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Colonial subjectivity: an evolving legacy in
Ousmane Sembène's *La noire de...* (1965), Michael
Haneke's *Caché* (2005), and Claire Denis' *White
material* (2009)

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COLONIAL SUBJECTIVITY: AN EVOLVING LEGACY IN
OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *LA NOIRE DE...* (1965),
MICHAEL HANEKE'S *CACHÉ* (2005),
AND CLAIRE DENIS' *WHITE MATERIAL* (2009)

by

Veronica Jordan-Sardi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Master of Arts degree
in Comparative Literature
in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Steven Ungar

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Veronica Jordan-Sardi

has been approved by the Examining Committee
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts
degree in Comparative Literature at
the May 2012 graduation.

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To Mami, for eternal love, support y una risa luchadora.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Sembène and Rouch	13
CHAPTER	
1. OUSMANE SEMBÈNE’S <i>LA NOIRE DE...</i> (1965)	16
Our point of entanglement	16
“Qu’est-ce que je suis ici?”	18
2. MICHAEL HANEKE’S <i>CACHÉ</i> (2005)	37
Double-occupancy	37
“Alors?” “Rien.”	42
“Je voulais que tu sois présent”	49
October 17 th , 1961	52
3. CLAIRE DENIS’S <i>WHITE MATERIAL</i> (2009)	56
Extending the postcolonial paradigm	56
“Ils ne méritent pas la terre extraordinaire”	59
REFERENCES	70

INTRODUCTION

Tzvetan Todorov has ascertained “three spheres” articulating the depicted New world in Columbus’ travel journal: “one is natural, one divine and the third human.”¹ These *spheres* were appropriated by Columbus given his class, his race, and his time; they were also elaborated, according to Todorov, by three motives for the conquest: “the first human (wealth), the second divine, and the third linked to a delight in nature. And in his communication with the world, Columbus behaves differently depending on whether he is addressing (or being addressed by) nature, God, or men.”² Unarguably, Columbus’ *spheres* and motives influenced what he documented; that is, the way he equated the natives’ physical nakedness with deprived “cultural property,” or his reasons for speaking about them as a part of the landscape.³

Blinded by his *spheres*, Columbus does not so much articulate a new experience as he chronicles wishful thinking: “There is nothing of the modern empiricist about Columbus: the decisive argument is an argument of authority, not of experience. He knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to pre-established rules in order to seek the truth.”⁴ Ultimately, as Todorov theorizes, Columbus’ writings epitomize two attitudes towards the Other. One is driven by a desire to see the Other as equal, and thus as identical, projecting personal values and forcing the Other into assimilation. The

¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1984), 14.

² *Ibid*, 14.

³ *Ibid*, 34.

⁴ *Ibid*, 17.

second is embodied by a denial of “the existence of a human substance truly Other, something capable of being not merely an imperfect state of oneself.”⁵

I find it essential to start with a summary of Todorov’s argument in *The Conquest Of America* due to its persistent relevance for current understanding of colonial subjectivity. Todorov notes the extent to which Columbus’s classifications of the Other remain in practice; present in every [former] colonist and in his relations to the [former] colonized. Todorov’s motivation to address why and how the Other is treated in the present prompts him to analyze what European and American culture considers the exemplary tale of conquest. Ultimately, Todorov believes that the conquest of America “heralds and establishes our present identity.”⁶ In partial agreement with Todorov’s statement on this Western perspective, I wish to consider his account of Columbus’s conquest and observance of the Other as a foundational narrative setting the stage for depictions of colonizer-colonized dynamics in the second half of the 20th century and at the start of the 21st. Through his analysis of Columbus’s journals, Todorov demonstrates that our understanding and consequent depiction of identity are not free of biases. Identities within the colonial context, and surely within other contexts beyond the scope of this paper, have been formulated, molded to suit (in Columbus’s case) selfish, political, economical, and spiritual purposes.

Columbus’s lenses, or *spheres*, as Todorov coins them, inevitably skewed and specified the manner in which he portrayed and historicized the Other. It would be a nearly impossible task to analyze all the *spheres* that have come into play when depicting

⁵ Ibid, 42.

