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Warner, Tobias

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## The Labor of the Living Dead

Tobias Warner 

University of California, Davis, USA

### ABSTRACT

This article develops the concept of the labor of the living dead through readings of recent Senegalese films, novels, comics, and music videos in Wolof and French. The undead have been resurgent in cultural production for decades but these are not your average zombies: they do not inspire collective dread nor are they directed by opaque, outside forces. In Senegal, the focus has more often been on the work of the undead. This enigmatic concept speaks to the pervasive and potentially fatal mismatch between discourses of entrepreneurial self-realization and the crushing limitations and dangers imposed on many by their present circumstances. In representations of undead labor, projects of normative self-improvement devour and outlive the selves they are meant to improve, generating affects of shame and powerlessness and sparking violence toward more marginalized lives. Alongside these dynamics, though, the figure of undead work also seems to contain a grain of counter-hegemonic imagination, even affording visions of alternatives to existing configurations of labor and humanity. Central to this phenomenon is a tendency to exploit the polysemy of the Wolof term *liggéey*, which means work in a conventional sense but which also refers in certain contexts to witchcraft or gendered labor.

### KEYWORDS

Senegal; aesthetics; cultural studies; undead; living dead; migration; structural adjustment; Wolof

A cemetery, nighttime. A grave is being dug, but the dead have already risen. In Mati Diop's 2019 film *Atlantique* (English title: *Atlantics*), a group of young Senegalese women are possessed nightly by the spirits of their menfolk who have drowned while trying to reach Europe in a small boat. In a climactic scene, the possessed descend upon the home of the drowned men's former boss whose embezzlement drove the men to take to the sea in the first place. Speaking through the young women whom they are possessing, the young men's spirits demand that the boss pay up the money he owes them and dig them proper graves. Later, as the boss toils away ungracefully with a shovel, they verbally shame him. One calls out "*lil mooy liggéey bi,*" which we might translate as "now *this* is work." The implication is unmistakable: *this* is actual, physical labor, as opposed to the embezzlement in which the boss was engaged. But this outburst has layers of meaning across the multiple senses of *liggéey bi*.

*Liggéey* in Wolof means any kind of labor in a conventional sense. But *liggéey* can also mean occult labor: to perform *liggéey* on someone (or to have an occult practitioner do so on your behalf) is to do witchcraft on them – to alter their destiny, for better or worse, in

ways that are out of reach for strictly human-centered understandings of agency. Further suggestive connotations can attach to *liggéey* in certain contexts, notably the notion of *liggéeyu ndey*, or the work of the mother. This gendered idiom of work is best captured in the widespread proverb *liggéeyu ndey, añub doom* (literally: the mother's work, the child's lunch; figuratively: a mother's work is what ensures a child's future success).

The various modalities of labor that cluster around the term *liggéey* are collapsing into each other at this graveside. First, there is the physical work that the young men did in construction. The specter of this (unpaid) labor finds its mirror image in the grave-digging which they now enjoin upon their former boss. In asserting that they are owed not just money but a grave, the possessed might be understood as refusing to be reduced to their labor and insisting that they too lived mournable lives. But the means through which they achieve this recognition ought to dispel any unalloyed optimism. Instead of risking their lives for recognition, it is only by dying and returning to lodge themselves in a ghostly fashion in the bodies of the living that the drowned workers can compel capital's avatars to recognize them. Alongside physical labor, there is also something occult going on in the possessions that drive the film's plot and the labor these generate.<sup>1</sup> Gendered labor adds another important layer: the possessions in *Atlantique* are almost exclusively a matter of young women who stayed behind becoming possessed by the spirits of young men who tried to leave. Against a backdrop of exploitation, economic desperation and gendered dreams of migration, multiple senses of work are colliding, creating a palimpsest around the term *liggéey*. The semiotic subsidence around what it means to work clusters around the labor of ghostly subjects who are no longer alive, but not quite dead either. So, the question is: What is this work of the living dead?

The living dead have been recurring figures in popular and elite Senegalese cultural forms for decades, as they have been elsewhere. But there is something distinctive about the undead here – they are not primarily sources of horror. In the texts, films, and performances that I will analyze, the emphasis is rather on the kinds of work the undead perform. A proliferation of undead work is telling us something important about the volatility of labor in contemporary imaginaries. In the Senegalese examples that I explore, the figure of undead work often collapses two or more of the meanings that cluster under the sign of *liggéey*: the toil of a body, various forms of occult work, and gendered labor. Through such superimpositions, the labor of the living dead becomes a way of reckoning with and crafting responses to shifting contemporary experiences of working. By harmonizing with this cultural phenomenon, this article aims to theorize the labor of the living dead.

