what was once a promised land of opportunities and better living conditions is now turned into a prison cell that suffocates and rips off her agency. This imprisonment

2. Translates to English as: 'It's a lovely country, France!'

that Diouana is facing manifests itself in the narrative through the visual usage of the black and white dichotomy. From the stripes in the floor of her room, to the design of her dress and to the overall usage of black and white contrast in the cinematographic lighting, Sembéne deliberately signals the racial segregation and imprisonment that Diouana has found in France (Dima 2014: 64).

David Bordwell defines Fabula as a pattern 'in which the perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences' (1985: 50). In this context, France as a country can be located as the Fabula in the narrative of *La Noire de*.... Since Diouana is trapped in the apartment, unable to leave and experience this foreign land, France never really becomes materially present in Diouana's life and the narrative of the film. It merely functions as an urban imagery and a concrete space of opportunity and civilization that the postcolonial Senegalese subject is vehemently excluded. Instead of becoming a place for Diouana to actualize her dreams, this 'myth' of France, therefore, becomes the place where Diouana is exposed to domestic neo-slavery (Calhoun 2020: 105) that leads her to commit suicide.

Although the film is an adaptation of Ousmane Sembéne's own short story, while adapting to the big screen, he decided to change how the suicidal narrative unfolds in the film version of *La Noire de*.... In the novella, the suicide of Diouana is recounted through the French police reports that reflect the event mainly through a French perspective (Sembéne 1962). In the film version, however, the suicide is told through the internal diegetic voice-over of Diouana, not only providing spectators with an intimate look at her state of mind and eventual self-destruction but also vocalizing a form of anti-colonial awakening on the part of the postcolonial subject (Virtue 2014).

Unlike the novella in which a third-person narrator is telling the story of Diouana, Sembéne's strategic intervention in the film to posit Diouana as the narrator of her own story enables the viewer to envision her gradual mental ravaging and provides a voice to the voiceless and mutilated postcolonial subject. The employment of this narrative voice also makes an impeccable contrast in the film because Diouana is completely silent around her employers yet quite articulate in the voice-over. Sarah Kozloff (1988) stresses that the utilization of first-person narrators in fiction films affects the spectators' experience by increasing the identification process, prompting nostalgia and emphasizing the subjectivity of the narrative. Peter Verstraten (2009) also defines the narrator in the fiction films as the commentator and mediator between the audio and visual formulations. Sembéne, in this context, reframes *La Noire de*... by making Diouana the narrator of her own story and the commentator of her state of mind. By directly addressing the viewers through a first-person narrator, Sembéne not only constructs a space of transmission for the struggles of the postcolonial subject but also makes Diouana the *griot* of this African narrative to convey her encounters and conflicts in Europe in the diegesis of the film.

The amalgamation of the despising attitudes, racially insensitive behaviours and the frequent contempt displayed by the French employers towards Diouana prompts her to experience self-alienation, detachment and – in Frantz Fanon's terms – dehumanization of the 'Other' (1963: 42). For instance, when a dinner guest tries to kiss her and mitigates the act as an

innocent gesture to experience what it feels like to kiss a *négresse* woman, or when another guest points at her lack of command of the French language, claiming that she must understand her employers instinctively 'like an animal', Diouana comes to the realization that she is being reduced to an exotic object on display in the French household rather than an autonomous subject. Having been otherized and constantly reminded of her racial, social and cultural difference and 'inferiority' by the European employers, Diouana's suicide thus presents itself in the narrative as a form of anti-colonial resistance. Regarding her self-silencing in the bathtub and the first-person narrator's potential to enable an anti-colonial revolt, Rachael Langford illustrates:

> Diouana chooses to present herself to the white world solely as an indelible and unadministrable 'foreign body', as a strategy of resistance. This choice of Diouana's constitutes an ironic play on the fear and loathing of African interiority that lies at the heart of all the colonial discourses infantilising, bestialising or romanticizing Africans.
>
> (2001: 15)

