

Love and diasporas: women's anticolonial performances in Atlantique, by Mati Diop

Roger Gomes Ghil¹, Gabriela Santos Alves²

¹(Social Communications Department, Communication and Territorialities / Federal University of Espírito Santo, Brazil)

²(Social Communications Department, Communication and Territorialities / Federal University of Espírito Santo, Brazil)

ABSTRACT: Analyzing the feature film *Atlantique* (Mati Diop; Belgium, France, and Senegal; 2019) from the perspective of film analysis (PENAFRIA, 2009), we aim to investigate how spectatoriality, the presence of an “opposing gaze” (HOOKS, 2019) and access to memory and ancestry (remembrance), promote a female anticolonial performance that claims, aestheticizes, manages and conceives diasporic new territories (cartographic and affective). We point out that, thinking from the black body’s perspective of the territory is to understand that this body - due to kidnappings and diasporas – assumes the role of a shelter of the ancestry that, when accessed by the processes of remembrance (incorporation), points to the forging of a new history. We also suggest the primordial function of black women and loving practices as healing gestures in the movement of memory maintenance within migratory processes.

KEYWORDS - Anticoloniality, *Atlantique*, Body, Love, Territory.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2018, there were 57,250 migrants from Africa to Europe. Approximately 770 of them lost their lives in the sea crossing to Spain, the main gateway to the European continent for migrants, due to diasporic processes structured by wars, xenophobia, epidemics, environmental catastrophes, and social and economic conditions of extreme poverty and racism. The threat of a gradual socio-economic decline in Europe, once the structuring center of global epistemologies, indicates the continent's subordination in the future. The occupation of a power territory by subordinate bodies reveals the responsible contradiction for the imminent end of the colonial world.

Mbembe (2018) announces a universalization of the concept of black since the capitalist economic model updates the practices of submission to sustain itself, rereading Imperial slave conducts of predation and capture, as well as colonial practices of exploitation and occupation, within the extractivist logic, so dear to this system. It is in this context that the French director of Senegalese origin Mati Diop has her first feature film, *Atlantique* (2018), a production carried out by a technical team mostly composed of women (including the heads of photography, sound, and art teams). The film was contemplated with the Grand Prix in Cannes, and its director went down in history as the first black woman to direct a feature film in the competition.

The film takes place in the same universe previously presented by the director in her short film *Atlantiques* (2009) and endorses the agenda of diasporic processes that the bodies of subordinated people are subjected to. This is the story of Ada and Souleiman's love: she is betrothed to another; he is a construction worker at a billionaire Senegalese enterprise and, without receiving his remuneration for a long time, decides to take a chance in the sea with his companions towards Spain.

Since Souleiman does not return, Ada marries Omar, a wealthy businessman, against her will. The narrative gets complicated when a fire happens in the room of the newlyweds that, according to investigations, would have been caused by Souleiman. Ada hopes that her beloved is alive whereas the women of the

community, in a nocturnal trance, march in procession to the home of the builder to collect payment due to the men killed in a storm in the high seas.

The detective responsible for the case begins to present malaise and mental lapses related to the information concerning what happened that night, which hinders the investigations. Ada can no longer hide her displeasure with the sham marriage and goes to the bar she used to hang out with her friends, who are also companions of the missing men. There, the women's bodies, during a process of embodiment, communicate to Ada what happened to Souleiman and we discover that the investigator's body is under the influence of the spirit of the missing young man.

For this analysis, we will make use of the methodological procedure that Penafria (2009) conceptualizes as filmic decomposition, which is a double articulation between the description of the elements present in the film (aesthetic and/or narrative) and the establishment, assimilation, and interpretation of the relationships between the decomposed objects. In this article, we, therefore, investigate the narrative issues of the production, its historical and cultural context, and some visual resources used by the director in order to relate them to the teachings of the proposed theoretical framework.