A complementary goal here is to contribute to a reevaluation of the place of the occult in African cultural studies. One widely-applied framework for making sense of the undead in African popular cultures has been the notion of occult economies.<sup>2</sup> Outlined by Jean and John Comaroff in response to a wave of concern over zombies in South Africa, the concept has proved generative across the continent. It tends to produce a certain type of interpretation: the living dead are evidence of fears of powerful, hidden forces pulling all the economic strings, symptoms of our latter-day "enchanted and perverted world" (Marx 1975, 37:813). Such readings can be compelling yet they miss the emphasis on work that appears across many recent Senegalese manifestations. In thinking with and through different cultural phenomena, I am inviting us to ask different questions of the living dead. Meanwhile, both Francis Nyamnjoh and Harry Garuba suggest that what looks like a contemporary resurgence of the occult in African contexts might also be

seen as the extension of “cosmologies of incompleteness” or “animist materialisms” that have long foregrounded the interconnectedness of the supernatural and the human (Nyamnjoh 2019; Garuba 2003). Their interventions nudge us away from purely symptomatic readings of the occult in favor of closer attention to the ways in which the undead make meaning of the shifting topography of practices of everyday life. My intervention expands on this attentiveness: undead labor illustrates the vicissitudes of work in the experiences of everyday people. In what follows, I consider three different but ultimately related facets of this phenomenon.

First, the labor of the living dead speaks to a pervasive and potentially fatal mismatch between discourses of entrepreneurial self-realization and the crushing limitations and dangers imposed on many by their present circumstances. Undead labor animates a sense of powerlessness circulating on the surface of everyday experience, a feeling that ordinary life can feel like an impasse. But this is beyond “cruel optimism” (Berlant 2011, 8) – the trope of undead work evokes the ways in which imperatives toward self-improvement can devour and finally outlive the selves they were meant to improve. In these nightmarish yet also realistic and even banal visions of undead labor appearing in Senegal, a person is often consumed by their drive to improve upon themselves – all that remains is their labor. This impulse to literalize the ingrown rapaciousness of certain forms of normative self-work speaks to what Garuba called a “continual re-enchantment of the world” in many African contexts that often entails representational strategies that “[give] the abstract or metaphorical a material realization” (Garuba 2003, 284–85). Unlike the occult economies analyzed elsewhere on the continent, little about the undead is portrayed as hidden in these contemporary Senegalese versions. A fascination with ghosts, zombies and the nature of their work is being deployed to speak to what “everyone” already knows: working on the self is zombifying in conditions that make that self-realization nigh impossible. This first dimension of undead labor can contain multitudes: the frustrated young man who has been told he should be able to rise to the top if he merely reaches within himself; the politician who strains and fails to capture yet more wealth; the striver who feels he is only a lottery ticket win away from a transformed life; the drowned migrant who has returned to haunt those he left behind; the patriarch who cannot assure survival for those who depend on him.

Secondly, the undead and their work also encode the ways in which affects of shame accumulate in the wake of frustrated attempts at normative self-improvement only to then be projected outward, sometimes violently, onto more marginalized bodies and lives. The undead have become a potent imaginative terrain into which subjects excluded from the category of the human are cast. In Senegalese contexts these can include a variety of subjects seen as unstable in terms of their performance of the normative categories of identity like gender, sexuality, or racialization. In other words, the undead are also a figure for those who are stuck somewhere between social life and social death. They activate an obsession with lives and bodies that, it is imagined, are so beyond improvement that they can be subjected to a work of abjection so vicious that its violence outlives even the life it was meant to demean. This second dimension of the work of the living dead has recently been mapped onto the homosexual whose body is dis-interred from a cemetery by an angry mob; or the alienated young woman attempting to become white.

Lastly, though, undead labor seems to have acquired an oppositional mode which allows it to serve as a ground for counter-hegemonic imagination. As dire as the first

two aspects of the work of the undead outlined above may appear, the trope also affords visions of forms of “work” that may counter the disastrous consequences of crushing imperatives toward self-improvement in impossible conditions and the forces of abjection these unleash. A curious but persistent association between undead labor and the aesthetic is crucial to this final dynamic. In some of the artworks and performances I analyze, the very notion of *liggéey* starts to become self-reflexive and extend to the work of the artwork itself. In this more expansive sense, *liggéey* stretches beyond its immediate semantic context and toward an account of *poesis*, or creative making.<sup>3</sup> The work of the living dead becomes a figure for the fragile but enduring capacity of works of the imagination to do a kind of labor that exceeds the parameters of easily legible human agency and to access alternative forms of futurity. Undead work evokes the capacity of the aesthetic to interrogate existing configurations of labor and humanity and to envision alternatives.

Taken together, these three strands cut to the core of what an exploration of the work of the living dead stands to contribute to African cultural studies. In what follows, I trace these threads through a collection of occult figures appearing in recent Senegalese films, novels, comics and music videos in both Wolof and French. Before going further, though, a quick clarification of what I mean by the living dead will be useful. Many of the figures I read here will appear undead in the familiar way that the drowned men are in *Atlantique* – bodies or spirits risen from the grave. But not all of them will be so legibly ghostly. What all of my examples do have in common is that they involve subjects positioned between life and death who are nonetheless still performing some kind of work.

This minimal definition of the laboring undead serves to distinguish this phenomenon from the kinds of frightening monsters we are accustomed to from popular culture. The undead I analyze here are not often sources of terror nor of collective dread. They also lack the dimension of absolute evil as a motivating factor that has been common in other uptakes of horror genres across the region (Wendl 2007, 2–4). Being living-dead or un-buryable is simply one of many conditions a body can exist in. And while these undead remain in our world to perform some kind of work, their labor is not often done at the behest of an opaque, all-controlling outside agent. All of these factors differentiate the laboring Senegalese undead from the transatlantic phenomenon of the zombie/zombii which is often seen as a figure completely evacuated of agency – a “nonconscious, consuming machine” (Lauro and Embry 2008, 99). By contrast, the laboring undead usually have strong reasons of their own to continue working. Indeed, these are often precisely what have made them undead in the first place.