Therefore, Diouana's suicide derives from a rebellious attitude of the post-colonial subject to reclaim her body and identity. It is also possible to read her motives in relation to losing the notion of belonging. Since she never really deployed a national ideal pertaining to Senegal, Diouana experiences two distinct losses: one is being removed from her country of origin, and the other is the loss of the French ideal, which she never really owned in the first place (Dima 2014). Besides the concept of belonging, Doyle Calhoun further discusses that the maid's suicide may also have derived from a gendered feeling of entrapment between the two repressive regimes that corners, in Gayatri Spivak's terms, the 'subaltern' female subject (2020: 109). On the one hand, the French employers are subjecting her to neo-colonial enslavement in France; on the other hand, her boyfriend in Senegal is waiting for her return to marry her – in other words, another form of domestic subjugation that the female subject is positioned to face with. In that sense, Diouana's suicide and self-silencing becomes an act of simultaneous rejection of both the enslavement asserted by the French employers and the domestic servitude proposed by her lover in Senegal.

Throughout the entire narrative, an African mask emerges as a leitmotif and a visual cue that bears cultural allegory regarding the colonial past between Senegal and France. In the beginning, Diouana takes the mask from her brother to give her European employers as a present. The French couple receives the gift delightedly, saying 'it's very authentic' and putting it on the wall. This exchange of dialogue represents the ideological implications of how the westerners' refusal to recognize African's subjectivities and how they see African cultural elements in degrading fashion that bears no ethical obligations and that can be commoditized solely as art objects to decorate their houses (Langford 2001). Mask, in addition to these functions, is the mere element in the French household that connects Diouana to her African identity. For this very reason, before her eventual suicide, Diouana tries to reclaim the possession of the mask, leading to a psychical fight with Madame. This strife insinuates even more that the mask does not function

solely as an object in the film; it is the bearer of a symbolic power that both the colonizer and the colonized wage war against each other to conquer it.

The ending scene of the film is Monsieur bringing the mask, Diouana's belongings and her salary back to Senegal. After Diouana's mother refused to accept his money, Monsieur heads back to his car. As he walks into the slums of Dakar, he is followed by Diouana's younger brother, wearing the mask. Since the mask embodies the colonial and neo-colonial relations of Europe and Africa, this scene in particular functions as an allegory that even after Diouana's death, the Monsieur, who represents Europe in a bigger scope, will always be followed and haunted by their past and current colonial complicities. The mask motif that is strategically inserted into the narrative by Sembéne, furthermore, functions to accentuate how even after the colonialism's official end, its continues to harm the African nations. The final image where the brother takes off the mask and looks directly to the camera, thus, shatters the cinematic illusion for the viewer and unmasks this 'new face' of (neo)colonialism (Virtue 2014), inviting spectators to look at the current state of Ousmane Sembéne's nation.

To epitomize, *La Noire de...* is a postcolonial cinematic exercise of an African filmmaker to formulate a national image after Senegal's independence, question the notion of foreignness abroad and, most importantly, reflect the continuous nature of French imperialism in Senegalese's subjects' mental states. To convey its messages, Sembéne deploys narrative methods such as first-person narrator, voice-overs and visual motifs that encapsulate and insert both the ideological implications and psychological ramifications of neo-colonialism into the narrative structure of the film.

Tracing Paris in Joséphine Baker's voice: *Touki Bouki* (1973)

> France? Nothing good comes from it.
>
> (Diop Mambéty 1973)[3]

Standing out from the postcolonial film canon and his contemporaries in the West African region, Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* (1973) takes place in the aftermath of Senegal's independence and tells the story of young Senegalese lovers, Mory and Anta, in pursuit of leaving their country behind and moving to Paris. Narratively speaking, the film continues the trend of African subjects in search of a better life overseas, particularly in the former 'motherland' of the West African region. However, Mambéty's film is stylistically innovative in nature and deliberately separates itself from the conventional examples of filmmaking in postcolonial Africa. Demonstrating the coexisting patterns of materialistic and spiritualistic aspects of post-independence life in Senegal, Mambéty constructs a filmic language that incorporates both western avant-garde aesthetics and African oral traditions (Thackway 2003). When asked about his filmic language and style by the scholar Frank Ukadike, Mambéty himself replied in an interview that 'cinema must be reinvented, reinvented each time, and whoever ventures into cinema also has a share in its reinvention' (2002: 126). In regard to the cinematic intentions of Mambéty that he gets to exercise in *Touki Bouki*, Vlad Dima argues:

3. A quote from *Touki Bouki* (1973) where Anta's mother and her customer engage in a dialogue and the customer says that in regard to the French goods they are selling.