1.1 ON DIASPORA

Something latent in the film is the nudity of the diaspora and the presence of the absence: this is a mechanism for activating memory, and memory is the possibility of life. The sea is highly responsible for the connection with memory in the narrative, in the same way as it is present in the formation process of transatlantic territories. The colonial project that forces these bodies to cross is rooted in epistemicide:

Killing another person's thought, in reality, transforming this person into a "thing", a mere tool to profit in a capitalist economic system, is a strategy that determined the relegation of black people into a state of subordination and perpetual inferiority. As the insignia of a race is imposed and it is classified as non-human, a categorization of beings destituted of rationality is created, this includes, of course, the memory. (PESSANHA, 2018, p. 63).

In addition to the proposition of escape (going) through the seas, the way back home is also revealed. There is an old African proverb that says: "a wanderer does not know the true meaning of home." This proverb is supported when we analyze the black diaspora and the epistemicidal practices that structured the transatlantic world, that is, the bond that is lost in this process and the need to reconnect to the motherland. This is a determining factor in the development of a sense of identity, which is lost in the forced repatriation process.

In this journey, it is possible to identify the bases and the updates in the religious practices of negritude in the search for survival and the maintenance of its secrets. The Candomblé terreiros, a counter-colonial afropindoramic religion, received the nickname "Little Africas", an African continuum in Brazil, along with samba pavilions, for example, since they are spaces of black people agglutination. In these spaces, the reconstitution of kidnapped African people's socio-cultural practices happened, and still do, and the consolidation of this place as a point of memory is also possible.

There are also reports that people of the highest positions of the Yoruba hierarchy would have followed their protocols inside the terreiros, since a safe space was configured there. Thus, they equate themselves to the Mães or Pais de Santo. This hierarchical reconstitution seeks to update the social form, or even to shed light on the fact that "it is not about remembering, but about bringing it to the present" (HAMPATÉ, 2010). The relationship with the unconscious, memory, past, and ancestry is a relationship of remembering what has been forgotten, either through the speech of preto velho in an umbanda terreiro, or by the reenactments of itans in the Xirês¹. We are talking about reestablishing connections, not only with dead relatives but also with illustrious ancestors, since, according to the Yoruba tradition, each family (clan) worshiped a specific Orixá, a deity present in the bloodline of each clan.

¹ Xirês are parties, within Candomblé, in which Orixás become present on Earth through embodiment and they reenact sacred narratives (itans).

Turning to the cosmogonic spiritualities Bakongo, Akan, Ashanti, and Nagô, which originated in West Africa (the region of the continent in which Senegal is located, where the film takes place) and Central Africa, we will find some notions of ancestry and memory related to the idea of remembrance. As the principle of Sankofa², in which we learn that the foundation of a possible future is structured in the present, from attentive listening to the voices of the past: "some memories are omens", says the character Ada in *Atlantique*. According to the Yoruba tradition³, Ifá⁴ tells us that "what is remembered, never dies." This calling only happens when we immerse ourselves in the waters, and in this case, in the waters of the Atlantic as well. The processes of sound trance and spontaneous incorporation are circumscribed to the context of the traditional spiritualities of these African regions and, in this case, of the filmic narrative as well. Although there is a communicational possibility of transmitting exhortations, teachings, warnings, charges and encouragement, these spiritual manifestations are recognized by the so-called "recent" religions, such as Islam⁵, as linked to "evil spirits", those who cause any disruption in hegemonic environments and in bodies considered "vulnerable".

1.2 OPPOSITIONAL VIEWS AND TERRITORIALIZATION DYNAMICS

Epistemologically, the construction of the postcolonial world is based on processes of captivity: in subjectivity, the processes of making one become docile and of asepsis of bodies take place; in spirituality, the emergence of doctrines and codes of conduct dialogues with the polarization of colonial political projects with absolutist dimensions:

The monotheistic euro-christian people, by having an omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent God, therefore unique, unattainable, deterritorialized, above everything and everyone, tends to organize itself in an exclusivist, vertical and/or linear way. This is because when they try to see their God, they only look in one direction. Since this God is male, they also tend to develop more homogeneous and patriarchal societies. As they believe in a God who can not be seen materially, they approach themselves closely to objective and abstract monisms. As for the polytheistic pagan peoples who worship various pluripotent, pluriscient and pluri-present goddesses and gods, materialized through the elements of nature that form the universe, they tend to organize themselves in a circular and/or horizontal way, due to the fact that they can look at their goddesses and gods in all directions since they have territorialized goddesses and gods. Because they have goddesses and gods they tend to build heterogeneous communities, where matriarchy and/or patriarchy develop according to historical contexts. As they see their goddesses and gods in elements of nature, such as water, earth, fire and other elements that make up the universe, they pursue subjective and concrete pluralism. (SANTOS, 2015, P. 38)