### **The Work of the Unburied**

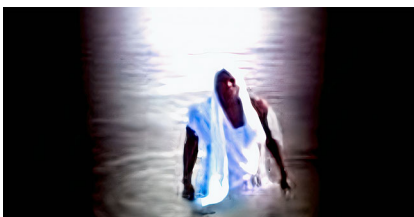
Mati Diop was not the first to imagine the drowned migrant’s unsettling return to the world of the living. There is a striking echo of *Atlantique*’s central conceit in an earlier moment and a more popular medium, namely in the work of the rapper Abdourahmane Sèye who performed under the alias Neew Bi in the late 2000s and early 2010s. In the music video for his 2008 breakthrough song “Galgui” (The Boat), we see a human form emerge from the sea clothed in a white shroud – a garment usually reserved for a corpse. As this human form rises from the waves (Figure 1), a beat begins – just a mournful, minor key piano hook stretched over a two-step break. On top of this simple

production, we overhear a conversation between two young men, one of whom is planning to take a pirogue to Europe. He says he is off to “*Barça walla barsax*” – “Barcelona or hell,” as the expression coined at the time would have it. Neew bi’s name means “the corpse” in Wolof. In the video and in live shows, he performed in a white shroud to indicate that he was the living dead: a ghost of those who drowned at sea, risen to warn, mourn, and chastise the living.

In the song’s chorus, Neew bi places emphasis on the verb *dem* (to go, to leave). In the first two bars, he drops it on break’s off-beat, but in the last bar he simply intones it five times, letting it resonate and fade like a waning pulse. In the music video, directed by Lai Ndiaye, Neew bi punctuates his rap with a repeated gesture of moving an invisible oar. In one sequence, Ndiaye layers several images of Neew bi in the same frame – some performing the rowing movement, others pointing out to sea. The image is grainy, but this superimposition can clearly be seen in [Figure 2](#).

The layering of images of the rapper as laboring corpse resonates with the overdetermination of work at that graveside in *Atlantique*. In “Galgui,” undead labor is a continuation of the striving that drives young people to brave migration in small crafts by the ocean route. Suspended in a pose of perpetual labor, Neew bi warned of the dangers of fantasies of migration. But far from imagining these as an issue of poor individual choices, Neew bi reserves special venom for the Senegalese state, which he portrays as having been more concerned with enforcing border controls to “catch” migrants in the act rather than in addressing the economic conditions that might cause someone to embark on such a journey. Neew bi’s ghostly self-presentation was a vivid commentary on the precariousness of labor in Senegal for many at the time, highlighting the zombifying effects of a condition in which work seemed to be only available elsewhere.

Neew bi was linking the work of the living dead to migration in the late 2000s, but such ghostly tropes were already circulating in the 1990s as a commentary on the devastating effects structural adjustment policies and currency devaluation were having on the Senegalese social fabric. The most iconic example can be found in the comics of Alphonse Mendy, alias TT Fons. Fons’ beloved strip *Goorgoorlou* first appeared in 1987 (Seck 2018, 1). The comic’s main character, Goor, is a Senegalese everyman, perpetually hustling to make ends meet. (The Wolof verb *goorgoorlu* means “to get by,” “to make an effort,” “to make progress” or even “to do one’s best”.) In *Goorgoorlou*, the practice of getting by is transformed into a way of life. The comic was immensely popular in Senegal, eventually leading to a TV adaptation that ran for many years. Fons mined comedy from the ways in which the practice (and art) of *goorgoorlu* was becoming a defining strategy of urban



**Figure 1.** Neew bi rising from the ocean in the music video for “Galgui” (Ndiaye 2008).



**Figure 2.** The laboring corpse in “Galgui” (Ndiaye 2008).

existence. In the very first strip, “Liberalism” from February 1987 (Figure 3), Fons makes explicit the link between his character’s *gorgoorlu* existence and the “adjustments” to the economy. Hoping to take advantage of the many promises of IMF-imposed economic reform – lower tariffs, a revised tax code, less regulation – the unemployed Goor rushes off to buy what he needs to be a mobile merchant only to find that the freed market is already overflowing with countless others who have the same strategy.

The undead became a feature of Fons’ work in relation to an earlier economic shock: France’s 50% devaluation of the CFA currency in 1994. In a striking series, Goor and his wife Diek hosted James Wolfensohn, the President of the World Bank, who really did visit Senegal in 1997 in the wake of devaluation. Wolfensohn (recast by Fons as “Wolofson”) is invited to dine with Goor and Diek, who hope that hosting this white man in a suit may yield some revenue. Surprised by the delicious meal they are able to scrape together for him, a stuffed Wolofson celebrates his satiation as an index of the success of the recent economic “reforms.” An appalled Goor then takes Wolofson to visit a grave and proceeds to dig up a skeleton that he declares to be himself. Fatoumata Seck offers a persuasive and insightful reading of this sequence, showing how it serves as an allegory of the vicious circle of debt created by structural adjustment and devaluation (Seck 2018, 10) (Figure 4).

