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The Ghost in the (Migrant) Machine: Living-deadness and resistance in Mati Diop's *Atlantique*

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This article proposes a reading of the ghostly routes and bodies of contemporary migrations through a study of the 2019 film directed by French-Senegalese film-maker Mati Diop, *Atlantique*, while exploring the inseparability of the political economy of migration from the material reality of people crossing lands and seas. The film tells a (ghost) story of migration and vindication of the seemingly powerless, haunting the distances and the intimacies between continents and within colonial relations, and centering on the gendered body, as monstrous and (therefore) resistant.

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The machine in the title of this article is the body. The human body in particular, a "machine" invoked in the well-known quote by Gilbert Ryle to critique the Cartesian duality of mind (the ghost) and body (the machine) (Ryle 2009). The phrase is highly evocative, as the mention of ghosts usually is, and for the purpose of this article the literal idea of the ghost will be interwoven with the metaphorical figure of the ghost as the "immaterial", or, more specifically, the unconscious. The body/machine will be the migrant body, individually and collectively moving across distances and, expressly, across bodies of water, but also the gendered body—as monstruous and resistant. The idea of the machine, however, may also stand in for a wider notion of a "technology of displacement" (Tazzioli 2022, n.p.), or of a mechanism; the "machine" of present-day migration towards the so-called global North and its production of a purported duality between the (European) view of economic determinants on one hand, and the dead and dying in the crossing on the other.

The article will propose a reflection on the ghostly habitation within the routes and bodies of contemporary migrations through the reading of the 2019 film by French-Senegalese director Mati Diop, *Atlantique*, while exploring the inseparability of the political economy of migration from the material reality of people crossing lands and seas. [1] The film tells a (ghost) story of migration and unravels precisely the aforementioned supposed duality within the mechanism of migration, a duality that in the end haunts the powerful and vindicates the seemingly powerless. As Lawrence N. Benjamin writes, it is a "marine meditation on disenfranchisement, corruption, and irregular migratory strategies [that] thrusts the viewer deeply into the daily inequities and affronts of the postcolony" (Lawrence 2020, E59). The film, importantly, also interweaves gendered bodies, hauntings, and power asymmetries, continuously crossing geographical, social, gender, and genre thresholds.[2]

Atlantique opens with a group of young men demanding their pay at a construction site, in Dakar. The scene immediately offers the juxtaposition, recurring in the entire film, of stillness on one hand – the sweltering heat accompanying a sense of immobility – and action, or movement, on the other – the sea-crossing yet to come, or the men protesting the unfair treatment at work. From this first scene, we follow the men returning to the city center on a pickup truck, in one of a series of lines/separations/thresholds that are drawn persistently throughout the film. The pickup runs through the city and also along the ocean shore, introducing the ultimate, liquid threshold that will haunt the film throughout.

Suleiman, one of the young workers, descends from the pickup and takes us to the other, fundamental line of separation – or encounter, as thresholds always are – with Ada; the two young protagonists appear and disappear on two opposite sides of a slow train crossing the middle of a seaside town, on the outskirts of Dakar. Suleiman and Ada

[1] *Atlantique* (2019, Senegal/France/Belgium; English title: *Atlantics*) won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2019. It is Mati Diop's first feature film, at least in part based on her 2009 short film, *Atlantiques*, which offers a very interesting "premise" to the 2019 feature debut, in terms of the development of both the theme of migration and the deadly ocean crossings, and of Diop's artistic work over time. Mati Diop has written and directed other medium-length and short films amongst which are *Mille Soleis* (2013), *Big in Vietnam* (2012), and *Snow Canon* (2011); she has also appeared as an actor in television and film.