⁶ Ibid, 5.

the Other since the age of Columbus. Furthermore, while Todorov categorizes Columbus's *spheres* as based on a close analysis of original journal archives and recapitulations, one can never account for what was left unsaid, what Columbus never wrote down or the possible presence of ulterior motives. Because I find that to ponder on the burden of personal *spheres* on portrayals of the Other may lead to an incomplete and thus untenable hypothesis, I choose instead to observe a common motif underlying the ways in which colonial dynamics and identities have been documented. I will not analyze the specific manner in which Columbus observed the natives, but wish instead to recall the tale of conquest in order to set the stage for the analysis of other colonial tales, remembering that there are always historical influences on the documentation of colonialism whose impact we cannot fully comprehend, personal *spheres* in documenting the Other for which we cannot fully account.

In order to analyze and pinpoint a motif motivating the way in which colonial dynamics and identities have been documented, the medium of representation and the colonial context need to be chosen and specified: the three tales I will observe here are thus all represented through the medium of film, and this aside from a short story on which one of the films was based. Furthermore, all three treat the construction of identities within the colonial context of France and its African colonies. I argue for a common way in which colonial dynamics and identity concerning France and its African colonies began to be depicted on film during the period of "decolonization," soon after the independence of many former African French colonies in 1960, and have continued to be depicted in a post-millennial filmic context (2000 - present). For France, the period of decolonization in Africa most importantly included the Algerian War (1954-1962), and

the independence of various countries belonging to French West Africa and French Equatorial Africa in 1960. These countries included: Cameroon, Senegal, Togo, Mali, Madagascar, Benin, Niger, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, and Mauritania.

To preface the context in which the word “postcoloniality” will be used, and how it relates to our understanding of a phenomenon like “decolonization,” I must delineate the term’s historical and social implications carefully. Homi Bhabha states that if postmodernity, postcoloniality, or postfeminism “have any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the ‘post’ to indicate sequentiality—after-feminism; or polarity—anti-modernism,” instead, he proposes the use of “post” indicates a “movement,” or a “bridge,” through which specific historical events involving the area can continuously occur.⁷ When referring to francophone “postcoloniality,” the prefix “post,” stands not *only* as a temporal marker for that which occurred following the political autonomy of France’s colonies. It also recognizes the phenomenon of colonialism as one whose effects continue at social, cultural, and political levels years after a formal, political tie has been historicized.

The use of the word “post-colonial,” with a hyphen, versus the use of “postcolonial,” also warrants attention. While the hyphen in the word “post-colonial” has been understood as inscribing the term with a “separation between two spaces of the History of France and its (former) colonies, that of a colonization and a post-colonization stage,” “postcolonial,” without the hyphen, as Bhabha notes, accounts for “a principle of continuity between the two periods, the colonial and the post-colonial, rather than one of

⁷ Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

separation.”⁸ This principle of continuity is what I wish to recall when using the terms “postcolonial” and “decolonization,” given that the phenomenon of colonization should not be bookended by specific end or start dates, but elaborated instead by evolving and complex processes occurring at different levels, at different rhythms, and in different places.

The three films I have chosen for analysis are Ousmane Sembène’s *La Noire de...* (1966), Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005), and Claire Denis’s *White Material* (2009). The first, *La Noire de...* was based on a short story written and published in 1958, two years before the independence of Senegal. The film was produced six years after the independence of Senegal, the story’s and the film’s featured African country. *Caché* and *White Material* were both filmed in and depict a post-millennium context; the former is set in Paris, France, and the latter in an unidentified African country during civil unrest. The near half a decade between the first and latter two films stands as proof of the non-categorical process of decolonization highlighted above. One could call it the “after-math of colonialism,” the “post-colonial,” or—as I would rather present it—the *process* of different individuals coming to terms with an *ongoing* colonial history that remains traumatic at many levels in conjunction with individual and collective identities. My choice of *Caché* and *White Material* thus highlights the persistence of colonial consequences on identity some 50 years after the historical marker for decolonization.

