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# Black Atlantic Currents: Mati Diop's *Atlantique* and the Field of Transnational American Studies

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In Mati Diop's film *Atlantique*, a Senegalese-French-Belgian coproduction from 2019, repeated tracking shots of the Atlantic Ocean gesture at the haunting histories that suture together the US and Senegal.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, *Atlantique* tackles the ravages of capitalism on a global scale by highlighting labor migration and the latter's disruptive effects on the women left behind, with a focus on the colonial connections between France and Senegal. However, a close reading of the film reveals a more complicated and transnational story, as *Atlantique* forces us to also think about the United States. In the colonial era, the American continent formed the tragic third corner of the *commerce triangulare* or triangular trade, the Atlantic economy based on the slave trade.<sup>2</sup> Gorée Island, two miles off the coast of Senegal, has emerged as a focal point of contemporary African American commemoration of the Middle Passage. While the United States is narratively absent both in *Atlantique* and Diop's 2009 short film *Atlantiques*, the lingering, extended shots of the ocean that characterize both productions cannot be seen as separate from this earlier traffic.<sup>3</sup> As Diop noted when asked about the significance of this oceanic history, "it was hard not to make connections between these waves of departure. It was very disturbing to me that young men would take these boats and risk their lives to reach Europe, especially when you think the slave trade was the opposite."<sup>4</sup> "Dakar feels like a ghost city to me for that reason," she continued, and the Atlantic Ocean "a very haunted place."<sup>5</sup>

The ghosts of the American continent and what it has meant for Senegal and the African continent thus loom large. This element of haunting is made literal in *Atlantique*. A generically hybrid film that incorporates elements of both African spirituality and the zombie genre, the film follows Ada, a seventeen-year-old Senegalese girl living in Dakar.<sup>6</sup> We first see her as she meets her boyfriend, Souleiman,

by the ocean. The romance is illicit. Ada is soon to be married to Omar, a man from a notable family immersed in a lucrative transnational labor circuit; six months out of the year, Omar flies to Italy for work. Souleiman, on the other hand, is a construction worker without access to such legal mobility. Toiling to construct yet another futuristic tower identical to the ones that have come to dominate new developments in Africa and the Middle East, Souleiman and his friends are forced to brave the unpredictable Atlantic in hopes of reaching Spain undocumented after their boss unlawfully withholds pay for several months. The women, including Ada, are left behind; the men's fate remains unknown for much of the film. Soon, inexplicable events start to occur. Ada's marital bed goes up in flames on the evening of her wedding, and at night her friends—their eyes rolled back, only the white visible—collectively roam the streets of Dakar as in a trance to confront the negligent business owner and demand payment of the missing wages. Witnesses claim to have seen Souleiman at the wedding, and the police detective charged with solving the arson suspects the young lovers conspired to sabotage the marriage. Soon, however, both the detective and Ada realize that it is not the material realities of the men that have made it back to Senegal. It is their spirits (*djinn*) that have returned to demand justice. After dark, Souleiman's spirit takes possession of the detective, whereas the other laborers inhabit their lovers' bodies. After Ada makes love to Souleiman—his soul in the detective's host—the film concludes with Ada looking in the mirror, embracing herself on her own terms, free from societal expectations or external gazes, for the first time: “I am Ada.”

Whereas *Atlantique* never explicitly evokes the past and is geographically confined to Dakar and its immediate vicinity, I argue that 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. Indeed, *Atlantique*'s production and distribution replicate colonial networks in their trajectories; the funding and crew are predominantly French and Belgian, whereas the international distribution rights to the film were purchased by Netflix for all Anglophone markets. Once we take into account circuits of movement, patterns of influence, and the transnational constitution of film in a digital age, I argue that we see not only how the circulation and reception of *Atlantique* is shaped by American conglomerates such as Netflix—and indeed, the traces of US economic imperialism make diegetic appearances as well—but also how a film like *Atlantique* urges us to transform our understanding of what is considered the purview of transnational American studies. While lasting connections between France, Belgium, and Senegal are obvious and have played a large part in the film's reception, I argue that placing *Atlantique* into a Black Atlantic trajectory yields a richer, more politically invested reading of the film that simultaneously helps us to rethink the political work that film can do in a globalized world. This is not to discredit the web of francophone connections underlying *Atlantique* as it is significant; ultimately, I argue it is only in a triangular framework—Senegal, Europe, US—that we see the full significance of *Atlantique* emerge.

After tracing the entangled histories and present of the US and Senegal, then, I look at Diop's career and *Atlantique's* circulation to show how the flow of cultural production complicates or even counters some of the traditional routes of capital that privilege West to East, North to South, as well as exceeds a francophone interpretative framework. For one, the film is spoken almost exclusively in Wolof, bringing into the traditional heart of empire voices from what reductively has been theorized as the periphery, instead centering the Senegalese world view. I then tie these two strands together in a close reading of the film itself, highlighting the urgency of rerouting transnational American studies to include objects produced outside of both its geographic and Anglophone bounds. In *Atlantique*, the fusion of the sonic and the aesthetic invokes both a worldly and otherworldly space oriented around the Atlantic Ocean, with the specter of the American continent always looming. As such, the film may not center narratively on transnational contact with the United States, but the liberatory futures and haunted pasts it evokes unavoidably involve a reckoning with US imperial power.

### Specters of Entanglement

On January 18, 1988, at noon exactly, church bells across the Senegalese capital of Dakar rang extendedly. The bells marked the beginning of a week-long celebration of Martin Luther King, with an agenda that included photo and film exhibits, conferences, a large-scale dissemination of printed materials about the US civil rights leader's human rights work, and various soirées that attracted a coterie of both American and Senegalese officials. The highlight of the week was the official inauguration of Martin Luther King Boulevard, a busy thoroughfare that cuts through the heart of the city. At the time, Senegal was the epicenter when it came to commemorating Black American heritage within Africa. The mid-eighties had seen the establishment of the King Foundation, a bi-national group tasked with perpetuating King's legacy. King was seen as a "representative of the black conscience" alongside Senegal's own Léopold Senghor, whose concept of *negritude* became foundational to postcolonial and Africana theory. As a Senegalese embassy worker noted, "In Senegal, there is a special sensitivity about black Americans."<sup>7</sup>

Culturally and economically, Senegal has formed an important focal point for the African American diaspora, as the MLK connection begins to show. This is precisely why I propose that *Atlantique* has something to tell us about the purview of American Studies—both narratively and on a meta level, the film makes a demand on the viewer to interrogate limited attitudes about both the economic traffic and the cultural imaginary linking the two countries.

This imaginary has long roots. *Little Senegal* by French-Algerian director Rachid Bouchareb (2001) and *Des étoiles* (Under the Starry Sky, 2014) by Dyana Gaye, for example, both narratively link Senegal to the US.<sup>8</sup> While this explicit connection is absent in *Atlantique*, each time Diop's lens traces the ocean, the specter of entangled

histories haunts the water. The ocean, the main character of *Atlantique*, is a space overdetermined by the American continent. “The Door of No Return” on Gorée Island, the passageway through which thousands of Africans were forced onto slave ships between the sixteenth and nineteenth century, has been especially sought out by Americans looking to understand the horrors of slavery and to trace their roots. From Alex Haley to Harry Belafonte, Stevie Wonder to Barack Obama, George W. Bush to Hillary Clinton, Americans continue to visit in the knowledge that Senegal and the United States are forever linked by this dark history. Gorée emerges as a symbolic space, imagined and reimagined as historical currents come to bear on the present.<sup>9</sup>

In a US context, the Maison des esclaves (House of Slaves) on Gorée emerged as a focal point for African Americans looking to memorialize the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. As poet Nikki Giovanni wrote in 1991:

It is all but impossible to be a Black American and not know Senegal. So many of us made our way to the New World through Gori [sic] Island. Through a fort and a hole in the ground where even yet one hears the moaning of the captives. What made those people survive, to replicate themselves—to live?<sup>10</sup>

Giovanni’s articulation of an inextricable link between Senegal and the United States formed the foreword to an American edition of Ken Bugul (a pseudonym for Mariètou Mbaye Biléoma)’s novel *The Abandoned Baobab*, translated from the French.<sup>11</sup> American attention to the book was both part of an increased interest in tracing diasporic culture starting in the 1960s—which we can also see reflected in favorable popular and critical reception of Senegalese films such as Ousmane Sembene’s *Black Girl* (1966) and Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki* (1973)—and a change in political engagement with Africa at the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, Gorée Island’s symbolic ties to the United States have informed an enduring connection between the two countries that crosses racial lines. As Bayo Holsey notes, in 1997 First Lady Hillary Clinton inaugurated a presidential engagement with the site and Senegal at large, in her memoir describing the country the “ancestral home of millions of Americans who had been sold into slavery.”<sup>12</sup> Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, too, subsequently visited Senegal and Gorée Island. Not coincidentally therefore, Obama listed *Atlantique* as one of his favorite films of 2019 in his by now traditional annual roundup.