²Sankofa means "return to seek it." It is an Adinkra of the Akan people, belonging to the region of West Africa (between Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo). Adinkras are ideograms designed to communicate the proverbs of the Akan people. This one is the symbol of a bird looking back with the egg of the future in its beak.

³Considering ethnolinguistic groups in West and Central Africa, the *Uolophes* (predominant in the narrative of the film), The *Fulas*, and the *Tucolores* (predominant ethnic groups in Senegal, approximately 67% of the population) compose populations in Guinea, Nigeria, Cameroon, Mali, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Ghana, Chad, Mauritania, Sudan, South Sudan, and Côte d'Ivoire. Other groups also constitute the territory such as the Sererê (14.7%), the Jolas (4%), The Mandinga and the Moors (3%). Therefore it is possible to infer that, with ethnolinguistic exchanges between these populations, there are traditional cults and divinatory practices of similar concepts or of similar origin to those of the Ifás in the Senegalese context. That is the case of the Sererê people, which in their traditional religious practices we find initiation rites and oracular consultations corresponding to the practices of the Yoruba.

⁴Represented by the Orixá Orunmilá. A divinatory method through personal Odus. These are like paths and plots that point out the fate and journey of the person. Precedent of the Cowrie-shell divination.

⁵The emergence of Islam dates back to the seventh century A.D., and the Yoruba people, for example, dates back to the seventh century B.C. The expansion of Islam in West Africa takes place from the ninth century A.D., getting intensified from the sixteenth century A.D. and on, being currently the most practiced religion in the region, covering more than 90% of the Senegalese population, often syncretized to the local ancestral cults.

Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2015) contributes to understanding that the process of gender issues captivity is also contained in the process of racialization, a structuring aspect of colonization. With pre-molded corporeal, aesthetic, and geographical territories, the production of images that maintain the status quo is normalized, such as, for example, in the Hollywood film industry. bell hooks (2019) announces, however, a sensory disobedience - thus, civil - inherent to the subjectivity of black women: the oppositional gaze.

According to hooks (2019), this gaze considers black women “neither as victims nor as perpetrators” of the dominant discourse⁶, but points to the possibility of agency, endorsing the place of black spectatoriality power : “each narration puts the viewer in a position of agency; and race, class, and sexual relations influence how this position of the subject is filled by the viewer” (hooks, 2019, p.218). The author proposes a visual pleasure for criticism, a pleasure that can also be acquired through mirroring, the shared self-connection of looking at the camera, as Ada does in the last shot of the film, announcing her own possibility of life in the future.

Even in the worst circumstances of domination, the ability to manipulate someone's gaze in the face of the power structures that contain it opens up the possibility of agency. [...] There are spaces of agency for black people, where we can at the same time interrogate the gaze of the other and also look back at each other, giving a name to what we see. The "look" has been and remains globally a place of resistance for colonized black people. Subordinates in power relations, they learn by experience that there is a critical gaze, the one that “looks” to register, the one that is oppositional. In the struggle for resistance, the power of the dominated to assert an agency by claiming and cultivating “consciousness” politicizes “looking” relations — one learns to look in a certain way as a form of resistance. (HOOKS, 2019, P. 184)

For hooks (2019), the gaze is presented to black people as a social instance very close to the spheres of power⁷, which receives a special nuance in the context of the film when the voice of Souleiman's spirit emerges the possibility of a look that vivifies: “I saw her in the huge wave that consumed us. All I saw were her eyes and her tears. I felt her crying pulling me to the shore. His eyes never left me, they were there with me, illuminating the depths” (ATLANTIQUE, 2019). The ghostly dimension of the work presents an alternative to the anticolonial agency, which escapes the captivity of the gaze. This is what gives life to new possible territories. The integrity of these territories - unlike the fragmentation present in the diasporic process - is precisely the possibility of opacity.