Most importantly, the motif uniting the three films in question can be encompassed in the notion of colonial identity as an ongoing process, neither fixed nor

⁸ Michel Laronde, “Displaced Discourses: Post(-)coloniality, Francophone Space(s), and the Literature(s) of Immigration in France,” in *Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies*, eds. H. Adlai Murdoch and Anne Donadey (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 177-176.

intrinsic, as in “decolonization” and “postcoloniality.” Consequently, I propose that the three films explore and depict how the continuous and undefined nature of identity in a colonial setting precipitates an urgent attempt by the self to *make* or *unmake* itself. All three films illustrate how the desire to self-define, whether through destruction or creation, is a response to the imposed, unstable atmosphere and idea of the self within a postcolonial context. Many postcolonial theorists have previously addressed the manner in which individuals can react to a colonially imposed identity by outlining what they consider to be the most important element constituting colonial subjectivity and proposing specific reactions to this imposition. I have identified the *making* and *unmaking* of the self as an important binary in the evolution of colonial subjectivities in reading the following authors and their ideas involving the development of identity within a complex, ambiguous, and continuously evolving colonial space.

Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the word *transculturation* in 1940 to embody the subtleties surrounding the state of a people losing or uprooting their previous culture and merging it with the acquisition of a new culture.⁹ Ortiz explained the *transculturation* that impacted Cuba’s natives under Spanish colonialism, as well as one that impacted Africans, Jews, French, Anglosaxons, and Chinese when they were brought as slaves or migrated willingly to the New World.¹⁰ Thirty years later, Édouard Glissant imagined a world where the power of understanding how cultures, nationalities, and ethnicities have been “entangled” due to colonialism, created a “third space” in which

⁹ Originally published : Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo Cubano del Tabaco y el Azúcar* (Havana: Jesus Montero, 1940). English translation: *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

¹⁰ Ibid, 102.

this mixing was categorized and accepted.¹¹ Glissant famously used the term “*créole*...to describe the entanglement—or what he calls the ‘relation’ between—different cultures forced into cohabitation in the colonial context.”¹² He viewed the understanding of these *creolized* spaces as essential to the forces behind the creation of new identities and communities.¹³ Although Glissant spoke primarily to the context of slavery and plantation societies in the Caribbean, South America, and Southeast Asia, he also proposed that the whole world was becoming creolized, so that an understanding of the world as a conglomeration of mixed nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures would help make room for complex identities.¹⁴

Responses to Glissant’s universalization of *creolization*, as well as the controversies surrounding the interchangeability of words like *transculturation*, *creolization*, and other terms such as *hybridity* and *diaspora* are beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁵ More importantly, what I wish to highlight in setting Ortiz’s *transculturation* alongside Glissant’s *creolization* is how both terms and their definitions speak to a world in which multiple identities coexist. Both terms categorize new cultural phenomena so as to accommodate the identities of many who have been either uprooted or transplanted in

¹¹ Stuart Hall, “Creolité and the Process of Creolization,” in *Creolité and Creolization* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 30.

¹² *Ibid*, 30.

¹³ Édouard Glissant, “Reversion and Diversion,” in *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1981), 26.

¹⁴ Hall, “Creolité and the Process of Creolization,” 27.

¹⁵ for a text that addresses some of the more contemporary controversies surrounding the use of these terms, see Stuart Hall, “Creolization, Diaspora and Hybridity in the Context of Globalization,” in *Creolité and Creolization* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003), 185-198.

a new cultural, racial, and national environment, or those, who in the 21st century, try to imagine a space where there is room for dual or even multiple identification. In other words, the inventions of *transculturation* and *creolization* are both attempts at placing bounds on the inevitably ambiguous space of colonial identity, the space in which the *making* and *unmaking* of the self takes place.