Confronting the president of the World Bank with the living-dead existence that structural adjustment and devaluation have wrought is a powerful gesture. But Goor dug and rose from his own grave several times over the years – first as a reaction to devaluation in 1994 (Figure 5), then again to mark Wolofson’s visit in 1997. Each time he dug his own

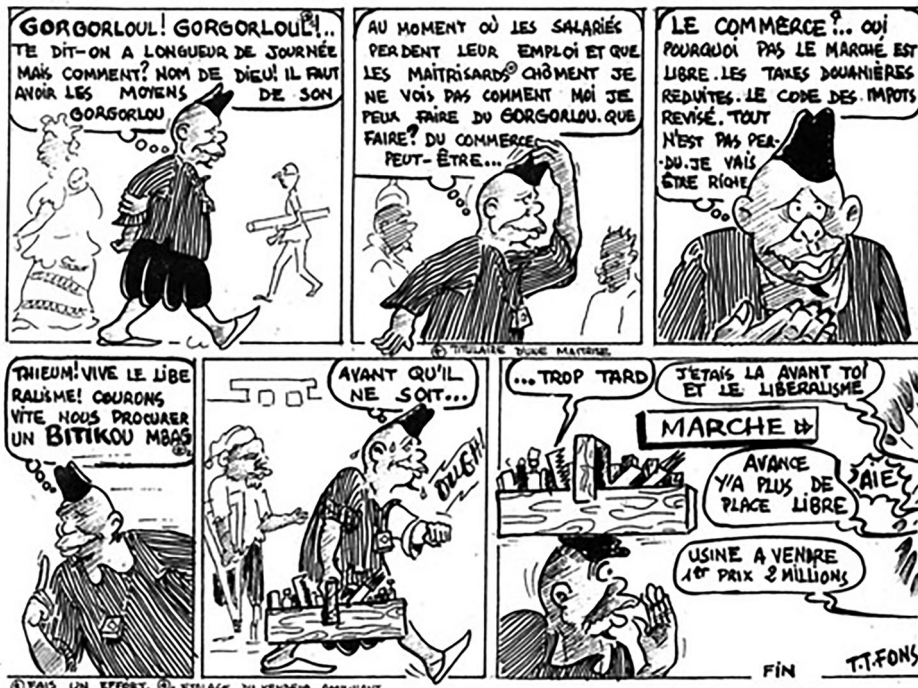


Figure 3. Goor discovers what it is that free markets free him to be (Fons 1991). © Alphonse Mendy. Reproduced with permission.



grave, Goor would get mistaken for a *mort-vivant*, a living-dead – sometimes with temporarily good results, such as when he escapes his creditors (Figure 6).

The comedy and tension of Goor's dramatic gestures of resignation derive partly from his gender, from his being unable to cover the daily expenses which he is supposed to provide as the patriarch. The grave Goor kept digging for himself in those years suggested that not only did economic restructuring have dehumanizing effects, it also had de-góorizing effects. That is to say, it contributed to a situation in which it was impossible for many men to be *góor ñi*. Instead, someone like Goor could only be what Matthew Brown calls in a Nigerian context a "breadloser" (Brown 2021, 150–84). For Goor the daily imperative to keep striving was unending. Even death would not release him from it. But here it is vital to note that Diek, Goor's wife, does not seem to experience economic precariousness in quite the same way. In Figure 7, Diek confronts her sulking husband and refuses to share in his self-pity. Instead, she calls on him not to give up.

In any comic, a panel is a parcel of variable time, but the formal qualities of this one are worth pausing over. *Goorgoorlou* was always formulaic by design. Fons used a consistent layout in these years, with eight or nine panels of regular sizes, always in three rows. This imposed a predictable narrative rhythm. Goor came up with some scheme in the first row, attempted it in the second, only to encounter a humorous setback by the last. Storylines could extend over several installments, but the basic structure never wavered. Of course, the essence of a serialized comedy is its formula, but the



**Figure 4.** Goor confronts Wolofson with his living-dead existence (Fons 2002a). © Alphonse Mendy. Reproduced with permission.



**Figure 5.** What remains of Goor after structural adjustment and devaluation (Fons 2002b). © Alphonse Mendy. Reproduced with permission.

consistency also reflected Goor's lived reality. The strip is full of humor, but the rhythm is pointedly always the same. Nothing ever changes in the form of the comic because nothing could ever truly change in Goor's world. He might meet the president, he might travel to Europe, but by the end of sequence he was right back where he started.



**Figure 6.** "Devaluation made me a ghost": Goor escapes his creditors (Fons 1999a). © Alphonse Mendy. Reproduced with permission.



**Figure 7.** Diek confronts Goor in his grave (Fons 1999b). © Alphonse Mendy. Reproduced with permission.

This makes exceptions to the rule of layout in *Goorgoorlou* all the more significant. Note how Fons draws Diek here – defiant, hand on hips, looking down on her husband, her body stretching past the borders of the panel.<sup>4</sup> The stakes of spatial transgression are high. Diek has provisional license to break out of the temporality that ought to contain her. This could just be a minor detail: a foot left trailing in the gutter to offer a sense of compositional depth. But the gesture also affords Diek the ability to step out of the rhythm the layout imposes. In contrast, Goor remains sitting in the grave he has dug for himself, the geometric shape of which mirrors the panel's border, giving us a sense that he is doubly constrained.