However, whereas cultural ties are well documented, the economic structures underlying them have received less attention in favor of situating Senegal in an exclusively French colonial context. Even so, this enduring transnational attachment between the US and Senegal cannot be understood without forms of colonialism and neo-colonialism that have marked American engagement with Senegal as much as French. Economic contact between the US and Senegal is often cast as one-directional,

part and parcel of a broader global turn toward neoliberalism and open markets that favors the West. In contrast, *Atlantique* shows that transnational film has the potential to unsettle such notions of dominance from within.

Despite limited narrative or any linguistic connection to the US or the Anglo world, traces of economic infrastructures and circuits on screen demonstrate that national and cultural borders have already eroded through transnational trade. In the opening scene of the film, as the men ride home from the construction site in the bed of a truck, the other men singing as Souleiman looks down dejectedly, we immediately see the evidence of American goods flooding global markets; one of the men is wearing a knitted Polo Ralph Lauren hat, and a T-shirt with an American flag pattern printed on both sleeves. As the frame closes in on him, his shoulders fill the entire screen, emphasizing the flag. Two other men are wearing Adidas, and a fourth wears a shirt that reads “Eastern Chicago.” Later on, we see cell phone markets across Dakar overflowing with both American and Chinese phones, and Omar brings a rose gold iPhone for Ada as a wedding present. There is also a prominent role for Kellogg’s Froot Loops, a distinctly American cereal, as one of the possessed women wears a promotional T-shirt when confronting the predatory boss. The eclecticism of these wares suggests not a rational marketplace or consumer demand but, instead, a dumping of US consumer products that did not sell in the States. Whereas the iPhones that circulate as status symbols within the film are globally desired, part of a level economic playing field, the presence of these dumped objects suggests that Senegal—as many countries in the Global South—serves as consumer landfill for the excess of American capitalism. Or, at the very least, even if the products should be imitations (as the somewhat dubious designation of “East Chicago” suggests, a term not commonly used in US descriptions), it lays bare the idealization of American consumer products across global markets and the ideational geography of globalization.<sup>13</sup>

Though Diop’s film narratively focuses on lingering connections to France and other European empires, these details suggest that Senegal’s primary economic connections are, in fact, American. In its depiction of dumping, telecommunications, and agricultural products, *Atlantique* is very much tuned into the economic realities of the global market. The US Department of State notes that its most common export to Senegal is indeed agricultural products, “primarily cereal,” while the CIA estimates that per one hundred citizens, Senegal has one hundred and ten mobile phone subscriptions, placing it on the same level as China and just behind the US in terms of cellular connectivity.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the US company APR, headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, dominates energy generation in Senegal,<sup>15</sup> while institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, which have since the 1980s been inextricably linked to a US brand of economic interest, invest heavily in critical infrastructure and ICT in the country.<sup>16</sup>

This economic interest is tied closely to regional security, and the US has a permanent presence in the country. Mr. N’Diaye, the exploitative boss of *Atlantique*, might be a grotesque character, but he is also a representative of a real life upper

middle class that serves as a conduit between US capital and Senegalese markets. The futuristic cities and high rises are largely funded or serviced by foreign resources. The fact that the police refuse to take action against him further hints at the intimate connections between economic concerns and state policing. The US is also a party to this. In 2016, in a “first of its type” agreement in sub-Saharan Africa, the US and Senegal signed a Defense Partnership Pact to protect their “common interests” in the latter nation, opening up space to potentially increase the number of US Department of Defense personnel already stationed in the country, which was around 40.<sup>17</sup> These common interests, of course, mainly referred to open trade enabled by stable security. In 2019, the ambassador-at-large Nathan Sales reiterated that the US has been “surging resources into the region” to help governments thwart terrorist threats. His phrasing revealed that here, too, financial interest reigned. Calling Senegal an “island of stability and prosperity and security,” remarkable especially for its “economy that had been really on the leading edge in the region” Sales noted that the US government envisions Senegal to be an “exporter” of this particular blend of open market and democratic security.<sup>18</sup>

These historical triangular parameters have today evolved into a neocolonial market relationship, with the US having a permanent military presence in the country as well as dual economic ties; Senegal is likewise a dumping site for unwanted American consumer goods and a market for key resources such as energy and agricultural exports. All of these entangled histories are diegetically present within *Atlantique*. This makes the film’s careful curation through Netflix a stark reversal: whereas American consumer goods travel indiscriminately to Senegal, dumped at random based on what is left over, *Atlantique* travels to the US as an exquisite object procured precisely for American (and global) tastes. For flows in the other direction, the stakes are very different. Diop discusses the ocean as carrying “a fatal attraction” for young Senegalese men. They are drawn to the territories across the Atlantic, Europe and the Americas, and are willing to risk their lives to reach these. This fatal attraction even blocks other forms of intimacy and changes the social fabric. As Ada says to her boyfriend Souleiman, in the first lines we hear in *Atlantique*: “You’re just watching the ocean. You’re not even looking at me.” The Atlantic is thus imbued with meanings—economic advancement, material security, sustainable futures, romantic loss—even prior to encountering it.

As such, both in terms of quality and quantity, *Atlantique* unsettles and critiques stereotypical patterns of globalization that mark the US as dominant. There is therefore a distinct meta-level to the moments viewers see the specter of American presence on screen; as the viewers see traces of US global markets, they themselves consume a Senegalese product brought to them by an American media conglomerate. Histories of colonialism and imperialism have left indelible marks on the Global South, but in the age of digital media, products from the Global South can unsettle US cultural hegemony from within as they come to circulate in a stream of global media productions.

### Circuitous Routes

When American actress Natalie Portman arrived at the 2020 Academy Awards ceremony, hosted as each year in Los Angeles, her black Dior cape drew attention beyond the customary discussion of its fashion merits. Embroidered in gold on the trim, in stark contrast to the dark fabric of the garment, were the names of a cohort of female directors, “women who were not recognized for their incredible work this year,” as Portman told the *Los Angeles Times*. Selected for inclusion were Melina Matsoukas (*Queen and Slim*, USA), Lulu Wang (*The Farewell*, USA), Lorene Scafaria (*Hustlers*, USA), Marielle Heller (*A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, USA), Greta Gerwig (*Little Women*, USA), Alma Ha’arel (*Honeyboy*, USA), Celine Sciamma (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, France), and Mati Diop (*Atlantique*, Senegal). Critics noted the performative nature of Portman’s display, one of many such symbolic gestures at inclusion by Hollywood elites—after all, even Portman’s own production company has never hired a female director besides her. What they did not remark on was the composition of the cohort.