It is not the closure in an impenetrable autarchy, but the subsistence in an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist, converge, and build structures whose true understanding would lead to the composition of a certain plot and not to the nature of the components. (GLISSANT, 2018, P. 53).

The concept of opacity, here brought from the thought of Édouard Glissant, arises from the non-understanding and non-reducibility of existence outside the regimes of hyper-visibility and institutional

⁶The dominant discourse here is clarified by the author as Mulvey's binary opposition, where the woman is the image and the man is the observer.

⁷The author draws a parallel between Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall when she presents the idea of “power”. While Foucault presents power as “a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom”, he also suggests that in all dynamics of control “there is necessarily the possibility of resistance”. Hall points to an effort by white people to totalize the existence of black people as stripped of power. However, quoting Franz Fanon in “black skin, white masks”, he says that “power is on the inside as well as on the outside.”

surveillance, as well as from an ontological impoverishment that is in the reductionisms and ethnic agglutinations of African peoples by European universalisms, queer, postmodernism and, finally, tokenism⁸.

The ghostly opacity explored in the plot allows the coexistence of life and death territories and presents the contradiction that provides the perpetuation of memory: freedom of transit. Haesbaert (2006) points out four basic objectives of the territorialization process that dialogue with each other, according to their contexts: physical shelter (resources and means of production); group identification (geographical borders); control through individualized spaces, and construction and/or control of networks. The author also points to the movement as a structuring element in the (re)constructions of the territory, as it allows the interaction between what he calls territory-zones (geographical) and territory-networks (economic influence). The driving force that promotes the interface between the narrative territories of this film by Diop, as well as the dynamics of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that circulate through them, is love. It can be operated in the aspect of surveillance and control – such as the fact that Ada is promised to another, a rich man, got married against her will and got an iPhone to be monitored. Or, it can be operated in the form of oneiric love – reciprocal feelings between Ada and Souleiman, sustainer of the political agency (also through the bodies of other women) of reclaiming and resolving financial issues in the “afterlife”.

The idea that love means our expansion in the sense of nurturing our or another person's spiritual growth, helps me to affirm that love is an action. This definition is important for black people because it does not emphasize the material aspect of our well-being. At the same time we know our material needs, we also need to meet our emotional needs. (HOOKS, 1984, p. 4)

Pointing to love as an action and untying this concept of materiality is the mechanism used by hooks to reveal its spiritual dimension and its expansive agency. This allows us to read Diop's film through the optics that shows this love as a black alternative to coloniality⁹ and trauma, since these are institutionally (bureaucratically and legally), territorially, and epistemologically established. For example, agency love is manifested in the filmic narrative when Souleiman's spirit is embodied not in Ada's body (running away from the pattern of previously seen embodiments), but in the body of a police investigator. This is the first disruption of agency love towards one of the premises of coloniality: the police as a regulatory institution of power, which acts in the name of law and order through punitivism. Souleiman manages to make the investigator forget (manifest the trauma of coloniality) and disrupt the investigations into the fire that had happened on Ada's wedding day. Souleiman's culpability for the fire activates in Ada the agency of the opposing optics (look): the certainty of death is transmuted into the certainty of life. Based on that, love triggers Ada's territorial displacement in the search for her beloved.

Awakening to love can only happen if we detach ourselves from the obsession with power and domination. [...] The values that sustain a culture and its ethics shape and influence the way we speak and act. A loving ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free and to live well and fully. [...] The commitment to loving ethics transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. (HOOKS, 2020, p. 105)

A loving ethic linked to an opposing perspective allows the conception of another perspective in the social/environmental arrangement, interpersonal relationships, and the treatment of spirituality. A fire that, on a

⁸Tokenism is a term first used in the 60s, by Martin Luther King. It reflects a superficial effort to integrate minority groups of power. Thus, it is possible to give the appearance of racial and/or sexual equality in workspaces, without requiring deeper and emancipatory structural changes.