*Goorgoorlou's* grave has its counterpart in one of the other great artistic responses to the devaluation of the CFA franc. This is Djibril Diop Mambéty's 1994 film *Le Franc* – also, in its way, a parable of undead labor. Setting his film in the wake of devaluation, Mambéty (Mati Diop's uncle) offers a striking vision of the instantaneous riches that the new economic reality could supposedly promise only to snatch away. The plot follows Marigo, a destitute musician who buys a lottery ticket and glues it behind a poster on his door. When that ticket turns out to be a winner, Marigo must haul the door around Dakar as he tries unsuccessfully to extract the ticket from its perch. Even in Mambéty's vision of an almost magical deliverance from urban poverty, a way out becomes a form of perpetual work, a burden a striver must still carry on their back. At the end of the film, Marigo takes his door to the beach where he hopes to use the ocean to wash loose his prize. In the ensuing scene, the door capsizes and the ticket is lost as Marigo battles the ocean. While the sequence appears slapstick, the vision of Marigo wrestling with the ocean for the lifechanging prize that eludes him also generates a visual echo, largely *avant la lettre*, of the capsized pirogues that would become a gruesome and haunting feature of later migrations by sea. Mambéty's film casts an uncanny and untimely shadow forward on the decades that have followed. But since *Le Franc* is a comedy, Marigo finally grasps the ticket and the film concludes with his unsettling laughter.

Goor's grave and Marigo's door were both portals to an elsewhere, fantasies of escape from an existence that was a constant struggle for many, made at a time when this may have seemed scarcely possible. These figures suggested only two ways out – instant, unexplainable riches or death (that was not necessarily death at all, but rather a

prolongation of an already anguished existence). The grave and the door spoke to dreams of migration that linked these possible outcomes (a chance for riches and a risk of death). They also both activated a reflexive framing of the medium, standing in for the comics panel and the camera's frame, respectively. *Goorgoorlou* and *Le Franc* associated the new economic order with a sense of crushing, undead-ifying stasis for many while also employing formal strategies to imagine ways out: breaking through that panel, walking through that door.

The grave and the door rhyme, visually and conceptually, with other portals found in more recent works featuring the labor of the undead. The singular image at the conclusion of *Le Franc* is of course the ocean – a frequent trope in the works of Mambéty. The sea was often a space of risk, transformation and possibility in Mambéty's work, from *Le Franc* to the earlier *Touki Bouki*, where the ocean famously served as an oversaturated canvas onto which the main characters' ambivalent migrant desires were projected. When Mati Diop released *Atlantique*, much was made of the presumed influence of her uncle on her work. But to my mind the most resonant affinity between them was largely overlooked: their mutual obsession with the sea as a portal to an uncertain elsewhere.

Djibril and Mati Diop's narratives of migration are both fixated on images of water. This is most pronounced in the younger Diop's recent film – barely ten minutes goes by in *Atlantique* without a shot of water of some kind. Common to both Diops, though, are the hyperreal qualities their cameras attribute to water, especially to the sea. The ocean is never merely blue in their work – it is opalescent, incandescent and, above all, reflective. Both filmmakers seem to associate the sea with mirrors. The ocean may be a reflective surface, but never a naively mimetic one – it mirrors back dreams projected onto it in distorted or refracted forms and can even serve as a portal between life and death, a refracting conduit for forms of labor that detach themselves from human bodies. Mati Diop makes the most of this in *Atlantique*, where mirrors serve dialogically as the only way in which the drowned men can still be seen in the world of the living. This is memorably captured in scenes in a bar with a floor-to-ceiling mirror, where a single frame captures both the person possessed and the one possessing them.

In recent cultural production, ocean, mirror and grave are often occult mediums – points of transit between life and death that serve as privileged channels for occult work. They are thresholds through which one passes on the way to realizing seemingly unrealizable dreams. But the work that goes into crossing such liminal spaces can be dangerous. Those who enter them risk being overtaken and consumed by their own labor. Ocean, mirror and grave are gateways to other existences but also dangerous portals out of which the living-dead may claw their way back out, going so far as to possess or replace those who summoned them.

This dynamic is crystallized in Boubacar Boris Diop's novel, *Doomi Golo* (The Monkey's Offspring), published in Wolof in 2003 and rewritten/translated into French by the author in 2009. As they do for Mati and Djibril, mirrors for Boris Diop often function as occult mediums, as spaces of *liggéey*. A key scene in the novel turns on the question of a lost passport. That passport belongs to Yacine Ndiaye, a Senegalese woman with French citizenship who has lived most of her life in France. She is the second wife of Assane Tall, a notable footballer who is the son of the book's main narrator. After Assane dies after living abroad for many years, Yacine returns to Senegal with her unruly twin children, to the great surprise of her husband's first family, who had not known Assane had married

again. Especially perturbed is Biige Samb, Assane's first wife, who begins quietly plotting to destroy her new co-wife. Biige takes the first step toward her revenge by stealing Yacine's passport. Yacine wants to return to France but without her papers she cannot do so. Pretending to help, Biige takes Yacine to a marabout – an occult practitioner, in this case – who is supposed to help Yacine get back to France.