Diop was at the Academy Awards as a representative of Senegal, as *Atlantique* had been shortlisted—though not nominated—in the Best Foreign Film category. As such, Diop, a French-Senegalese filmmaker, was the only representative of African, non-western filmmaking (though she herself grew up and resides in Paris), as well as the only debut feature filmmaker on the cape. I bring in these cultural coordinates to posit that *Atlantique* has taken on a life outside of the independent foreign film circuit that its peers are often confined to.<sup>19</sup> What Portman’s gesture illustrates—in its own flawed way—is how easily *Atlantique* was quickly absorbed into US circuits, especially those centered on increasing the visibility of underrepresented groups both on-screen and behind the camera. This is also evident in Ava DuVernay’s selection of the film for an advanced screening in the newly-opened Los Angeles space for her organization Array, a collaborative of artists, activists, and industry professionals that sets out to amplify the work of people of color and women filmmakers.<sup>20</sup> Before its release to Anglophone markets via Netflix, *Atlantique* was furthermore selected to compete in a number of prominent US film festivals; it played at the New York Film Festival, Chicago International Film Festival, and the Palm Springs International Festival, in addition to several appearances in Canada.<sup>21</sup>

The story of *Atlantique*’s circulation, and of Diop as a transnational auteur, illuminate exactly how national film cultures can open up to create worldly connections or engagements, and as I argue, worldly interventions as well. *Atlantique*’s success is interesting to study precisely because it runs counter to Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim’s observation that postcolonial or diasporic cinema is

consistently located on the margins of dominant film cultures or the peripheries of industrial practices, making it almost impossible to evaluate the impact such films might



have on mainstream or popular cinema within either a national or transnational context.<sup>22</sup>

*Atlantique's* circulation to the heart of contemporary film distribution via Netflix, I suggest, does help us rethink how films from “the periphery” can help reshape and challenge dominant cultural industries and beliefs.

As is true for much of postcolonial film, as Higbee and Lim note, Diop's career has formed in the West. She was born and raised in France and studied cinema both there and in the US. Thematically, her work gestures at the established concerns within postcolonial cinema of relationships between colonizer and former colony, economic unevenness as a result of this history, and current migration patterns. The film is indebted to a long tradition of filmmaking and culture “in French,” as Leslie Kealhofer-Kemp and Michael Gott self-reflexively characterize world cinema animated in some way by linkages to France both past and present.<sup>23</sup> “In French,” placed in quotation marks, points to the fact that not all filmmaking within this lineage is francophone or in French—Wolof, the language of *Atlantique*, in this definition would not preclude a film from being considered within this genealogy of global cinema that originates with France. Indeed, in their demand to center an expansive understanding of francophone spheres—by looking at multilingualism, French cinema apparatus, funding, and individual career trajectories—Diop emerges as a prime exemplar of this new face and possibility. In 2018, Gott and Thibaut Schilt proposed that this flexible corpus of film, coined *cinéma-monde* by Bill Marshall, formed an indispensable heuristic in film analysis for its capacity to account for the “porosity of borders” and an attention to how “languages and identities ‘travel’ in contemporary cinema.”<sup>24</sup> The term is instructive for the financial, symbolic, narrative, and cultural connections it helps bring into view. As an optic, *cinéma-monde* allows us to consider and juxtapose a variety of lateral connections, bypassing the outdated dichotomies of the postcolonial. I thus propose that including historically rooted networks, such as the triangular traffic including the US, is not far-fetched at all nor does it discredit the import of francophone cinema on Diop's work; in contrast, it reimagines these lateral connections beyond linguistic bounds. This becomes especially salient in twenty-first century distribution, as a key facilitator of this cinematic “travel” has been digital streaming media platforms, which allows a nationally hybrid product to circulate to the heart of United States media consumption.

Throughout her career, Diop has been supported by UniFrance, the body promoting French filmmaking across the globe. Funding for *Atlantique* was also decidedly marked by the French-Belgian-Senegalese triad; UniFrance classifies the film as sixty-nine percent French, twenty percent, Senegalese, and eleven percent Belgian.<sup>25</sup> Narratively, despite these hybrid production lineages, *Atlantique* nevertheless is characterized by elements specific to Senegalese culture, from the djinn to the Wolof language. The entire film was shot on location in Dakar, and the narrative deconstructs the rigid Western binary between rational and irrational. As

Diop observes, in African cinema, “fantasy is part of reality.”<sup>26</sup> The only traces the viewer gets of an outside world are in long tracking shots of the Atlantic Ocean. This singular focus on Senegal was a conscious choice on Diop’s part; her work is animated by the desire to “relay different realities,” away from media framings that lock a whole generation into the drama of migratory crossings or that present stereotyped versions of the nation. As such, a subject ostensibly saturated already by media perspectives—migrants and refugees seeking to reach Europe—is rendered wholly differently when focusing on the absences, by “giving the floor back to those affected” by migration and those left behind.<sup>27</sup> Even the single concession that Diop made to her artistic vision was with the Senegalese context in mind; she initially debated having Souleiman possess the body of Dior, one of Ada’s closest friends. This opposite gender-possession would mirror the rest of the narrative, as all djinn take up residence in a female host. However, as Diop notes, she abandoned the idea of having a female character “make love to Ada” as she felt the “Senegalese public was not ready for this.”<sup>28</sup>

While media narratives and extant scholarship have thus privileged the French and Senegalese context, my reading of the film as an object of transnational American studies—of a Black Atlantic rather than an Atlantic network—recenters the American component. *Atlantique*, then, is an incarnation of what Christina Klein has called “an ethos of worldly engagement” in discretely national film cultures.<sup>29</sup> Diop and her work became part of a global media stream when the distribution rights were bought by Netflix after her victorious turn at the Cannes Film Festival, where *Atlantique* won the Grand Prix.<sup>30</sup> While Diop admits to having “mixed feelings” about Netflix and its relation to filmmaking, she overall welcomed the deal, as it ensured a global, and massive, market for her film.<sup>31</sup> As Luis Aguilar and Joel Waldfogel show, Netflix has profoundly transformed the capacity for global distribution.<sup>32</sup> Whereas theatrically releasing a foreign film was cost prohibitive—between physical shipping of the reels and the labor of translation and dubbing—digital streaming has facilitated “cross-national cultural trade” at an unprecedented level.<sup>33</sup> Critics of the streaming platform worry that Netflix signifies a new cultural imperialism, distributing US fare to two hundred and forty-three countries without restriction, but Aguilar and Waldfogel conclude that Netflix enables “trade in many directions,” and that the diversity of its library is highest in the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, Diop’s reluctance at wholeheartedly embracing her selection by the foremost streaming media company in the world, a US conglomerate with an annual budget of fifteen billion dollars to acquire content, is not surprising given the film’s focus on global wealth inequalities. A crucial element in *Atlantique*’s reception was its place in a cohort of films that focus on class in a global framework. A. O. Scott, in his review of the film for *The New York Times*, for example, characterized *Atlantique*’s Grand Prix as “effectively second prize”<sup>35</sup> in a docket dominated by films exploring capitalism’s unsavory effects, with the main honor going to Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite*, an equally genre-bending South Korean film that also grotesquely illuminates class

exploitation through the story of an opulent family and their domestic staff.<sup>36</sup> However, whereas *Parasite* explicitly invokes trajectories of US colonialism and imperialism readily legible to US audiences—the son's obsession with playing Indian and the family's emphasis on English-language acquisition and US education are merely a few examples—in *Atlantique*, Diop has crafted a film free from any such concessions.<sup>37</sup>

This makes the reparative and counterhegemonic work *Atlantique* performs—what I call its worldly intervention—even more significant, and its success all the more remarkable. The consumption of media is, as Marwan Kraïdy and Patrick Murphy argue, “the most immediate, consistent, and pervasive way that ‘globality’ is experienced.”<sup>38</sup> Arjan Appadurai uses the term “mediascapes” to connote how media, in different forms, transcends geographic boundaries and modes of representation.<sup>39</sup> In the age of Netflix, the local and the global can converge in the privacy of one's own home, allowing one to not only encounter the global but make it meaningful in one's day-to-day life. The presence of *Atlantique* within an American, but globally-accessible, conglomerate such as Netflix brings a distinctly Senegalese film and worldview within immediate reach for more than sixty-one million US Netflix accounts, most of which have multiple users.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, the haunting connections between the US and Senegal are perceptible through the aforementioned traces of US presence as well as Diop's interviews in North American publications and the festival circuit, making it possible for viewers to discern the connections. In the film's evocation of the figure of the *zombi* and the significance awarded to the ocean, for example, *Atlantique* displays an indebtedness to the French-US-Senegal triad. As Joanne Chassot notes, the *zombi* has served as “an avatar for the slave” throughout African diasporic culture to describe the Middle Passage, the dehumanizing ocean voyages with slaves packed in like cattle to the New World.<sup>41</sup> The *zombi*—a parallel to the possession of the djinn—thus in itself encapsulates this transnational history.