> Mambety's film is quintessentially African in its form and more specifically Senegalese; but given that more than a hint of European cinema runs through it, *Touki Bouki* is an example of the successful blending of African and European storytelling techniques.
>
> (2017: 44)

We can infer that Mambéty prefers to act as a modern-day *griot* to convey his story due to the rich and unique ways of storytelling formats that this African cultural figure offers. Instead of simply adopting the western methods of filmmaking, Mambéty merges African cultural elements with cinematic conventions to build his narrative. Consequently, the dream-like, non-linear narrative structure of the film resembles how the *griots* in Africa choose to perform and transmit their stories (Barlet 1996). Mambéty's approach and insistence to form an African cinematic language is, therefore, become a crucial matter to unravel the narrative patterns in the postcolonial context of *Touki Bouki*.

Hamid Naficy (2001) situates accented cinemas in relation to the individuals, nationalities, identities and with the experience of deterritorialization itself, claiming that such cinemas represent the notion of exile through the private stories of individuals and the collective experiences of nations. Lindiwe Dovey further notes that exile and alienation that is experienced by postcolonial subjects both at home and abroad can be derived from the neo-colonial institutions as well as the continuing precolonial traditions of African countries (2009: 59). Senegal's struggles with neo-colonialism and the turbulence of political and economic conditions in the 1970s, therefore, contextualize the younger generation's discontent with their nation. In this way, the individual detachment experienced by Mory and Anta not only underpins their quest for a better life in France but also articulates the dissatisfaction of a younger Senegalese generation in a larger scope.

Vlad Dima (2017) illustrates Mory as a postcolonial and hybrid hero who is struggling to come to terms with his identity. On a traditional note, he is very much connected to the Senegalese land and enjoys being a cowherd; contrary to that, his passion for the motorcycle signals a modernist side of him. Therefore, the motorcycle in the film in which Mory and Anta start their quest reveals itself as a visual motif that implies the notion of hybridity. Since Mory put an ox skull on top of it, the vehicle appears as a hybrid creature and visually signifies how both of the protagonists oscillate between the dichotomies of modernity and tradition in the post-independence stage of Senegal. By putting this visual motif in the film, Mambéty not only forges a connection with African culture but also, in David Murphy's terms, narrates 'a tale of modern Africa, complete with motorbikes, motorways, and machinery' (2000: 243).

France, once again in this film, emerges as a place for the postcolonial subjects to escape from the banality of their lives in Senegal. Unlike Sembéne's film *La Noire de…* that takes place in France even though the Senegalese protagonist Diouana was completely excluded, Mambéty's film *Touki Bouki* does not feature France at all. France as a filmic location is never materially present in the narrative, only appears as a dreamy land and functions solely in the imaginations of Mory and Anta as a myth that offers better life conditions. As previously exemplified in *La*

Noire de through Bordwell's terms, France can be situated in the Fabula in *Touki Bouki* as well. In order to locate its place in the Fabula and represent the idealization of the former *Metropolé* by the protagonists, unlike Sembéne's usage of the first-person narrator, Mambéty prefers to utilize a non-diegetic song in the narrative, 'Paris, Paris, Paris' sung by famous French singer Joséphine Baker. He juxtaposes Baker's lyrics where she proclaims Paris as 'a paradise on earth', simultaneously displaying the scattered images of the barren wilderness of Sahelian Senegal to emphasize protagonists' perceptions of the country and its 'undesirable' outlook. On the incorporation of Baker's song, Alexander Fisher articulates: 'Mambéty completely reconfigures the song, extracting the first two lines of Baker's extended refrain and reducing it to a repetitive motif, thereby suggesting the illusory nature of its subject' (2019: 8). The deliberate choice of using Baker's music as a non-diegetic element, thus, functions to accentuate the protagonists' dreams towards Paris. Since the song offers a fantasy, corresponding to that of Mory and Anta's fantasy to leave Senegal, its lyrics repeatedly summon them to move to the capital of France (Dima 2017).