The visit is initiated with the aim of obtaining the marabout's prayers for the safe return of Yacine's lost passport, but it quickly shifts into a more complex transaction. The marabout agrees to give Yacine a completely new identity through an occult ritual, in preparation for which she must gather strange objects and large sums of money. In the climactic scene, the marabout asks Yacine whether she is ready to be transformed into a different person. Yacine replies that, yes, she is. The marabout asks her what name she wants. "Marie-Gabriella Von-Bulkowski," she tells him. Baffled by this choice, he asks her to write it on a piece of paper and say it aloud seven times. With this accomplished, Yacine starts to become Marie-Gabriella. During her transformation, Yacine sits in front of a mirror where she watches as a procession of ghostly women (some white, some black) enter and exit the room while the marabout whispers incantations in the corner. After these figures have disappeared, Yacine looks up at herself in the mirror and sees she that she has been transformed into the white French woman whose name she spoke aloud and signed. Yacine's transformation is presented as a deeply perverse process of self-making. Yacine watches as a white *imago* separates itself from her psyche only to occupy and finally replace her body (Diop 2003, 312–18).

*Doomi Golo* makes it quite clear that Camara, the marabout, is performing *liggéey* for/ on Yacine. Camara repeatedly describes it as such. "This work you see and its whitening ... That was huge work!" (*Liggéey boo gis ak weexalam...Loolu liggéey bu réy la!*) (Diop 2003, 318, 320). The transformation of Yacine into Marie-Gabriella Von Bulkowski suggests that there is something fundamentally occult about the production and reproduction of whiteness. The *liggéey* here appears to result in a new identity that literalizes Yacine's alienation by having her embody it. But the price for becoming Marie-Gabriella is devastating. As payment, the marabout demands that Yacine give him one of her twin children. When she refuses, the marabout transforms both children into monkeys. This sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in Yacine being "rescued" from Senegal by French special forces who refuse to evacuate her children since they no longer resemble her. The occult work also renders Yacine a living-dead subject. Bigue, Yacine's rival, tells her father-in-law that "Yacine Ndiaye is not dead yet, but she is no longer alive either" (Diop 2009, 409). The reason why is quite clear: she has had to sacrifice not only her identity, but also what mattered most to her in the world. This is occult labor that has consumed the very self it was meant to work on.

Yacine's transformation in *Doomi Golo* might at first appear to be a classic instance of an occult economy. To obtain an illicit object of desire (in this case, whiteness and the privileges of mobility it confers), someone must pass through a shady ritual that ends up obliging them to sacrifice an important relationship. The schema is similar to the money magic plots of Nollywood films such as *Living in Bondage* or *Ashes to Ashes*. But as Brown suggests of the latter, it is unclear that the ritual is doing the real work of transformation: if anything, the occult work appears to be merely amplifying or actualizing what was already there in the character's psyche (Brown 2021, 170).

Just as significantly, upon closer inspection Yacine Ndiaye's startling transformation in *Doomi Golo* can also be read as a scene of the utmost realism. As supernatural as her becoming Marie-Gabriella might appear, the entire scene can be read as a transposition of bureaucratic processes of "naturalization" – in other words, this is a scene about acquiring (or regaining) French citizenship. It even results in new papers for Marie-Gabriella (to replace the stolen ones). Indeed, all the seemingly magical elements of the episode – the strange objects and huge sums of money Yacine must gather; the extensive questioning; the injunctions to repeat her name, to sign her name; and, finally, the call to receive a new image – all of these are components of what state security regimes regularly require of petitioners in order to obtain a passport or a visa. *Doomi Golo* makes clear that the work that border security regimes demand is not fundamentally different from the occult *liggéey* a marabout might perform. This is a depiction of an everyday form of occult work whose powers extend beyond mere documents to the remaking of bodies and selves.

The fate of Yacine and her children is also noteworthy for the way in which it activates not just occult work but also the ideology of gendered labor contained in the well-known maxim, *liggéeyu ndey, añub doom* ("the mother's work, the child's lunch"). In *Doomi Golo's* denouement, the "work" begun by Yacine is visited upon her children in their transformation into monkeys. In this superimposition of occult and gendered labor there is the silhouette of a further, startling thought: the work of the mother can also be a form of undead labor. In popular imaginaries, the mother's work (*liggéeyu ndey*) conjures a future-oriented temporality. Her work is what sustains the child (*añub doom*). One understanding of this adage is that it means that the greater the degree of a mother's self-sacrifice, the greater her child's future success will be. Central to such an interpretation is the image of a child eating its mother's work. *Añub doom* seems figurative, but is it really? Part of what the adage conjures is the feeling of being devoured by your own offspring. In other words, *liggéeyu ndey* not only serves as a figure for a possibly endless form of work but also for labor that consumes the very self that performs it. This captures the place of gendered work in the rise of the undead in recent cultural production: if the constellation of meanings around *liggéey* takes from occult work the notion of a form of labor untethered from a laboring subject, it takes from gendered labor a temporality in which working can consume and outlive the very subject that performs it.