Netflix released the film on November 29, 2019. UniFrance made the short *Atlantiques*, a direct precursor to the feature film, available for streaming free of charge to coincide with the release, now featuring English subtitles.<sup>42</sup> Adding a slick English promotional post about her work, UniFrance thus joined forces with Netflix to market Diop as a new transnational auteur and make her legible to the Anglo world. On the other side of this coin, while the paratext may have been in English, this distribution both enabled Wolof to challenge the linguistic dominance of English and counter what Aguiar and Waldfoegel call the original status of Netflix as a “cultural US hegemon” by circulating the product of a country underrepresented in global film distribution.<sup>43</sup>

However, even before Netflix, Diop was already very much embedded in a transnational culture of race and class. The original working title for *Atlantique* when she workshopped the project at the Locarno Film Festival in 2012 was *La Prochaine Fois, Le Feu*, the exact translated French title of James Baldwin's 1963 non-fiction collection *The Fire Next Time*.<sup>44</sup> The homage to Baldwin is pointed, as Baldwin, too set out to

understand the Black experience in a global perspective, even while situating his essays within an American context. Diop wrote *Atlantique* at Harvard University, where she received two prestigious yearlong fellowships, and cites “Asian film, American film, and French film” as formative influences on her work as much as the African cinema she is often reduced to.<sup>45</sup> Two of her short films, *Snow Canon* and *A Thousand Suns*, invoke American linkages both narratively and generically, the former by propelling its plot through an erotic fascination with an American babysitter and the latter by casting its Senegalese protagonist as a western hero, complete with cowboy boots, a denim jacket, and Tex Ritter’s “The Ballad of High Noon” as sonic accompaniment to this distinctly American visual.<sup>46</sup> As such, Diop embodies the “ethos of worldly engagement” that Klein refers to, both in terms of content, style, and economic entanglements. As she says herself, *Atlantique* is a “very universal story” that nevertheless has allowed people to “feel more receptive to a certain place that they had no idea about.”<sup>47</sup> The film enables people to imagine and identify with a world and a culture from a remove, all while embedded in a distinctly American viewing context.

What this circuitous movement shows on the one hand, then, is how American capital has reshaped and forever altered national contexts, beginning with the triangular trade and culminating in distribution patterns that replicate the slave trade between Europe, Senegal, and the US. On the other hand, the inclusion of *Atlantique* in a US media landscape and its subsequent prominence in both national and global debates around representation, the Western gaze, and linguistic monolingualism has also affected how the US views itself in relation to the world. Crucially, the influence is multidirectional, and it is here that I turn to *Atlantique* and transnational American studies.

### **Haunted Currents**

As the circulation of *Atlantique* shows, borders are increasingly porous just as they are becoming hypersurveilled and policed. Whereas culture travels easily across oceans, the dynamic transforms when it is humans looking to follow the same routes. As migrants are being turned away at the borders and resettlement has become a pipe dream for most refugees, the stakes of including them—and the cultural products that stand in for them—in transnational American studies to combat this physical erasure cannot be overstated. This is increasingly true as former President Trump moved to restrict access to the US not just from the Middle East, but from Africa as well. Revisions to the travel and visa ban in January 2020 affected predominantly African countries, most with sizeable Muslim populations. Opal Tometi, one of the founders of #BlackLivesMatter and an immigrant rights activist, called the revisions “an attack on Africans,” and both African and US politicians spoke out against the xenophobic, anti-Black, and islamophobic sentiments the ban represents.<sup>48</sup>

This came on the heels of an earlier, infamous moment in Trump’s presidency that also cast African nations, including Senegal, into the spotlight. When Trump

referred to Haiti, El Salvador, and Africa as “shithole countries” at a 2018 White House meeting on the subject of immigration, a global scandal ensued. One of the strongest condemnations came from Senegal’s president, Macky Sall, who wrote on Twitter that he was “shocked” at the remarks and that African and Black people “deserve the respect and consideration of all.”<sup>49</sup> UN spokesperson Rupert Colville condemned the remarks as “racist”: “You cannot dismiss entire continents and countries as ‘shitholes’ whose entire populations, who are not white, are therefore not welcome.”<sup>50</sup> Given the military presence of the US in Senegal and the economic investments I outlined, such a restriction is particularly ludicrous; if any state has been domineering, it has been the US, which has continued to exert both economic, military, and cultural pressure overseas. As Africa and Senegal, explicitly and implicitly, figure prominently in US rhetoric surrounding immigration and cultural pedigree—and for millions of African Americans, as an ancestral homeland recalling captivity and forced migration—it is imperative to also read for narratives that contradict these negative and reductive depictions from within, especially films that make no narrative concessions to what often seems like an unavoidable and omnipresent US presence. Media culture is a primary avenue here, as is literature; cultural forms can travel without restriction and be embraced where people themselves are discarded.

Films like *Atlantique* are thus cultural oxymorons. They embody movement in spaces where movement per definition is impossible or “not welcome.” This is true as much onscreen as in terms of circulation. *Atlantique* and its short film precursor not only challenge us to reconceptualize the parameters of the field, but they also mirror this move diegetically by focusing on the ocean to destabilize the understanding of locations as fixed. As the main character of *Atlantiques* muses, “look at the ocean. It has no borders. [Pause]. No borders.” Theoretically, my turn to the sea therefore dovetails with recent work in transnational American studies that has turned to the oceanic or transoceanic.<sup>51</sup> This turn focuses predominantly on transpacific or archipelagic formations in contemporary perspectives, but can be usefully extended to include Africa as well.<sup>52</sup> As Hester Blum writes, oceanic epistemology “finds capacious possibilities for new forms of relationality through attention to the sea’s properties, conditions, and shaping or eroding forces.”<sup>53</sup> Rather than merely a physical point of connection between nations, the sea is seen as a constitutive and shaping force. Indeed, within global French film studies, Michael Gott has equally productively investigated an “aquatic point of entry” for the French film networks of *cinéma-monde*, but his focus on the former colonies and Europe means the US as a key Black Atlantic coordinate has been little theorized.<sup>54</sup>

In *Atlantique*, the sea is omnipresent. Even in the moments we do not see it, we hear the ocean roaring and waves crashing. The only time we see Ada and Souleiman together is at the beach, when they meet at an unfinished house to avoid prying eyes. When they say their goodbyes, Souleiman knows he will attempt to navigate the sea that night but does not inform Ada; instead, he wistfully watches her walk away, before turning back around to watch the now silver-colored ocean. The

ocean is also where the women find out that their partners, brothers, and friends have left; Ada's friend Dior owns a simple beach bar, and when the news breaks the women desperately observe the waves. The ocean is never far away and shapes the lives of everyone, both the men who leave and the women left behind. The sea is therefore a crucial character in *Atlantique*. Its figuration as alternately benign and treacherous, as a metaphor for both opportunity and loss, is extradiegetically accomplished through a haunting soundtrack by Kuwaiti composer Fatima Al Qadari. Indeed, the sea determines the music itself. As Al Qadari recalls, Diop wanted the music to sound like "it came from the bottom of the sea, from the abyss."<sup>55</sup> This oceanic grammar is haunted not only by the visual presence of the ocean and the stories of the migrants and refugees who sailed it, but by the global economic formations that precipitated and made necessary these dangerous journeys.