So what exactly defines the behavior of *self-making* and *unmaking* within the ambiguous colonial context? One can simply start to understand these behaviors as reactions by either an extension of the colonizer or colonized to the expectations established within the framework of colonial identity. In *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952), the Martiniquo-Algerian writer Frantz Fanon analyzes the psychological effects of colonialism on people identified as black.¹⁶ He highlights the importance for humans to reach a kind of “non-being;” in other words, he calls for a humanism based on sameness as opposed to difference, and theorizes, as a black man himself, that the black man must disentangle himself from racial identification in order to move beyond discrimination: “the black is a black man; that is, as the result of a series of aberrations of affect, he is rooted at the core of the universe from which he must be extricated...I propose nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself.”¹⁷ According to Fanon, racial identification leads to an internalization of inferiority or superiority that cannot lead to equality; language, for example, is tainted with racial hierarchies, differences that continue to assert the Other as weaker or more powerful than the

¹⁶ Originally published : Frantz Fanon. *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris : Seuil, 1952). English translation: *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc, 1967).

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

speaker.¹⁸ In the end, Fanon calls for a restructuring of identity as unattached to color or perpetrated by the colonial situation, which continually delineates the man of color as inferior. In short, Fanon argues that if racial hierarchies imposed by colonialism give the self a “sense of self” from outside, it is essential for the self to rid itself of racial identification constructed by colonialism.

Furthermore, Fanon’s call for the colonial subject to “extricate” himself from color identification and reach a kind of “non-being” serves as an example of *self-unmaking*. As a response to the negative significations that have been placed on the black man’s color, a racism Eric Williams confirms was the consequence of slavery and colonialism, not slavery or colonialism born of racism, Fanon theorizes a *negative* reaction or behavior that would help the colonial subject arrive to a state of neutrality; that is to say, a state where he would be “free” of the identity markers that have been placed upon him.¹⁹ In Fanon’s rhetoric and its constitution as *self-unmaking*, “extrication” and “non-being” both imply a *negative* behavior and reaction, an *unmaking* of the self, which Fanon ultimately theorizes as a move forward in the process of identity within the colonial context. Almost counter-intuitive, for Fanon, *self-unmaking* is power.

Alternatively, Homi Bhabha’s anthropological perspective presents a different expression of *self-unmaking* through what he calls *mimicry*. For Bhabha, *mimicry* is “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” from

¹⁸ Ibid, 10-14.

¹⁹ Eric Williams, “The Origin of Negro Slavery” in *Capitalism and Slavery*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), 7.

which, he observes, both the colonizer and colonized can benefit.²⁰ Through *mimicry*, Bhabha proposes, the colonized can achieve power by participating in a complex process of appropriation and mockery. In simpler terms, the colonized can act *like* the dominant Other with the intention of mocking him/her through a degree of gained agency. Alternatively, the colonizer can seduce the colonized into *mimicry* and halt the development of his or her identity, “fixing the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence... ‘incomplete’ and ‘virtual.’”²¹ In this way, *mimicry* embodies a menacing strategy for the colonizer and colonized, but arguably more effective when used against the colonized Other.

Bhabha’s theory, like that of Fanon, exemplifies a reactive measure in which a colonial subject participates in order to attain a more “active” identity; “active,” in the sense of an identity that is self-sought and combats the constructs of colonialism. While Fanon’s kind of *self-unmaking* purportedly liberates the black man from racism, *self-making* or *unmaking* through Bhabha’s *mimicry* on the part of the colonizer or colonized equally causes the colonized subject to become more dependent on the colonizer. The colonizer can use *mimicry* against the colonized to force the Other into an “incomplete state,” *making* him or herself (the colonizer) the emblem of that which must be impersonated in order for the Other to construct a sense of identity. Ironically, with the intention of gaining some power through mockery, the colonized becomes less of himself. Within the context of *mimicry*, it is thus clear that colonial power relations are established in ways that bind the colonized subject in *self-unmaking*. Although both

²⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 85.

²¹ *Ibid*, 86.

Fanon and Bhabha explain how *self-unmaking* can lead to the potential for power gained by the Other, he acts only through *negative* reaction and behavior. What are, then, the implications of the Other's effort to continuously *self-unmake* himself in a search to free his identity? Can the colonized subject thus ever act positively, manifesting agency over his identity by *making* instead of *unmaking*? Or is the tendency for the Other to fight through *self-unmaking* ingrained within the identity constructs of a colonial context? Does the colonizing subject alternatively act through defensive *self-making*?