[2] In terms of cinematic influences and genre choices, *Atlantique* can be linked to the works of Djibril Diop Mambéty (Mati Diop's uncle), to the socio-realism of Ousmane Sembène, and, especially in terms of the plot, to Moussa Toure's film *La Pirogue* (2012), as well as to some French poetic realist cinematography; references also do emerge to more typically "western" classics of zombie and more generally horror films. For an excellent and extensive analysis, see Dima 2022 (in particular 44-50).

are in love, and we encounter them on their last day together, as that very night Suleiman will leave Senegal on a boat, along with the other young workers, heading for Spain on what will turn out to be a deadly crossing. We learn of this departure after the fact, as does Ada, who falls into utter desperation. She had been, all the while, unwillingly engaged to a wealthy young man, clearly per her family's will, and a few days later, at her wedding, events – and the film itself – take a different turn, one that is somewhat surprising though not completely unannounced, as we will see below. The nuptial bed burns (apparently self-ignited) during the wedding celebration and the subsequent police investigation is conducted by a young investigator who seems, from the very first appearance, to be carrying some kind of illness. From this moment on, a number of Ada's friends seem to become ill as well, veering the film towards a somewhat classic horror film trope: that of the mysterious disease, contagion, of intangible elements attacking bodies undecipherably connected to one another; all elements that Vlad Dima (2022) interestingly identifies as actually referencing even more specifically the vampire genre. At the same time, and also pointing to further complex threshold-crossings within the film, the same elements evoke figures of the Islamic esoteric knowledge, when, for example, the possessed women are treated by a marabout.

The further and more dominating theme, however, seems to become that of the ghost.[3] The young women begin leaving their homes at night and walking purposefully yet mechanically to the construction site owner's house, appearing inside his home, demanding he pay what he owes the men. We immediately understand, then, that the young men who have died at sea are speaking through their girlfriends' bodies. The women are possessed by their ghosts, and every time this happens, their eyes turn completely white, in a partial physical transformation that speaks to the horror genre, the ghost story, and also some of the more classic cinematic representations of possession.

An interesting addition to the women's bodies possessed by ghosts is the young detective, a man, who also becomes possessed. We realize, as his investigation turns in fact towards himself, that he is actually possessed by Suleiman. It turns out he was the one to set the bed on fire at the wedding celebration, and he, at the end of the film, meets with Ada and makes love with her, in Suleiman's only possible "return". Suleiman defeats death, in a way, finally united with his young, beautiful lover, and perhaps even defeats the "big mountain" that, he tells Ada, he had thought was Spain while on the boat, but was actually the wave that would bring him and all the other young men to their death. The morning after on the beach (on the ocean, again), in the final scene of the film, Ada is alone and looks at herself in the mirror, then breaches the fourth wall and looks into the camera, with a proud gaze. She too, or perhaps she especially, has put forth her own form of resistance. She declares, "Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada."[4]

The ghosts that populate *Atlantique* are, as we have seen, quite literally ghosts of dead people, coming back to haunt first and foremost those responsible for their death, namely the contractor who refused to pay them and ultimately therefore pushed them to embark on the deadly journey. Diop in this sense points to the mechanism of internal élites typically exploiting the lower classes in post-colonial countries, in a structure that

[3] Diop herself has defined the film a "ghost story" in more than one interview (Kaganski 2019 and Qureshi 2019), thus appearing to reference perhaps more closely what Vlad Dima calls "the more European occult version of the ghost" (Dima 2022, 54).

[4] *Atlantique* is filmed mainly in Wolof, of which I have no knowledge, interspersed with some French. This is the English subtitle translation.

is, clearly, integral to the larger colonial/capitalist system of exploitation. As Ian Haydn Smith writes, "[t]he supernatural element, with the spirits of the men possessing the bodies of those they love or others near them, allows Diop to return time and again to the more pointed political themes of her film" (Smith 2021, 192). The wealthy contractor and the deadly "mountain" embodying Spain – or Europe – clearly exist in a constitutive relation. This is the first and certainly strongest critique of the colonial violence embedded in modernity that the film puts forth. But it is not the only "ghost" in this machine of violence.