Ada reads into the ocean a profound sense of loss—even in the opening scene, she laments that her boyfriend is looking at the waves instead of her—that is directly tied to this long trajectory of Senegalese migrant deaths at sea. As Diop observes, *Atlantique* encapsulates both the mass movement of people pre-2012 (the "Barcelone ou la Mort [Barcelona or death]" period) and the uprising of youth in the 2012 Dakar Spring to oust the corrupt president and call for better opportunities in Senegal. For Diop, the two groups are inextricably linked, engaged in the same pursuit of demanding recognition of their humanity and right to live. As she says, "the living were carrying the dead within them."<sup>56</sup> For Souleiman, looking at Ada and the ocean are one and the same thing; for him, they both signify his future. He envisions both a life of leaving and of staying, marrying the two movements. Ironically, the act of gazing at Ada is repeated in his death. After their night together, Souleiman speaks one last time to tell Ada about a premonition of his final moments, his voice imposed over aerial visuals of the Atlantic at sunrise:

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 shore. Your eyes never  
left me. They were there, within me. Pouring their light into  
the depths.

The monologue is strikingly similar to an earlier film Diop made about the overwhelming scale of the ocean and human mortality in the face of it. *Atlantiques*, a sixteen-minute short film that Diop released in 2009, also includes long tracking shots of the Atlantic, with a boat disappearing into virtual insignificance against the immeasurable blue canvas of the waves. The short chronicles the same themes as *Atlantique*—migration, loss, and inequality—but this time from the perspective of the men. It is purposefully lo-fi, opening with a grainy audio recording of a man relaying how he and his friends almost died at sea when a wall of water battered their *pirogue* as they tried to reach Spain. We then see a young man named Serigne and his friends

gather around a campfire as he tells them about the desperation that led him to his treacherous journey and its mental effects. Nevertheless, Serigne will repeat the attempt; in Senegal, there is “only dust,” no money for him. “If I must die, so be it,” he says. The image then cuts to his gravestone. The second journey proves fatal. The hurt is amplified as we later see Serigne reassure his friends once again that he believes in the ocean’s potential, a sentiment echoed in a collage of elegiac intertitles that explore the visions of abundance that ignite in these men the “most burning desire to flow into the ocean.”<sup>57</sup>

The global economy has uprooted people from their homes, encouraging them to imagine futures otherwise, and it is here that these stories enter the purview of American Studies, a field that tracks the formations of capitalism, a set of relations most closely associated with the US in its current excesses. American Studies can “monitor, register, and respond” to lived social experiences, as George Lipsitz succinctly summarized the field’s architecture.<sup>58</sup> Due to capitalism’s global sway, this reactivity always already means in a comparative perspective, and as both of Diop’s films show in their depictions of forced migration, the sea is not neutral. The sea is itself a litmus test for social stratification, as we see throughout the film in the fact that it is only men from poor families who see no other choice but to attempt travel to Europe.

Conversely, Diop also includes a scene of Omar’s engagement with the sea that shows how it is wealth that can turn the ocean from a source of necessity or terror to a source of pleasure. When Omar takes Ada to a beach club, he lounges, enjoys a mixed drink, and swims in an infinity pool. His swimming is confident and unremarkable, a juxtaposition to the emphasis on the inability to swim of Souleiman and his friends. As he goes to the bar to order a second drink, the flat screen TV mounted over it shows a glamorous advertisement for the Muejiza Tower, the very construction site where Souleiman was a laborer. As such, the scene suggests that economic security or excess allows the wealthy to consume commodified versions of experiences that for most are predicated on the principles of bare survival or necessity. In these mediated realities, exploitation becomes hidden—there is no trace of the workers, separated from their families to work for days on end in the desert heat at the construction site, and there is no trace of the thousands of migrants lost at sea in the still waters of the pool or the vistas of the ocean from the lounge chairs. Just as the pool is a mediated and safe version of the ocean, the glitzy television ad offers a sanitized version of the tower, with all labor, risk, and toil erased.

The cutting criticism of *Atlantique* inheres not only in its condemnation of blatant economic exploitation, but precisely also in Omar’s inaction in the face of these inequalities and his substitution of material products for genuine connections. It is at the pool that Omar gifts Ada an iPhone, which, unlike the dumped wares is a coveted American product. Emphasizing that he got the rose gold edition for her, which is the newest, he asks repeatedly if she likes the present. It is the only multiline exchange the engaged couple have. Ada, exasperated, covers her head with a towel. The film then

cuts directly to her putting on yet another cover, her wedding veil. Societal expectation—of middle-class domesticity, marriage, and economic advancement—structures both of these moments. It is these societal structures that reproduce stratification, and everyone benefiting is complicit in them. The scenes between Omar and Ada are clearly intended to register as constraining and unfulfilling, far removed from the dynamic and freeing bond between Ada and Souleiman. Even though Diop could not have foreseen her film ending up with Netflix, this critical analysis of mediated complacency has clear reverberations for its viewership. What *Atlantique* cautions against is exactly this inaction, the state where consuming a mediated version of something erases realities. The viewer does not want to replicate Omar's mistakes. We do see the larger capitalist structures and their effects in *Atlantique*, and we do see the transnational entanglements that led to this. Viewing the film via Netflix, therefore, cannot but bring up questions about the US role in the world. As Ronak Kapadia noted, the otherworldly affiliations that cultural productions can evoke—in this case aided by haunting visuals and soundtrack—can be a starting point for envisioning real social change, and *Atlantique* effects this in its suturing of the US to capitalism to make a larger geopolitical argument.<sup>59</sup>

In *Atlantique*, the US's role in the world is figured in the margins diegetically, but both in the glimpses of US presence and in the film's indictment of capitalism and its wreckages, it is readily apparent that transnational American studies is pertinent not just in terms of the film's circulation, but in terms of its superb depiction of neoimperialism as well.

Nevertheless, it is the discrete context in which these items appear that incorporates them into a distinct narrative that equates the United States with capitalism. On the evening of her wedding celebration, Ada shows her friends her marital bedroom, a glamorous, brand-new, Western-style setup. A professional film crew documents the festivities, and the entire villa is illuminated with sleek neon lights. Her friends tell her she has "hit the jackpot," and Fanta jokes that she will gladly be Omar's second wife to share in the opulence. As they use their iPhones to take a host of selfies on the bed, Ada refuses to participate, clearly uncomfortable by the celebration of the material wealth when she is deeply unhappy by her arranged marriage. Later, when Dior registers Ada's sadness, she tells Ada that "out there is one big struggle," and that if she leaves "the house of happiness" she will be on her own, no family to support her. Fanta also heavily protests Ada's desire to leave all this money, saying she was "seduced by the bedroom" and will gladly marry Omar. The fact that Dior refers to the marital home as a "house of happiness" cannot but be interpreted as a financial assessment, as Ada is visibly anything but happy. Dior and Fanta are unapologetically interested in material accumulation ("you love money more than anything," Fanta tells Dior), but because of it are perceived as shallow and unfeeling. They are the two characters who dress Western-style, which makes them stand out and classifies them as social pariahs for more traditional Senegalese.<sup>60</sup> Mariama, Ada's oldest friend and a devout Muslim, repeatedly calls them "sluts" and



says that Ada cheapens herself by hanging out with them. Capitalism and tradition are thus continuously juxtaposed, specifically by highlighting Mariama's disdain for the other women.

In another crucial storyline, that of the unpaid wages, the materiality of the US also comes into full view. Souleiman and his coworkers see no choice but to leave Dakar after their boss, Mr. N'Diaye, neglects to pay them for four months despite repeated reminders. Mr. N'Diaye's tower looms over the Atlantic, and in several shots we see it ominously flicker over the water at night. When the spirits of Souleiman's coworkers come back to demand the outstanding 32 million in wages, they congregate in Mr. N'Diaye's villa, outfitted with electronics and luxury furniture. Their first visit, where they possess the women—including Fanta and Mariama—serves as a warning, and on the second they spark a fire in his house, a repetition of Ada's marital bed. Fanta, whose djinn serves as the group's spokesperson, is dressed in a Kellogg's Froot Loops T-shirt for all of these pivotal scenes. She is also wearing the shirt when Mr. N'Diaye finally meets them at a cemetery to hand over the money. However, monetary payment is not enough, and it is here that the most prescient critique of capitalist exploitation is articulated in *Atlantique*:

Mr. N'Diaye (ND): Let me go. You have the money.

Women (W): You're going nowhere. It's your fault we're dead. Never forget.