⁹Coloniality is an intelligence that crosses spatially and temporally the institutions and bureaucracies. Modernism, postmodernism, and contemporaneity are historical-affective marks of coloniality. Quijano (2000) tells us that this political-economic intelligence that emerged in the colonial context did not end with the dissolution of colonialism. He points to race, gender, and work as classification pillars responsible for the structuring of colonial and modern world capitalism in the sixteenth century.

wedding day in the bride's room, would be interpreted as a bad omen, is now the good news. The transmutation of fire as love and justice into an emotionally empty arranged marriage is the certainty of that spiritual agency, of love as faith, which can not be seen or touched, but which burns and burns, a certainty that is the feeling. In the work of Noguera (2020), Djamila Ribeiro – already in the book preface - points to love as a political form, because it is stripped, according to an African philosophy, of the romantic apparatus forged from European colonial epistemologies, which fragment it and reduce it to alchemical processes of the human organism. Love is a political form because it points to the possibility of full presence as a manifestation of the unpronounceable thing. It is a verbal form of being in the world, which blurs borders and confuses faces underwater.

Realistically, being part of a loving community does not mean we will not face conflict, betrayal, negative results for positive actions, or bad things happening to good people. Love allows us to face these negative realities in a way that affirms and uplifts life. (HOOKS, 2020, P. 144)

True love is the foundation of our involvement with ourselves, with family, with friends, with companions, and with everyone, we choose to love. (HOOKS, 2020, P. 141)

Djamila Ribeiro in Noguera (2020) and hooks (2020) point out that the Western-Catholic view of love preaches, in its romantic aspect, a cult of ego validation and individuality. Regarding spirituality, Djamila accuses a “supernatural” factor: that which escapes the norm. There is an idea of separability and distance in these two movements. Bakongo-nago traditions do not believe in such separability, it is not possible to dissociate the spiritual from the concrete, what exists is a continuity, such as death: transmutation.

Love is both an intention and an action. Our culture validates love as fantasy or myth, but it does not do the same with the art of love. By not reaching this myth, people are disappointed. However, one must understand that this disappointment is for unreached romantic love. True love, when sought, will not always lead us to “happily ever after”. Even if it does, we need to know: love takes work, and it is not that perfect and ready-made story from fairy tales. (HOOKS, 2020, P. 18)

When Glissant (2018) tells us about the possibility of opacity linked to what hooks (2020) tells us about a collective practice of love, the dimension of shared self-connections is evident within the narrative of the film, , both for women and their companions, friends, and sisters. This can be seen in a scene where they are all in the bar without news of their companions, in an atmosphere of sorority and pain– and for the men who nurtured affective ties with these women and who have even disembodied, they return to guarantee their well being through the collection of an unpayable debt: death. Here good living is not about the "happily ever after" of romanticism. It is about justice.

1.3 LOVE AS A HEALING PRACTICE

Far away from the subaltern, vulnerable and romantic condition, Diop presents the actions of black women incorporated as the driving force of the narrative. First, as a loving community, they welcome Ada and advise her to follow her heart in regards to maintaining her love for Souleiman. Then, they encourage each other to break the stigma imposed on Senegalese women's bodies by Islamic tradition, when they flee their homes to go to the bar. Finally, under the effect of spirituality, there is still the strength of their ties and the collectiveness established that operates the repair and the collection of overdue wages to the Senegalese magnate, responsible for the works of the tower.

In this place of protagonism, we remember that femininity, according to Jeje-nagô's spiritual perspective, is divinized by the waters in the form of the queen mother, the Iyabás. This conception also presents a proposal of female politics and management linked to the experience of these women, since “in ancient times, only women used to initiate the worship of the orixás. The phenomenon of trance was seen as a feminine

condition quintessentially” (EVANGELISTA, 2013, p. 93). It is in that way that the woman's body is announced as a political agency since it has the whole range of health-producing knowledge of traditional African medicine, as well as the tools to spiritually deal with all the challenges of the new reality. It is political to heal, remember and enjoy when the institution is necropolitical¹⁰.