The final act of the film takes place in the port where Mory and Anta separate as Mory chooses to stay in Senegal and Anta gets on the Ancerville ship to leave. Mory runs back to his motorcycle, a symbolic representation of his bond with the land, and Anta is seen all by herself, isolated in the ship, waiting to leave. Neither Mory's radical decision to stay nor Anta's departure guarantees them a better life. Mory is once again trapped within the confinements of the land he has been so keen on to escape, meanwhile Anta is on her way to a foreign country, stepping into a state of uncertainty. In addition to this ambiguity, the Ancerville ship that carries Anta to France has once transferred another Senegalese immigrant, Diouana of Ousmane Sembéne's *La Noire de…* (1966).[4] Therefore, the ship functions in the narrative as a visual and intertextual signifier that turns the notion of immigration into neo-colonial slavery for the Senegalese female subjects in France. What can be eventually inferred is that both of these protagonists' opposing choices, whether it is staying vs. leaving, tradition vs. modernity, or Africa vs. Europe, may result in similarly unsettling outcomes (Bonin 2018).

Although Mory's commitment to his native country never really promises him prosperity and his path is as ambiguous as Anta's, his refusal to leave Senegal at the end of the film can bear the political stance of the director Mambéty himself. Dovey describes the exilic and diasporic acts in the postcolonial narratives as 'an ironic loop, a one-way conversation, and a vicious circle' that brings no benefits to the postcolonial subjects (2009: 70). In this sense, Mambéty's decision to make at least one of his protagonists stay in Senegal can be read as a critique of this exilic mobility and narrative pattern. It is also possible to see it in a much more gendered way since Mambéty attributes the postcolonial male subject a sense of connection to his land and lets the female subject leave her country deluded by the myth of France. These differences in gender representation resemble the one in Sembéne's *La Noire de…* where Diouana leaves and her lover remains, forming a narrative trend in early Senegalese cinema.

4. Kate Bonin, in her article 'Dreams of Dakar, 1973: Reading Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo's "El sueño" with Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Touki Bouki*' (2018), forges the ship's connection between two films and gives further detail about the ship's history.

Possessive ghosts, murmuring ocean: *Atlantics* (2019)

> How beautiful you are.
> I saw you in the enormous wave which consumed us.
> All I saw was your eyes and your tears.
> I felt your weeping dragging me to the shore.
> Your eyes never left me.
>
> (Diop 2019)[5]

5. See *Atlantics* (2019). Souleiman's ghost reads this poem in a voice-over sequence to Ada in which he professes what has happened in the ocean.

Tackling similar themes with two previously analysed films, Mati Diop in *Atlantics* offers her spectators a timely look at the postcolonial subjectivities living in contemporary Senegal. Adapted from Diop's own short film *Atlantiques* (2009), the film takes place along the Atlantic coast and tells the story of Ada, a 17-year-old Senegalese girl separated from her lover, Souleiman, who works in the construction of a futuristic and a looming tower located in the suburbs of Dakar. Having been forced to work without a wage for three months by their exploitative boss, Souleiman and his other unpaid co-workers decide to seek a better future overseas, which results in tragedy. Although the film, on the surface level, presents itself as a love story between Ada and Souleiman, it turns into a political commentary ordained with mysticism and horror.

This tale of immigration and African refugees becomes not only a cinematic exercise of Mati Diop's search for a postcolonial African identity but also morphs into the manifestations of neo-colonialism and corruption that Africa is currently dealing with. Its representation of the immigrants and stylistic approach to convey their devastating journey to the Atlantic Ocean also differs from its contemporaries. Instead of the stark realism of a documentary aesthetic that many directors tend to apply, Diop upends this refugee narrative with the unexpected inclusion of horror elements and African mysticism. Besides these narrative and stylistic distinctions, unlike Sembène and Mambéty's films, Diop replaces the European ideal of France with Spain. Existing solely hypothetically for Senegalese people, Spain, in Hannah Giorgis' (2019) words, is 'an abstraction meant to hold workers' hopes and frustrations'. It can be inferred that European locations repeatedly construct the Fabula of Senegalese films. Never being able to materialize itself in these narratives, Europe represents an unattainable destination for the African subjects.