The dead young men come back as the unwritten in the history of colonial relations, in terms of the "intimacies", to paraphrase Lisa Lowe (2015), between Europe and Africa, actually fleshing out such relations in their dead yet undying bodies, in the ghostly sedimentation the ocean preserves, and, significantly, in the women's bodies staying in Senegal – as well as, ultimately, in the bodies of Suleiman and Ada uniting through the detective's possessed body. The colonial relations between Europe and Africa are inscribed in the vastness and pervasiveness of the body of water that takes the men's lives, and this inscription is extended in and through the bodies of the women in Senegal, in a double form of resistance, albeit within the unutterable grief of loss.

Indeed, the politics of "those who stay" is at the center of Diop's film, and yet (again) the irrevocable connection with Europe and its constitutively violent modernity is always there – in Dakar, in the trajectories of bodies and lives looking to the shoreline, and especially in the line of the ocean drawing hypnotically to its waves, its beauty; its darkness. The ocean is the true haunting of the film. It is, indeed, the anticipation of the ghost story that surfaces very early in the film, and perhaps even the liquid contagion of vampiric illnesses. The theme of contagion and "the return of the dead" can also be traced to a further trope of the horror genre, with perhaps even more interesting implications for the colonial and postcolonial structures of violence and migrations. As Vlad Dima points out, "[t]he way the group of women possessed by the returned moves about the city seems to indicate a firmer connection with another figure of the undead – the zombie. […] The concept that might unify all zombies is trauma, whether collective or individual, whether physical or emotional" (Dima 2022, 57). In her fundamental study on the deep connections between the roots of the zombie-figure, coloniality, and the slave trade, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (2015), Sarah Juliet Lauro observes how not only the word itself "zombi" originates in Haiti, but its very transposition into Western culture is profoundly linked to colonial relations: "[m]ost likely due to its association with Haiti, the site of what is problematically termed the world's only successful slave rebellion, the zombie, more than other undead figures, has become a trope associated with revolution" (Lauro 2015, 7). More specifically, unfinished revolutions, if we consider the zombie "the incarnation of living death [representing] revolutions that have not completely succeeded" (Lauro 2015, 6).

In this sense, the ambiguity of the zombie figure is fully recognizable in the women/walking dead men who on one hand resist and vindicate the injustices they suffered, and on the other cannot truly come back to live neither the life they would have wanted in Dakar, nor a new life across the ocean. Incorporating both enslavement and political resistance, the "irresolvable zombie dialectic" Sarah Juliet Lauro (2015, 34) evokes draws together the "central antinomies" of "slavery, rebellion and living death" (Lauro 2015, 7). This set of connections is particularly useful in reading *Atlantique* and its construction of "living-deadness", following Lauro, again, in her observation that the zombie myth is (also) about "the cultural powers of the entirely real domain of the

imaginary, as retained even by those who are described as socially dead." (Lauro 2015, 6). If the young men in the film are described as actually dead in the shipwreck, they also quite clearly stand for the disenfranchised, socially dead in Senegal to the point of not being paid for their work, and equally not recognized as living subjects in Europe, where they are, at best, only numbers; ghosts, in short, of that machine.

Female bodies, male ghosts

The fact that the spirits coming back are all male, and that they come to inhabit women's bodies – with the exception of the investigator, which we will return to below – appears significant in more than one way. As Lidia Curti observed in her lengthy analysis of the ur-ghost-story *Hamlet*, the ghost ultimately represents the subconscious,

> [the] two opposites, the evident and the hidden, the familiar and the unknown, the identity between mystery and truth, the enigma and its solution [...] What is closest becomes distant, and vice-versa; the familiar hides the horror, the intimate becomes interior, internal, hidden, buried. (Curti 1998, 159)