ND: I'm sorry.  
[women imitate him and laugh]

ND: Let me go.

W: Not yet. Dig our graves first.  
[ND begins to dig using a pickaxe]

W: Look, he doesn't even know how to dig. That's real work! Dig till your hands burn! Faster!  
[ND is straining and panting now]

W: Every time you look at the top of the tower you'll think of our unburied bodies at the bottom of the ocean.<sup>61</sup>

In demanding physical labor of Mr. N'Diaye, the workers undo the erasure of labor that characterized the mediated forms of capitalism discussed earlier. Mr. N'Diaye is not accustomed to labor, to "real work," and has merely enjoyed its spoils from the comforts of his home without exposing himself to any of the risks. Moreover, he has refused compensating the workers who did perform these dangerous tasks. Fanta in her Froot Loops shirt is continuously in the frame; the women are confronting the excesses of predatory transnational capitalism while clothed in its threads. The

affiliations represented here are, literally, otherworldly. The djinn are at once supernatural and a realistic depiction of a brutal social reality. As Diop notes, her inspiration to write *Atlantique* came when Serigne, the lead of *Atlantiques*, articulated why so many Senegalese men risk their lives to cross the Atlantic, commenting that “[w]hen you decide to leave, it’s because you’re already dead.”<sup>62</sup> Labor exploitation is life-taking, even before the formal arrival of death, and *Atlantique* fuses life and death to demonstrate this continuum.

The djinn of *Atlantique* are therefore an embodiment of social injustice. Labor exploitation has become so pervasive in the system of racial capitalism that its occurrence no longer inspires surprise. The countless stories about refugees, modern slavery, and displacement have led to what Roman Krznaric calls an “empathy collapse” in the West: the sheer volume of these stories ironically diminishes individual responses.<sup>63</sup> *Atlantique*’s visceral representation of injustice in the form of possessed women disrupts this disaffected state and registers powerfully. In her depiction of such violence as haunting, Diop has found a way to make this violence real again, to rupture it from the ordinary. By opting to tell this story via the allegory of haunting, Diop demonstrates how the injuries of capitalism trouble easy classifications of past, present, and future. While these injuries may be inflicted initially upon individuals, they have society-altering effects: All of society is oriented around departures and the gaps they leave. Souleiman and his colleagues are robbed of their future, frozen in a perpetual past as Ada and society propel themselves forward toward more productivity, more capital, more revenue. The presence and presentness of the djinn in a society revolving around capitalist demand and the teleology of the market disrupt this idea of linear time. *Atlantique*’s possessed women are a literal incarnation of Avery Gordon’s conceptualization of haunting, an “animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence makes itself known.”<sup>64</sup> It is telling that it is the women who are highlighted in Diop’s narrative; those left behind are looming in the margins, erased from transnational stories about migration or refugees. Their grief is the other side of the coin. The film’s secondary storylines, such as the virginity test that Ada is forced to take and her family’s attachment to respectability politics, show restrictive conventions particular to women’s propriety in patriarchal societies, restrictions that are in part embedded in capitalist fantasies of material improvement and “marrying up.”

When Ada eventually meets Souleiman again, in the body of the detective, she skirts all these social conventions. They meet at the beach bar, and when she looks at the detective’s reflection in the mirror, it is Souleiman she sees. The camera continuously pans from the dance floor to the mirror, switching between visuals of Ada kissing Souleiman and the detective, reflection and reality. As we see the waves from the building and hear the sound of the waves crashing, Ada loses her virginity. *Atlantique* thus ends on an optimistic note, suggesting that love is a reparative to all the exploitation and restriction, and is the only model of futurity. “Last night will stay with me, to remind me who I am and show me who I will become,” Ada remarks the morning after. The final love scene is ironically also the one place where the

progressive politics embodied in the rest of the film become more ambiguous. For example, there is the question of why it is only Souleiman's spirit who possesses a male body, whereas all other djinn have possessed female ones, as such opening the way for a heterosexual love scene and avoiding a more complex same-sex one. There is also the issue of why Ada needs the night with Souleiman to embrace her future, rather than simply relying on her robust network of friends to extract herself from her marriage.

Nevertheless, *Atlantique* transcends the particulars of its narrative both in its embodiment of representation uncompromised by the Western gaze and by bringing into capitalism's heart—the US, by way of Netflix—a multilayered indictment of it. Whereas the representational politics of Hollywood are often mitigated by hiring millionaires to depict the struggles of marginalized characters, lending credence to the belief that the potential of art to transform daily lives is minimal, being performative at best and exploitative at worst, *Atlantique* goes a different route. It does not solely depict the heartbreak of a generation marred by lack of opportunity, but also casts them in the film itself. Diop enlists non-professional actors, most of whom had never even been near a film set. Mama Sané, who plays Ada, speaks no English or French, only Wolof. Diop spotted her in Thiaroye, a suburb of Dakar, and used a translator to communicate with her throughout the shoot. Ibrahim Traoré (Souleiman) is indeed a construction worker, and Nicole Sougou (Dior) worked at a bar, mirroring their on-screen characters. For Diop, it was important that her cast closely reflect and be grounded in the experiences the film depicts. Her logic is that “[b]efore choosing an actor, I think you have to recognize them, meaning the character you have written.”<sup>65</sup> As such, the very people who are otherwise marginalized, not professional stand-ins for them, are placed at the center via the film's trajectory into global digital media.

By making a case for including cultural productions such as *Atlantique* in transnational American studies, I respond to Shelley Fisher Fishkin's warning to scholars of the field to not inadvertently reify the very American exceptionalism that many of us set out to critique in the realm of politics. As Fishkin writes, provocatively:

“America First” and “English Only” memes shape the kinds of politicians elected in some districts in the US; they also shape the kinds of research done in the district where all of us live: the academy. ... [W]hat new perspectives on research in American Studies might emerge if we made the movement of people and texts around the globe more central to our scholarship, and if we opened our scholarship to multilingual archival materials in multiple locations[?] <sup>66</sup>

I am especially moved here, pun intended, by Fishkin's invocation of movement as a crucial category. As I outlined in this essay, *Atlantique*—and other cultural productions that are absorbed into American media streams and conglomerates—alters the US

media landscape by diversifying its linguistic and cultural homogeneity as it travels into US circuits. In this sense, locating a work like *Atlantique* within a transnational American studies is not reductive, but generative. The theoretical move of positing a national production as transformative of transnational scholarship does not challenge the fact that *Atlantique* is both of and for Senegal. As Diop says, part of her art as a Franco-African is to avoid “apprehending Africa from the prism of my Western culture.”<sup>67</sup> Rather than making *Atlantique* fit a US-oriented framework in my analysis, I suggest therefore that *Atlantique* offers a modality for rethinking the foundational tenets of the field by foregrounding movement and recentering the painful, haunting legacies originating with the triangular trade that suture Senegal, the US, and France. In an age where US conglomerates acquire and circulate cultural productions from the Global South at accelerating speed, we need to seriously consider these productions as reshaping linguistic and geographic boundaries from within. This kind of work is readily accepted in economic analysis: the influx of foreign goods—such as the US designer items or iPhones we see in *Atlantique*—is generally understood to alter national markets and both the surface and fabric of societies.<sup>68</sup> In this sense, it is only logical to afford the same power to digital products in the twenty-first century, as digital consumption is now one of the most prevalent forms of transnational exchange.

Of course, broadening transnational American studies is only ever a first step. One must hope that the free circulation of cultural productions along with a recognition of the multidirectional, shaping influences that these productions reflect will eventually combat the dehumanizing narratives and legislative frameworks that at current dominate US relations with large parts of the world, especially Africa and the Middle East. This also involves encountering nations on their own terms, outside of reductive Western frameworks. *Atlantique* ends with a direct call for this recognition of humanity and independence. Ada, gazing into a mirror, the Atlantic Ocean behind her, for the first time recognizes herself outside of the lens of the patriarchy, of Western representation, and of economic and familial expectation. Looking directly at the viewer, she announces confidently, “Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada.” Whether this future can materialize is also a responsibility of the academy.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mati Diop, dir., *Atlantique* (Senegal, France, Belgium: Cinekap/Frakas Productions/Arte France Cinéma/Canal+/Les Films du Bal, 2019, and Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2019). Throughout the essay, I use the film's original French title. On Netflix, the film was released under the English title *Atlantics*.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher L. Miller, *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Mati Diop, dir., *Atlantiques*, short film (France, Senegal: Anna Sanders Films/Le Fresnoy Studio National des Arts Contemporains, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Liam Freeman, "Award-Winning Director Mati Diop Says Cinema Has a Moral Duty to Create Visibility," *Vogue UK*, May 24, 2020, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/mati-diop-interview>.