Even though *liggéeyu ndey, añub doom* is without a verb, the adage has a clear temporality: it is a version of reproductive futurism, or the investment of all hopes for the future in the figure of the child (Edelman 2004, 2). Reimagining *liggéeyu ndey* as a kind of undead labor, then, draws out the consequences of the constraining futurities that animate many fantasies of self-improvement. To put that thought more concretely, people are nurturing nearly impossible dreams which are eating them alive very much like the mother whose work is devoured by her child.

While sketching the costs of entrepreneurial self-realization in conditions inhospitable to human flourishing is one function of recent representations of undead labor, there is a more oppositional aspect as well. The work of the living dead can also provide the figurative ground for imagining alternatives. One such oppositional form animates Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's 2018 novel *De purs hommes*. Like many of the works already discussed, this text orbits around an empty grave – but this time because a body has been dug up. In the book's opening pages, a mob of young men descend on a Muslim cemetery and dis-inter the corpse of a young man who they presume to

have been a *góorjigéen*, or homosexual.<sup>5</sup> After being removed from the cemetery, the man's body is dragged in its white shroud in a degrading fashion across Dakar. This horrifying sequence is captured on one of the participant's phones, leading to a viral video that sparks the novel's plot.

These events are adapted from several incidents that occurred during recent waves of homophobic panic in Senegal. Notable among these is the case of Madieye Diallo, whose exhumation by a mob in Thiès was recorded and circulated on mobile phone and even sold as a DVD in the marketplace (Mills 2011, 119). In Ivy Mills' prescient and perceptive analysis of Diallo's case, she argues persuasively that such exhumations served to instantiate the *góor-jigéen's* "dehumanized unburiability" (Mills 2011, 119). Sarr's fictionalization extends this dynamic to its logical conclusion: the young man in the novel, Ahmadou, is said to be neither alive nor dead. The queerness attributed to him by the mob is configured as a form of abjection from the condition of *góor ñi*, men, leading to his suspension between life and death. As one character says, *góor-jigéen ñi* are "the only ones in this country to whom a grave is refused. The only ones to whom we refuse both life and death" (Sarr 2018, 10).

In *De purs hommes*, this suspension of certain subjects between life and death is linked to experiences of economic *ressentiment* and frustrated heteronormative masculinities. Ahmadou's mother recalls the journey she made in the middle of the night to bury her son in secret with the help of two hired gravediggers:

There are a lot of young unemployed men in this country, they never sleep. What did they think of us? An old horse cart pulled by a donkey, in the middle of the night, transporting two men, a woman and a form that could not be mistaken for anything else (Sarr 2018, 84).

This transit of Dakar rings occult: they are described as a "team [*attelage*] of evil spirits" (Sarr 2018, 84). But the mother insists on what made them appear thus: rumors had circulated when her son fell sick and those had made him socially dead even before biological death took him: "There was talk of a homosexual evil ... The rumor swelled. His illness gave weight to the suspicions. Since he was sick, he was a *góor-jigéen*. From there, he was dead" (Sarr 2018, 83). Alongside the stigma, the crucial factor is the "young unemployed men" who line the roads through which Ahmadou's corpse passes and who will form the mob that denies him a grave (Sarr 2018, 84).

Sarr's novel unfurls a complex picture of the "work" of the queer undead. On the one hand, the plot of *De purs hommes* seems constructed to offer a rebuke to conceptions of the human defined by the exclusion of certain lives that are considered unmournable, as Judith Butler would put it (Butler 2004, 19–49). Ahmadou's ostracism is directly tied to a broader social climate in which strongly-felt imperatives toward masculine self-improvement stagnate in intractable economic conditions only to erupt into outbursts of spectacular violence directed at marginalized lives.

Beyond this sharp but familiar critique, the core of Sarr's novel is its simmering obsession with the "work" that Ahmadou's corpse continues to perform. "Everyone" has seen the ghastly exhumation on social media but it is upon the book's narrator, Ndéné, that the cellphone video does its real work. At first, Ndéné (who begins the book asserting that he is straight) callously suggests that Ahmadou's fate means nothing to him only to then watch the sequence repeatedly, leaving him feeling that Ahmadou is "still a bit alive" (Sarr 2018, 82). This generates a volatile identification, a halting series of refusals

to condemn Ahmadou, and, finally, Ndéné's own ostracism and stigmatization. Against the position that queer life is unmournable, the novel pits Ndéné's commitment to grieve for a man he never met, even if it means assuming his stigma. What could possibly counter a work of violence that aims not only to demean and destroy but to abject even after death? Only an equally all-consuming work of mourning in which the supposedly un-grievable is allowed to gain a transformative hold on us. It has always seemed to me that this was what Butler may have had in mind when describing mourning almost as a form of spirit possession: "Something takes hold of you: where does it come from? ... What claims us at such moments, such that we are not the masters of ourselves? To what are we tied? And by what are we seized?" (Butler 2004, 21)

To be seized by something. Something that is not our self but which obliges us to recognize that we are tied to others, despite our most ardent dreams of autonomy. This is also the lesson, told in a different form, at the heart of Cheikh Aliou Ndao's *Mbaam Aakimoo*. Originally published in French translation in 1997 as *Mbaam Dictateur* (Donkey Dictator), the 2007 Wolof novel is an example of that transnational genre known as the dictator novel.<sup>6</sup> The plot focuses on an autocrat named Wor who rules over an unnamed African republic. Wor (whose name means "to betray") aspires to control every aspect of his country but his rule is abruptly ended when his ministers conspire to make him the object of occult *liggéey*. As he addresses the nation, a dead, bewitched buzzard falls at his feet, setting off a spell that eventually transforms Wor-the-all-powerful into a humble donkey. Wor-the-donkey must then flee the presidential palace and wander until he is found by a Laobé family who adopt him and put him to work. The rest of the novel showcases the tensions of a dictator's consciousness lodged in the body of a laboring animal.