Certainly, this double nature of the ghost, the intimacy of "inside" and "outside" surfaces and, in a way, performs, also, in *Atlantique* (to remain close to Hamlet, and the play within the play, indeed, as some kind of performance in the end is always necessary for ghosts to appear). It is, quite clearly, not the subconscious of the possessed women that produces the ghosts, but, rather, it is that of the rich contractor who exploits the workers, and also, more poignantly, the (European) viewer's subconscious harboring ghosts and un-dead bodies. However, the bodies carrying the ghosts are the women's. As Curti writes, "[u]ltimately the uncanny is the female womb, man's first home" (Curti 1998, 159). These bodies, once again, become monstruous and resistant at the same time. Or, perhaps, Mati Diop makes them capable of resistance precisely because they are capable of being monstruous. In a different passage, observing in this case female subjectivity and the power of the gaze in relation to madness – a form of "obscene" or monstruous itself if you will – Curti writes of Velasquez' *Las Meninas*, reading it via Foucault:

> the subject has exited the picture, or remains as an indirect, vague reflection in a mirror; a ghost, in fact. Instead women have moved to the centre of the picture: they were not supposed to be there, yet they have become the object of the gaze; at the same time they become subject themselves as part of the interrogative look gazing on the disappearing "thing". They have entered the picture and ironically given it a name. The name is that of the displaced subject, of what was not supposed to be there. (Curti 1998, 175-76)

When the women in *Atlantique* become possessed, their eyes turn completely white, projecting an uncanny gaze that is absent yet penetrating. Their gait appears more mechanical, their posture at one point is seemingly that of the men, but what truly makes them liminal figures, between the living and the dead, is the whiteness of their eyes. This horrific and rejecting/erasing gaze seems to confirm precisely the "subject that was not supposed to be there" (Curti 1998, 175-76). For if the men are acting through the women, this resistance would not take place if not for the physical presence, the

bodies – and the solidarity in their persistence and resistance – of the women.[5] Ada's body, though not directly participating in the possession and haunting, is materially inhabited by the ever-returning threshold of patriarchy, pushed into a marriage she does not want, and, in the process of refusing her unwanted fiancée, put through the violating practice of having her virginity medically tested. Ada's own threshold is trespassed, but her agency is not relinquished when, in the end (which is also her beginning, as she declares in the last scene) she decides what to do with her body and sexuality.

As already mentioned, the investigator is possessed as well; his is the only male body to carry the ghost within himself. This instance of a male possessed body might appear to contradict the power embodied by the women's corporeal resistance. However, the investigator's possession has some specific characteristics that make him appear as not much more than a means, in the end, for Ada's ultimate resistance. Notably, he is the only "possessed" who does not go to the contractor's house at night to claim the payments due. Furthermore, as Vlad Dima points out, the investigator surrenders his agency, in what can be viewed as a vampiric act by Suleiman, who takes away the man's identity, or his very "essence", and at the same time imbues him with superhuman powers. This occurs not only physically, when he unexplainably breaks free from the self-handcuffing that should have served to restrain his movements when possessed, but also mentally, since he ultimately does solve an apparently unsolvable case. In the end we see him leaving his job, somewhat of an empty shell, walking away from what had appeared to be his sole focus, his "essence":

> Without knowing what his *next* essence is, [the investigator] is then simply a very useful, if unwilling, tool throughout the film. He lends his body to tasks he does not want to do, and eventually lets Suleiman's spirit overtake him completely, to the point that he actually disappears in the lovemaking scene. The cinematic "trick" used by Diop to let the audience see the real inhabitant of the body is the mirror reflection, which, ironically, amounts to a reversal of a European belief – that vampires, as soulless creatures, do not have a reflection. (Dima 2022, 57).

What Dima refers to as an interesting "reversal of a European belief" in relation to the reflected image of the vampire/Suleiman/investigator points to the noteworthy "trans-continental overlaps between Europe and Africa" (Dima 2022, 54) offered by the figures of both the vampire and the zombie, as well the myriad religious and cultural ramifications of narratives of djinns and ghosts. Mati Diop works, again, along the line of contact/separation between African and European mythologies, or, perhaps more precisely, within the space of power relations in which myths, narratives, and metaphors have travelled and come to perform, in this case, modernity and its hauntings.[6]