<sup>5</sup> Freeman, "Award-Winning Director Mati Diop."

<sup>6</sup> Diop herself has dismissed genre as a distinctly Western interpretative tool, but I use it here nonetheless to make the film legible to audiences unfamiliar with it, as the element of haunting and possession is crucial to my analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Bunny McBride, "Africans Celebrate a US Hero: King's Cause Transcends Countries," *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 15, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> *Little Senegal*, dir. Rachid Bouchareb (Algeria, France, Germany: 3B Productions/Canal+/France 2 Cinéma, 2001); and *Des étoiles* (Under the Starry Sky), dir. Dyana Gaye (France, Belgium, Senegal: Andolfi/Central Electrique/Rouge International, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> At times, this symbolism exceeds the historical record. For white Americans and African Americans, Gorée has come to assume huge significance, even if the French slave trade was directed predominantly to the Caribbean rather than the Anglophone Americas.

<sup>10</sup> Nikki Giovanni, foreword, in *The Abandoned Baoab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*, by Ken Bugul [Mariètou M'Baye], trans. Marjolijn de Jager (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991), v. For a further analysis of the significance of Gorée Island for Black American artists, see Salamishah Tillet, "In the Shadow of the Castle: (Trans)Nationalism, African American Tourism, and Goree Island," *Research in African Literatures* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 122–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40468165>.

<sup>11</sup> Ken Bugul [Mariètou M'Baye], *The Abandoned Baoab: The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman*, trans. Marjolijn de Jager and afterword by Jeanne Garane (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008). Bugul's novel urgently brought to attention the predicament of the female colonial subject, a searing indictment that resonated both in the francophone world and outside of it. In the United States, *The*

*Abandoned Baoab* was widely acclaimed, with noted novelists Marita Golden, Randall Kenan, Ann Petry, Amiri Baraka, and Lorene Cary recommending it as “a riveting psychological journey through the emotional legacy of colonialism and self-hatred” (Afterword, *The Abandoned Baoab*, 166).

<sup>12</sup> Bayo Halsey, “Charged Memories: The Slave Trade in Contemporary Political Discourse,” in *Slavery and Its Legacy in Ghana and the Diaspora*, ed. Rebecca Shumway and Trevor R. Getz (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2017), 219–37.

<sup>13</sup> I am indebted to anonymous reviewer 1 for this observation.

<sup>14</sup> “US Relations with Senegal: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” *US Department of State*, October 31, 2018; “The World Factbook: Senegal,” *The Central Intelligence Agency*, page updated February 7, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> “Angola, Senegal, United States: APR Energy Renews 106MW of Contracts in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *MENA Report*, February 7, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> “Senegal, United States: Senegal Covid-19 Response Gets Financial Boost from World Bank,” *MENA Report*, June 20, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> “Senegal, United States.”

<sup>18</sup> Annika Hammerschlag, “US Helps Senegal Defend Against Sahel Extremists,” *Voice of America*, November 4, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Bong Joon-ho’s *Parasite* (2019), often read alongside Diop’s film for its thematic focus and international circulation, does not quite function as a parallel. While it is also a non-Anglophone film, Bong already enjoyed a significant international career; his two most recent offerings, *Snowpiercer* and *Okja*, included American movie stars and were particularly geared toward a hybrid international audience. *Parasite* (orig. title *Gisaenchung*), dir. Bong Joon Ho (South Korea: Barunson E&A/CJ Entertainment, 2019); *Snowpiercer*, dir. Bong Joon Ho (South Korea, Czech Republic: SnowPiercer/Moho Film/Opus Pictures, 2013); and *Okja* (South Korea, USA: Kate Street Picture Company/Lewis Pictures/Plan B Entertainment, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ava DuVernay, @Ava, “I am proud to present the Los Angeles premiere of Mati Diop’s ATLANTICS at @ArrayNow’s Amanda Theater in November before its @Netflix debut. Mati is the first black woman to have a film in Grand Prix competition at Cannes. The film is gorgeous. Brava!” Twitter, October 10, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> “Atlantics: A Ghost Love Story,” *UniFrance*.

<sup>22</sup> Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim, “Concepts of Transnational Cinema: Towards a Critical Transnationalism in Film Studies,” *Transnational Cinemas* 1, no. 1 (2010): 7-21, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1386/trac.1.1.7/1>.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Gott and Leslie Kealhofer-Kemp, "Introduction: World Cinema and Television 'in French,'" *Contemporary French Civilization* 43, no. 1 (2018): 1–15. The entire special issue rethinks the parameters, lineages, and investments of visual culture within this French constellation.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt, "Introduction: The Kaleidoscope of Cinema-monde," in *Cinema-monde: Decentred Perspectives on Global Filmmaking in French*, ed. Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt, 1–21 (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> "Atlantics: A Ghost Love Story."

<sup>26</sup> Kelsey Adams, "Mati Diop Explores the Forces of Migration with a Ghostly Love Story," *NOW Magazine*, November 18, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Ava Cahen, "Mati Diop et Olivier Demangel (*Atlantique*): l'écriture du scénario – épisode 1," *FrenchMania*, January 21, 2020. Quotation translated by the author.

<sup>28</sup> Ava Cahen, "Mati Diop et Olivier Demangel (*Atlantique*): l'écriture du scénario – épisode 2" *FrenchMania*, January 26, 2020. Quotation translated by the author.

<sup>29</sup> While Klein's work is both temporally and geographically distinct—she writes about the Cold War and the South Korean film industry—her argument is generative for the ways in which it separates networks of circulation and style from narrative content. Just as Klein notes of Korean cinema, *Atlantique* emerges out of a cultural field "that was being reconstructed by a host of domestic and foreign forces." Christina Klein, "Cold War Cosmopolitanism: The Asia Foundation and 1950s Korean Cinema," *Journal of Korean Studies* 22, no. 2 (2017): 282, 290, <https://doi.org/10.1215/21581665-4226460>.

<sup>30</sup> International media were quick to celebrate Diop, honing in on the fact that she was the first Black female director to compete in its main competition. Diop herself called the focus on her identity "a very reductive approach to me," instead urging attention to what her film represents. Nevertheless, film and director became inextricably linked in the western media storm surrounding the film. See Rich Juwziak, "Atlantics Director Mati Diop has Mixed Feelings on her Historic Cannes Win," *Jezebel*, November 18, 2019. In January 2020, Netflix announced that *Atlantique* would be added to the prestigious Criterion Collection, alongside three other Netflix originals: *American Factory* (dir. Steven Bognar and Julia Reichert, USA: Higher Ground/Participant, 2019), *Marriage Story* (dir. Noah Baumbach, UK, USA: Heyday Films/Netflix, 2019), and *The Irishman* (dir. Martin Scorsese, USA: Tribeca/Sikelia/Winkler Films, 2019). Currently, Alfonso Cuarón's *Roma* (Mexico: Esperanto Filmoj/Pimienta Films, 2018) is the only Netflix film included in the collection. Within this cohort, Diop and *Atlantique* stand out for various reasons. All other films were directed by established directors with considerable clout in the film industry, whereas this is Diop's first feature-length film; all other films either won (multiple) Academy Awards or were nominated, whereas *Atlantique* did not advance beyond the

shortlist for Best International Feature; and all other films were produced or coproduced by US media companies.

<sup>31</sup> Melanie Goodfellow, “*Atlantics*’ Director Mati Diop Talks Taking the Plunge with Netflix,” *ScreenDaily*, December 14, 2019. The Netflix deal did not include all territories; France, Belgium, and select European countries had their own distribution. North America, the UK, and Asia formed the main markets accessed via Netflix.