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy presents the difficulties in imagining spaces where there is room for dual-identification; in other words, a space where the powers of *creolization* embodying multiple ethnicities, races, and nationalities rule, and where the colonized subject can participate in the construction, in an active and positive *self-making* of identity:

“Striving to be both European and black required some specific forms of double consciousness. By saying this I do not mean to suggest that taking on either or both of these unfinished identities necessarily exhausts the subjective resources of any particular individual. However, where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination.²²

In proposing that “double-consciousness” stands as a requirement for a person striving to identify with two or more cultural, racial, or national groups, Gilroy necessitates a psychological process in which the individual replaces the nonexistent room for shared spaces in society with a mental awareness, a mental space that makes room for dual or multiple-identification. The act of being “doubly-conscious” can be seen

²² Paul Gilroy, “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity,” in *The Black Atlantic*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.

as a step towards inner *self-making*, as it provides a cognizance that does not settle for the orchestrations of societal identity. However, as Gilroy proposes, the process occurs inside an individual and does not positively change identity spaces at an actual level.

Additionally, how can one display power over one's own identity if one should also consider, like Gilroy implies and Stuart Hall ascertains, that identity is not just "being" but also "becoming"... positioned by and reposition[ing] itself in the narratives and discourses of a culture and a history...?"²³ If identity is a result of ever-changing ethnic, racial, and national spaces, can an extension of a colonizer or colonized in a postcolonial world ever really free him or herself from the pre-established identity constructs and dynamics of colonialism? Is the trend of *self-unmaking*, a process through which the colonial subject could potentially break free from an identity that has been imposed on him, also a product of colonialism and thus only a perpetrator of the destructive entanglements he/she wishes to break free from?

Through an analysis of *self-unmaking* in *La Noire de...*, *Caché*, and *White Material*, I propose to respond to the aforementioned questions. My main objective is to observe how the colonized subject's effort to untangle him or herself from colonial identity may actually entangle him/her further. Does *self-unmaking* imply a habitual submissiveness and servitude from the Other, that although supposedly combative, pushes him further back into enslavement? In contrast, does the colonizer act through the opposing force of *self-making*, continuing to colonize the Other, acting defensively from a remaining desire to control him in a world where he has less social and political power to do so? It is essential to note that I foresee no clean or simple binary in the

²³ Stuart Hall, "Creolization, Diaspora, and Hybridity in the Context of Globalization," 188.

conceptualization of *self-making* and *unmaking*. In identifying self-destruction as an underlying motif in three cinematic representations of colonial subjectivity, I seek to observe how the tendency for the colonial subject to *self-unmake* has evolved. Have we departed from our understanding of a postcolonial paradigm in which extensions of the colonizer and colonized continue to serve as positive and negative polar opposites? What might following the progression of colonial subjectivities in these three films reveal about a post-millennial understanding of the colonial legacy?

Sembène and Rouch

The three films to be analyzed are all fiction films made by directors who actively create voices and subjects in settings and commentaries on the traumatic effects of colonial situations. In 1958, the same year Ousmane Sembène's short story "La Noire de..." (or "The Promised Land") was published, ethnographer Jean Rouch made a 75-minute film, *Moi, un Noir*. As a French director/ethnographer living and filming in Africa, telling stories featuring real subjects in French African colonies, Rouch was criticized concerning the ethics surrounding his position as both ethnographer and maker of fiction films.

When reviewing *Moi, un Noir* in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard, *Nouvelle Vague* director, wrote: « Tous les grands films de fiction tendent au documentaire, comme tous les grands documentaires tendent à la fiction. »²⁴ Godard did not believe that Rouch, as a pioneer of *cinéma vérité*, was to be condemned for documenting his African

²⁴ Jean-Luc Godard, "L'Afrique vous parle de la fin et des moyens," *Cahiers du Cinéma* n° 94 (1959) : 182.

subjects without being able to celebrate a filmic, aesthetic sphere.²⁵ Godard admired Rouch for demonstrating how art satisfied the real. He defended Rouch's freedom of expression by describing him as "un Français libre qui pose librement un regard libre sur un monde libre."²⁶ Thus, for Godard, and arguably for *La Nouvelle Vague*, Rouch's success as a filmmaker was tied to his ability to simultaneously document *and* fictionalize the real. Film theorist Gilles Deleuze, praised Rouch for successfully "fleeing himself" as a Western male; that is to say, for becoming less dominant in relation to his filmed colonial subjects.²⁷ Rouch's ability to "fictionalize the real" is of less importance to Deleuze than his ability to create space between himself as ethnographer/director and his subjects, a space Deleuze considers key to the development of ethical colonial subjectivity.