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[5] With reference to the theme of female or feminist solidarity in the film, Mati Diop states in an interview that, "[f]riendship between women plays a very important role in the film. […] As I was writing the script, I met girls in Dakar who I questioned about their relationships with men, sex, marriage, and religion. None of them corresponded to a particular stereotype, there was obviously a variation in points of view and various sensibilities (that we find in the various female characters of the film). I loved the honesty of some of them who weren't afraid to say that they were now using men to their advantage and without qualms. I see this phenomenon as a kind of Afro capitalist neo-feminism" (Kaganski 2019, n.p.). Gigi Adair speaks of a "community of female solidarity" that ultimately allows for agency and "an alternative future" (Adair 2022, 10; 1).

[6] A fundamental work on migration as powerful haunting of modernity is Keith Piper's *Ghosting the Archive* (2005), in which the artist "opens" the Birmingham City Archive, and in "a fluctuating attention" (Quadraro 2014, 104) uncovers the narrative of immigration from the Caribbean to Birmingham through a local photographer's collection. The Dyche Collection contains hundreds of family portraits of the

Crossing visions, crossing sounds, returning to the other

As already underlined, the ocean is central in *Atlantique*, not only quite obviously in the title, but also in its intermittent appearance, between scenes that are at times seemingly unrelated to the sea itself, as a sort of constant horizon where desire and fear are undistinguishable. The ocean is, indeed, the underlying threshold that works like a palimpsest for all the other liminalities articulated in the film: life and death, materiality and immateriality, male and female bodies, the politics of migration and the ghost story, and, ultimately, the African continent and Europe. That space-between is the uncanny body of water that offers, from the first scenes to the very end, beauty and horror, and the always present possibility of drowning in its abyss. Indeed, although *Atlantique* is not what could be categorized as an "aquatic" or "oceanic horror" film (Harrington 2018, n.p.) – we never see what happens at sea – the unknown that lies beneath the surface is ultimately the central theme of the film. The potential deadly forces inhabiting the water lurk in the background throughout and anticipate the hauntings to come.

The frequent frames of the ocean, almost a commentary to the plot, serve a perhaps similar purpose as the soundtrack in the film, offering something of a "liquid visual" parallel to the acoustic narrative. The soundtrack is by Dakar-born Kuwaiti musician Fatima Al Qadiri, who designed for the film an acoustic crossing (another crossing, indeed) of electronic and "organic" sounds – like ocean waves – as well as a melodic and at once hypnotic musical narrative that keeps the viewer in a mesmerized expectation of both supernatural turns and more linear plot developments (the film is also, after all, a story of thwarted love). The haunting forbearing of the ocean waves, insistently appearing, and in a way dominating and framing the story, interweaves with the equally haunting music, which in some tracks actually incorporates the sound of waves ("Suleiman's Theme" and "Ada and Suleiman", for example), and in others brings in an obsessively "urban", metallic sound, again alternating with a melodic and disquieting melancholia. Dakar, the ocean, the stories of migration that we are so used to seeing on the news as – at best – stories of people saved at sea, or – most frequently – as the accountability of death by (neo)colonialism, the reality of everyday life for those who "stay behind" in the places of origins of migrants – all these stories are rewritten by Diop in the sounds and sights of water and the (supernatural) power of bodies obsessively returning, whether dead or alive. To this point, Gigi Adair notes that the film refuses "the dominant visual regime of migration by focusing [...] on the conditions that structure migration and the cultural and social effects of migration, primarily from the point of view of non-migrants, particularly the young women left behind" (Adair 2022, 1) and rejects and subverts the "border spectacle" (De Genova 2013, quoted in Adair). Adair goes on to observe that "the men's deaths haunt the film, but they are never shown [...]. This means that they are unavailable for the type of humanitarian intervention and public mourning that aims to generate empathy for