The film stars with the point of view of Souleiman, endeavouring to vocalize the exploitation of workers in the construction of Meuiza Tower. He, then, meets Ada in the city and they kiss at the beach against the ocean. In this intimate moment, Ada utters 'you are just watching the ocean' to Souleiman, which not only insinuates his eventual departure overseas but also shifts the narrative focus to Ada, who remains in Dakar, Senegal. Although this change in the focus provides Ada's agency to dominate and embellish, Souleiman's presence continues to haunt the narrative through supernatural means. Consequently, Souleiman and other workers return to the city as ghosts, possessing the bodies of the women they left behind to seek justice from their corrupted boss. By implementing horror genre conventions and orchestrating Fatima Al Qadiri's eerie score, Diop creates a

change in the atmosphere and the narrative of the film to introduce these otherworldly components.

The corruption that is being exposed in the narrative through the portrayal of the Senegalese boss echoes the aforementioned notion of neo-colonialism. Even after the independence of many countries, this notion discloses itself in various forms and narratives; in the case of *Atlantics*, a formerly colonized Senegalese bourgeoisie acts like the colonizing Europeans, oppressing and exploiting African subjects. In the postcolonial context, Frantz Fanon introduces the term 'collective catharsis' describing it as 'a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released' (1967: 112) and further suggests that violence can be an efficient tool to decolonize the colonized people's subjectivity to reclaim their identity, power and political authority (1963: 250). Therefore, violent attacks performed by the ghosts, from breaking into the boss' house to setting the city on fire and terrorizing the police force, present itself not only as a class-based uprising but also as a collective effort to get rid of the neo-colonial complicities and its traumatic character. Hence Mati Diop as a modern-day *griot* reveals the political unsaid of this postcolonial narrative through the haunting incorporation of the ghosts while meticulously transmitting a mystical love story that reinvents and reforms the subjectivity of its protagonist, Ada.

In the short film version of *Atlantics*, one of the Senegalese men who pursue a better life overseas through immigrating in a boat defines the ocean as a space of utmost opportunities 'that lacks the branches to hold onto'.[6] This definition appropriately encapsulates how Diop stages the presence of the ocean in the narrative of her film: tempting yet extremely dangerous. Patricia Pisters stresses that the ocean as a narrative agent in *Atlantics* enfolds a particular immigration story from the countless collection of other stories that its enormous volume absorbs (2020: 177). For this reason, Mati Diop manifests ocean both as an evocative visual leitmotif and as a character of its own that vocalizes Ada and Souleiman's agencies through the usage of voice-overs.

The ocean functions as a leitmotif because its alluring and hypnotic nature constantly invites Senegalese subjects to discover the seemingly eternal opportunities it offers. Diop, thereof, captures the enthralling sound and imagery of the waves accordingly and furnishes the narrative with this omniscient and magnetic presence by the ocean. In this sense, it is possible to read this leitmotif as a social allegory since the Atlantic Ocean bears historical connotations for Africans (Enzerink 2021). The Island of Gorée,[7] a place located near Dakar, is one of the first known destinations where the slave trade has begun, and the Atlantic Ocean itself was a road to this slavery, servitude and subjugation. Many Africans, whether they were forced to migrate or sold for slavery, either committed suicide by jumping off the ships or were thrown out by the colonial officials into the sea as a punishment. The Atlantic Ocean, in consequence, represents the memory of such collective tragedy for African subjectivities. For this very reason, the positioning of the ocean as a leitmotif in the narrative unravels itself as a social stimulus and is inextricably linked to the historical trauma experienced by the Senegalese people.