Diop suggests, in the midst of Senegal's predominantly Muslim society, the rescue of the traditional Senegalese and African spirituality roots by portraying, in the film, the embodiment as a way of resonating this memory: wet bodies of women embodied in the spirits of their companions who return to collect the money they are owed. Waters¹¹ are also women, waters are also emotions, waters also cover and embrace memories. The director builds, in this group of female plot agents, transgressive characters who have meetings in a nightclub by the sea with their companions.

When we, black women, experience the transformative force of love in our lives, we take on attitudes capable of completely altering the current social structures. This way, we can build up the strength to confront the genocide that kills so many black men, women, and children every day. When we know love, when we love, it is possible to see the past with other eyes; it is possible to transform the present and dream about the future. That is the power of love. Love heals. (HOOKS, 2010, p. 12)

“When black women move, the entire structure of society moves with them” – this phrase by Angela Davis, in País (2017), translates the structural and political condition that black women have in society. This structuring condition happens in contradiction to anti-hegemony: executing an oppositional gaze activated by loving ethics within a necropolitical regime.

In this scheme, black women can only be the other, and never themselves. [...] White women have an oscillating status while being themselves and “the other” of white men because they are white, but not men. Black men exercise the function of opponents to white men, for they are possible competitors in the conquest of white women because they are men, but not white. Black women, however, are neither white nor men and exercise the function of “the other” of the other. (KILOMBA, 2008, p. 124)

It is in being “the other of the other” that these women question the hegemonic practices of social construction and point to the possibility of reform through a strategic performance of dismantling the dominant ideology. Economic and legal intelligence coexist in the existential dimension of precariousness. It is the condition of being othered that brings the insight closer to the precarious existential reality of these women.

II. CONCLUSION

To think from the black body's perspective of the territory is to understand that the black body - due to the continental displacements resulting from diasporic process - assumes the primordial role of carrying ancestry, identity, and culture wherever one goes, and through memory (remembrance) activated by an agency love. It is also to remain connected with their physical and spiritual territories of origin, and yet to create the ability to forge new possibilities of being in the world, transmuting the trauma.

We understand through this study that the processes of remembrance/access to memory occur from the body and the immersions in ancestry, in addition to diving into femininities that anchor knowledge of female politics and management responsible for converting the necropolitical norm of coloniality into the

¹⁰The Cameroonian writer Achille Mbembe (2018) presents a necropolitical system, in which sovereignty can choose who lives and who dies. Mbembe translates the instances of neoliberal democracy as “the widespread instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human beings and populations”, leading to the depletion of resources, death and death in life (epistemicide).

¹¹It is important to highlight here that within the religious practices of the Sererê people - some of the traditional people of Senegal- there is an aquatic deity called *Mindiss* - female protector of the region *Fatick* - which has its image forged from the structure of a manatee. She receives offerings in the *Siné* river and has a part of the sea named in her honor.

possibility of life, justice, and enjoyment. Furthermore, the entirety of the new possible territories for racialized people is in the possibility of opacity, therefore, separated from hyper visibilities and identity ties.

These ties are intrinsically linked to coloniality and its desires to capture, understand, catalog, and homogenize. Castiel Vitorino Brasileiro (2019) tells us that love is a healing practice, therefore, an ephemeral process that needs constant maintenance.

The end of the world is a corporeal, gestural and integral experience. Because illness is a dialogue established between all my organs; then continue! Burn us and facilitate the energy balance that makes us new creatures. Continue to help us kill the coloniality of our gestures, cognitions, and emotions! Set fire to our bodies and give us the happiness of living in the heat of transmutation. I want to stay fired up. If I must die because of it, I die today, then, so that yesterday I can set the fire in which I will be burned tomorrow. (BRASILEIRO, 2019, p. 16; p. 8).

Like the fire in the bride and groom's bedroom, love is this bonfire: transmutation as a manifestation of the power of an opacity that blurs the boundaries of time, space, and physical state. Where the fire does not evaporate, neither does the water extinguish the fire. They are simply qualities of this love manifestation. This is the healing practice: to set yourself and others on fire, to wet yourself and others, to be the other, and to understand the other without ceasing to be yourself.

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