<sup>32</sup> Luis Aguiar and Joel Waldfogel, “Netflix: Global Hegemon or Facilitator of Frictionless Digital Trade?,” *Journal of Cultural Economics* 42 (2018): 419–45, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10824-017-9315-z>.

<sup>33</sup> Aguiar and Waldfogel, 422.

<sup>34</sup> Aguiar and Waldfogel, 444. The US Netflix library has both most products available for streaming and also the widest range of foreign content.

<sup>35</sup> A.O. Scott, “Haunted by Ghosts and Injustice in Senegal,” *The New York Times*, November 14, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> In their article on *Parasite*, Ju-Hyun Park notes that “the United States is implicated throughout,” most notably via the complex linguistic entanglements of English in Korea. See “Reading Colonialism in *Parasite*,” *Tropics of Meta*, February 17, 2020, <https://tropicsofmeta.com/2020/02/17/reading-colonialism-in-parasite/>.

<sup>37</sup> Diop builds on a transnational cinematic archive, including African, American, Asian, and European films. Within Senegalese cinema, Diop steps in the footsteps of—indeed, builds on—several other directors whose works have received international recognition. Notably, the works of Djibril Diop Mambety (*Touki Bouki*, 1973) and Ousmane Sembène (*Black Girl*, 1966) also blend hybrid cinematic devices with transnational narratives that redefine or question the centrality of the West or western discursive formations. *Touki Bouki* (The Hyena’s Journey), directed by Diop’s uncle, is a stylistically innovative fantasy film about two young lovers dreaming of a move to Paris, whereas *Black Girl* is a haunting indictment of French racism and traces the life of a Senegalese domestic servant whose cruel and exploitative French employers drive her to suicide. Djibril Diop Mambety, *Touki Bouki* (The Hyena’s Journey), (Senegal: World Cinema Foundation, 1973; USA: Criterion Collection, 2020); and Ousmane Sembène, *Black Girl* (Senegal, France: Filmi Domireve/Les Actualités Françaises, 1966).

<sup>38</sup> Marwan Kraidy and Patrick Murphy, “International communication, ethnography, and the challenge of globalization,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 3 (2003): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2003.tb00294.x>.

<sup>39</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).



<sup>40</sup> Amy Watson, “Number of Netflix Paid Streaming Subscribers in the US, 2011-2019,” *Statistica*, January 20, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Joanne Chassot, “‘Voyage through death/to life upon these shores’: The Living Dead of the Middle Passage” *Atlantic Studies* 12, no. 1 (2015): 90–108, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2014.993825>.

<sup>42</sup> “Free Viewing: *Atlantiques* by Mati Diop,” press release, *UniFrance*, November 29, 2019. *Atlantiques* is now also available for purchase or rental on Amazon Prime.

<sup>43</sup> Aguiar and Waldfogel, 422.

<sup>44</sup> Locarno Film Festival, Facebook Status, April 23, 2019. James Baldwin and Steve Schapiro, *The Fire Next Time*, introd. John Lewis, photographs by Steve Schapiro, essays by Steve Schapiro and Gloria Baldwin Karefa-Smart (Cologne: Taschen, 2019).

<sup>45</sup> Austin Dale, “The Metrograph Interview: *Atlantics*’ Director Mati Diop,” *Metrograph Edition*, November 22, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> *Mille soleils* (A Thousand Suns) is a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction, and tracks Magaye Niang, the protagonist of *Touki Bouki*, the 1973 film mentioned in the note above. The film is by Diop’s uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty and became a landmark in African cinema. In Mati Diop’s film, Niang reflects on the parallels between his onscreen stardom and later life as a Senegalese cowboy. Mati Diop, dir., *Snow Canon* (France: Aurora Films, 2010); and Mati Diop, dir. *Mille soleils* (A Thousand Suns) (France, Senegal: Anna Sanders Films, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Dale, “The Metrograph Interview.”

<sup>48</sup> Opal Tometi, “Trump’s Travel Ban is an Attack on Africans,” *CNN*, February 5, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/05/opinions/trump-travel-ban-expansion-africa-racism-tometi/index.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Macky Sall, @Macky\_Sall, “Je suis choqué par les propos du Président Trump sur Haïti et sur l’Afrique. Je les rejette et les condamne vigoureusement. L’Afrique et la race noire mérite le respect et la considération de tous. MS.” Twitter, January 12, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Rupert Colville, spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Remarks at a press conference, Geneva, January 12, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Important recent works here include *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); and *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, ed. Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

<sup>52</sup> Earlier frameworks like Black Atlantic studies of course did center Africa, but in studies of the twenty-first century the geographic focus seems to have shifted.

<sup>53</sup> Hester Blum, "Introduction: Oceanic Studies," *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14788810.2013.785186>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Gott, "Lost at Sea or Charting a New Course? Mapping the Murky Contours of Cinema-monde in Floating Francophone Films," in *Cinema-monde: Decentred Perspectives on Global Filmmaking in French*, ed. Michael Gott and Thibaut Schilt (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2018), 132–54.

<sup>55</sup> Translated from the French by the author: "sonne comme si ça venait du fond de la mer, des abîmes," "Fatima Al Qadari parle de la BO magnetique d'Atlantique," *Troiscoleurs*, September 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Calgary International Film Festival, "Atlantics Interview with Director Mati Diop," *Global Perspectives*, October 25, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> *Atlantiques*.

<sup>58</sup> George Lipsitz, "What Is American Studies?" ASA White Paper. *American Studies Association*, 2015: 1–2. <https://www.theasa.net/publications/asa-working-papers>.

<sup>59</sup> Ronak K. Kapadia, "Sonic Contagions: Bird Flu, Bandung, and the Queer Cartographies of MIA," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 26 (2014): 226–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpms.12075>.

<sup>60</sup> Later in the film, for example, Fanta says that the *marabout* has told her that the spirit got "in via my belly button because I don't dress properly."

<sup>61</sup> *Atlantique*.

<sup>62</sup> Michael-Oliver Harding, "Meet the Cast of *Atlantics*, Mati Diop's Ghostly Love Story," *Dazed*, November 26, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (New York: Penguin, 2014), xi.

<sup>64</sup> Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

<sup>65</sup> Harding, "Meet the Cast of *Atlantics*."

<sup>66</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Transnational American Studies: What's Next?" In *Oceanic Archives, Indigenous Epistemologies, and Transpacific American Studies*, ed. Yuan Shu, Otto Heim, and Kendall Johnson (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019): 217–18.

<sup>67</sup> Kelsey Adams, “Mati Diop Explores the Forces of Migration with a Ghostly Love Story” *NOW Magazine*, November 18, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> The transformative impact of globalization in the realm of economics is well-documented. For example, much research has been done around terms such as “Coca-Colonization” and export dumping. This includes both research on how American export has shaped the world as well as on how import into the US has changed its culture from within. See for example, “Cultivating Poverty: The Impact of US Cotton Subsidies on Africa” (New York: Oxfam International, 2002; <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/cultivating-poverty-the-impact-of-us-cotton-subsidies-on-africa-114111/>); Gary G. Hamilton, Misha Petrovic, and Benjamin Senauer, eds., *The Market Makers: How Retailers Are Reshaping the Global Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Beverley Hooper, “Globalisation and Resistance in Post-Mao China: The Case of Foreign Consumer Products,” *Asian Studies Review* 24, no. 4 (2000): 439–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357820008713286>; Vivian C. Jones and Brock R. Williams, “US Trade and Investment Relations with Sub-Saharan Africa and the African Growth and Opportunity Act” (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012); and Jeremy Prestholdt, *Domesticating the World: African Consumerism and the Genealogies of Globalization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Furthermore, transnational scholars such as Penny von Eschen outline how the establishment of free markets and economic opportunities overseas was a central component of US foreign policy for most of the twentieth century, even as both Black Americans and Africans resisted the profound political, social, and cultural effects of this US economic imperialism. See Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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