6. See *Atlantiques* (2009, dir. Mati Diop).

7. The Island of Goréé is one of the places included in the World Heritage List by the UNESCO.

Diop gives the ocean a deliberate agency and lets it wander in the narrative almost like a ghost, to haunt the characters and the spectators. From the beginning of the film to its ending sequence where Ada makes love with the ghost of Souleiman in a bar near the beach, the ocean's material presence offers the characters to share intimacy and belonging. In order to achieve the magical realist aspects of the love story, Diop juxtaposes the voice-overs of the lovers with the murmurs of the Atlantic Ocean. When the ghost of Souleiman poetically describes his catastrophic death to Ada in a voice-over, the ocean becomes the bearer of the lovers' mourning for each other and, on a symbolically larger scale, the nation's mourning for all the lives that it has swallowed.

Even though the story revolves around the two lovers and the uprising sense of class consciousness in contemporary Senegal, Mati Diop does not neglect to develop her protagonist's agency and identity. Unlike the previously studied notions of the ghost and the ocean, mirror as a motif that is implemented into the narrative by Diop operates in subtleties. Characterizing Ada's coming-of-age and formation of her individual subjectivity, we witness Ada gazing at her reflection on the mirror in different occasions in the film. However, this pattern only reveals its true intentions in the last scene where Ada utters the following words in a voice-over: 'Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada'. Her delivery of the line and the reflection in the mirror, thus, is a visual and narrative indicator that Ada now feels complete and has come to terms with herself, with Souleiman's loss and her future in Senegal.

Following the footsteps of Sembéne in *La Noire de* and Mambéty in *Touki Bouki*, Diop establishes these narrative elements and visual motifs in her film to construct the agency of her protagonist. She additionally offers a contemporary look at the struggles of the Senegalese nation that heavily circuits around class-based conflicts caused by the rising sense of neoliberal policies and neo-colonial dynamics. As a relevant and timely story of refugees in the twenty-first century, Diop also puts the Atlantic Ocean at the front and centre of the narrative. Even though the ocean plays a large role in both of the previous Senegalese films, Diop in *Atlantics* gives the ocean an agency by emphasizing its menacing atmosphere and recounts what it means to Senegalese people in larger conjunctures.

Conclusion

This study argued how the filmmakers utilized narration tactics to represent continuing battles of Senegalese subjects to overcome neo-colonial dynamics and French imperialism. From Diouana to Mory and Anta, and finally to Ada and Souleiman, these characters have in one way or another subjected to the remains of colonialism that prevent their dreams from materializing. These obstacles stem from social, cultural, political or economic occurrences in post-independence Senegal and have an enormous impact on the process of their identity formation. None of these characters, except Mory of *Touki Bouki* and, to some extent, Ada of *Atlantics*, pertained a national ideal regarding Senegal. Since neo-colonialism and France's cultural imperialism manifest themselves in the daily lives of these characters, they are positioned in accordance with French ideals and western ways of living and constantly seek ways to escape from Senegal.

Separating itself from the other two films and offering a panoramic and up-to-date look at Senegal, Mati Diop's *Atlantics* subverts many narrative conventions that are exercised by early practitioners of Senegalese cinema. In Sembène's *La Noire de* and Mambéty's *Touki Bouki*, for instance, the narrative pattern of immigrating to France is experienced by female subjects, whereas, in *Atlantics*, it turns into a group of men going to Spain as illegal immigrants. In her film, women are the ones connected to the Senegalese land, and men are the ones who left it for a better future. Diop, as a second-generation filmmaker from Senegal, also opens a window to discuss how neo-liberal politics of globalization converged with neo-colonialism and made an impact on Senegalese society regarding class-based tensions. To epitomize, in all the three case studies, postcolonial identity formations are formed through the filmmakers' deliberate utilization of narrative elements. From vocalizing postcolonial subjects through voice-over usage to juxtaposing non-diegetic songs into the narrative or attributing an agency to the Atlantic Ocean, Sembéne, Mambéty and Diop used every opportunity presented by the film medium as a way to perform anti-colonial resistance and narrate their stories in search of a national identity. Senegalese filmmakers acting as contemporary forms of *griots*, therefore, strived to represent the struggles of their society in the aftermath of French imperialism and accentuated how (neo)colonial dynamics operate in Senegal even to this day, fettering its people from reconfiguring their identities.

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