Caribbean immigrant community, and in the process of physically coming into contact with the photographs, the artist puts the images, and the crossings of those lives, stories and histories, in relation to the materiality of the archive itself. Each photograph is shown held by the artist's hand clad in a white glove, as it turns from the negative to the positive, while the archive space and the gloved hand are reversed, from positive to negative. This process of mirroring echoes, in a way, the appearance/disappearance of ghosts and their crossings of bodies and spaces in *Atlantique*, within the wider frame of migration as ghost story, common to a number of artworks: *Haunted House* by Zineb Sedira (2006); *Western Union: Small Boats* by Isaac Julien (2007); *Asmat* by Dagmawi Yimer (2015), to name just a few. Ghosts, displacement and erased histories are, of course, central to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), perhaps the foundational work on the theme.

migrants among Europeans" (Adair 2022, 2). This indicates quite clearly that Diop is not addressing the European/Western audience in its expected grammar and syntax, so to speak, not only quite evidently in the choice of filming in Wolof, but more comprehensively in the "oceanic hauntings" of visions and sounds through which the politics of migration, exploitation, and resistance are brought forth in *Atlantique.* The visual politics of a "haunting resistance", we might say, emerges in and on the thresholds of Diop's work.

Indeed, the crossing of thresholds is the central, uncanny action, that inhabits *Atlantique.* As Vlad Dima puts it, "the film is consumed with crossings". (Dima 2022, 43). The aesthetic overlapping and the rewriting of genres and their distinctions produce an ethics of undoing the distinctions or dualities when thinking about contemporary migrations and their historical interconnections with colonial relations between continents. Those continents, it is worth reiterating, are intimately connected materially and metaphorically through the water, the Atlantic Ocean in this case, of the film title and of its po-ethics. Suzanne C. Enzerink adds a further and relevant observation in this sense, reading the film within the triangular trajectories of the slave trade, thus drawing the US inside the frame as well. Her analysis considers the politics of the production of the film (Senegalese, but predominantly French and Belgian) and distribution (via Netflix to the Anglophone and wider world), which Enzerink reads as replicating colonial networks and trajectories. Furthermore, although the film does not openly portray "the past and is geographically confined to Dakar and its immediate vicinity, [...] Diop's generic and aesthetic choices – with the incorporation of haunting and the ocean – nevertheless urge us to consider the entangled histories of the US and Senegal and how these histories inform the present" (Enzerink 2021, 54). By looking at *Atlantique* within the framework of the Atlantic economy of the slave trade, we can then "rethink the political work that film can do in a globalized world" (Enzerink 2021, 54). Diop's film is at once a crude and direct political statement on class difference and the violence of coloniality, and a ghost/horror narrative of love and vindication. The two are evidently not mutually exclusive; rather, they reinforce one another, with the violence of colonial relations feeding the emergence of the uncanny subconscious or hauntings of modernity, and the same hauntings offering the performative metaphors that perhaps more efficiently expose the failure of stories and histories that self-proclaim linearity and lack of ambiguity.

Ada's body is traversed by the patriarchal imperatives of control and "purity", but also by her own drive towards agency over her present and future. Her body performs resistance and takes hold of the future. Not only, then, are spaces crossed and re-crossed, but so is time, in the coming and going of the migratory movement, in the idea it holds of the future, and in the breach in the linearity of "modernity," performed by those "coming back" – the *revenant,* in Derridian terms (1994) – who never actually leave; never actually disappear. In the haunting is the limit, or the key, to that insisting wave-motion that endlessly connects the trajectories of leaving, of staying, of Dakar and the Atlantic Ocean, of Spain, and death; of undoing death and doing resistance. As, again, Lidia Curti writes of migration and temporality,

> [w]e should look at migrancy as a sympoietic condition connecting the present of the passage to the past of origins, and to the aspiration of the future, making subjectivity a complex contested process that involves the social and the psychic, the conscious and the unconscious. The already existing confrontation with alterity is more urgent today. Migration is not a new phenomenon in human history but

> today it gives rise to a new order of instability in the production of deterritorialized subjectivities. It cannot be read in a univocal manner. Hospitality if unconditioned may create a new vital assemblage in which them and us are simultaneously diverse and the same. (Curti 2017, 8-9)

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