*Mbaam Aakimoo* directly asks what *liggéey* means now. Malaw, the eldest son of the family that adopts the dictator-turned-donkey, brushes off his father's suggestion to find a job, asking instead "What does he even mean by work?" (*Moo lu mu tudde liggéey?*) (Ndao 2007, 1:19). Malaw wants to emigrate and gathers money through various illicit schemes. He senses that work is something that can only be found elsewhere since Wor's regime has tried to monopolize the country's economy (*aakimoo*, the word Ndao uses for dictator, means "to hoard"). But the occult *liggéey* done to Wor reverses the polarity of accumulation. As a donkey, Wor can now only labor, but receives no benefit beyond prolonged life. While perhaps not as typical an undead figure as others I have examined, Wor-the-donkey maps onto the living dead's association with powerlessness, shame and work without end or accumulation. Through the occult work performed on him, Wor is made to be socially and symbolically dead, no longer human and yet somehow condemned to live out a marginal existence.

Ndao's novel conjures the everyday reality of work under a gerontocratic regime that siphons off a country's resources and suffocates the younger generation. Running parallel to its political critique, though, this text is saturated by a sense of unease about where its own aesthetic work fits in. The text seems concerned with whether the labor and desires of the novelistic narrator are ultimately on par with that of the dictator; both are, in some sense, struggling for absolute mastery within a domain populated by many other competing voices. Eventually we start to hear the voice of Wor the dictator interrupt the narrator, quarreling with his own portrayal.



In *Mbaam Aakimoo*, bits and pieces of discourses accumulate, at times taking over the story. This formal choice suggests a possible resolution of the anxiety provoked by the link between the writer and the dictator. A novelist may be a bit of autocrat, but they can also be quite like the mute donkey: powerless to control the narrative, but enjoying a privileged position from which to overhear all the goings on (the donkey in the family compound functioning as a Wolof equivalent of the fly on the wall). Both the donkey and the dictator double the work of the fictional, novelistic speaker: one appears totally in command of an imagined universe, while the other is merely an eavesdropper whose work is ultimately not their own. *Mbaam Aakimoo* asks who lies concealed in the novelist's mastery of their craft – the absolutist dictator, the mute and eavesdropping donkey, or perhaps both? Once the notion of *liggéey* becomes lodged in an artwork, it tends to generate such haunting questions as: if experiences of working are shifting, what and where is the work of art? What kind of labor can aesthetic making still aspire to be?

In closing, let us return to that graveside in *Atlantique*. There is no explanation given in the film for why the drowned are returning. Mati Diop does not supply a backstory because she does not need to: the film itself performs the work. The final layer of *liggéey* at that graveside is none other than aesthetic labor – the power of an artwork to amass and command a multitude of shards of everyday experience and to serve as a space from which to reflect, outside of rationalist coordinates, on and beyond present configurations of labor, humanity, and power.

In the end, the labor of the living dead is perhaps not as enigmatic a concept as it first appeared. Why are the dead back? Because their work here is unfinished. They have returned for all the same reasons the living also continue to work: for love, money, envy, debt, survival, dignity, and on and on. It is our world that is not yet done with them.

## Notes

1. Throughout this article I often use the term *liggéey* expansively to refer to occult forms of work more generally. The term does not typically include spirit possession.
2. Occult economies refer to “the deployment, real or imagined, of magical means for material ends” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 279), especially to situations in which “wealth, because it has been separated from formal, discernible labor practices, appears through seemingly supernatural or mysterious networks” (Green-Simms 2017, 130–31). The term has been generative in analyses of Nollywood, where the grafting of the occult onto the stark moral compass of melodrama has been seen as a way of “mak[ing] sense of the neoliberal present in Africa” (Adejunmobi 2015, 41) and acting out its “horrific transformation of human life into surplus value” (Garritano 2012, 61).
3. On the aesthetic deployment of *liggéey* see also Ndao (2002).
4. See also Fatoumata Seck's compelling reading of the gutter in *Goorgoorlou* as the space of sutura and gendered moral virtue. (Seck 2022)
5. The *góor-jigéen* (literally “man-woman” in Wolof) is an indigenous third gender that goes back to at least the nineteenth century in Senegal according to written sources, but which has recently undergone a pejorative resignification in popular discourse where it is associated with the figure of the male homosexual (Broqua 2017). Sarr incorporates an account of this etymology into the novel. On the long history of gender variance in Senegal, see the recent volume edited by M'Baye and Muhonja (2019), especially the important contribution by Ayo Coly on the political landscape of recent homophobic panics (Coly 2019).
6. On the dictatorial masculinities of *Mbaam*, see Baker (2019).

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## ORCID

Tobias Warner  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6978-1314>

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