Unlike Godard, Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène did not celebrate *Moi, un Noir* for representing Africans under ethnographic and aesthetic modes or for the distancing the effect of his *spheres* (as Todorov coins them). And unlike Deleuze, Sembène challenged the legitimacy of the film when he proposed that "an African should have made it."²⁸ Additionally, in response to Rouch's view that being a European observer allowed him to see details of another culture that the culture itself could not see, Sembène responded, "...especially in the realm of cinema one has to analyze as well as

²⁵ Ibid, 181-182.

²⁶ Jean-Luc Godard, "Étonnant," *Arts* n°713 (1959) : 177.

²⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2003), 223-224.

²⁸ Ousmane Sembène quoted in Steven Ungar, "Whose Voice? Whose Film? : Jean Rouch, Oumarou Ganda and *Moi, un noir*," in *Building Bridges: the Cinema of Jean Rouch*, ed, Joram ten Brink, (London: Wallflower, 2007), 118.

see. So that instead of saying merely that a man whom one sees is walking, one needed to know where the man on screen was coming from and where he was going.”²⁹ And in order to see where a black man was coming from and going one had to be black. In response to Sembène’s criticism, a sequel to *Moi, un Noir* was then directed by the lead actor of the film, Oumarou Ganda, when he made *Cabascabo* (1969).³⁰ It seems vital to consider Sembène’s reaction and criticism more closely. How would Sembène have documented the Nigerians of *Moi, un Noir*? Would he be able to *flee* his judgmental *spheres* as many consider Rouch to have done?

In opposition to the non-ethnographic films in question, the controversy surrounding Rouch’s role as fiction ethnographer stands as a reminder of the range of personal *spheres* fictionalizing the films in question. Additionally, the theoretical questions surrounding Rouch’s ethos of filmmaking also illustrate what I am *not* attempting to ask in *La Noire de...*, *Caché* and *White Material*. Having chosen works by Sembène, Haneke and Denis, I am aware of the purposefulness with which these colonial stories are told. And while it is necessary to include what is at stake for these three eclectic directors when close-reading their films, I do not delve into the respective ethics that surround their own subjectivities as creators of different colonial frameworks.

²⁹ Ibid, 117.

³⁰ Ibid, 118.

CHAPTER 1

OUSMANE SEMBÈNE'S *LA NOIRE DE...* (1965)Our point of entanglement

Ousmane Sembène adapted his first film, *La Noire de...* (1965), from his short story translated into English as “The Promised Land,” originally published three years earlier.³¹ It is essential to note the gap between when the story and the film are set, since the story takes place in Senegal two years before the country’s independence from France in 1960, and the film takes place five years later. This chapter considers *La Noire de...* both as the point of departure and the “point of entanglement” for the identities in question, borrowing Édouard Glissant’s use of the latter expression in his essay, “Reversion and Diversion.” Glissant applies the word “entanglement” to explain the way in which the colonized people and former slaves of the Caribbean have had to revert and divert in order to find their place in relation to both their original roots as Africans or native Caribbeans and their place in a colonized country.³² According to Glissant, colonized subjects must divert by searching “for the principle of domination, which is not evident in the [colonized] country itself” while also reverting to their origins, their attachment to their original culture.³³ Ultimately, in order for a colonized subject to construct a safe and purposeful identity in a chaotic colonial setting, Glissant concludes

³¹ Ousmane Sembène., “La Noire de...” “ In *Voltaïque: La Noire de...*, 157-183. Paris : Présence Africaine, 1962.

³² Édouard Glissant, “Reversion and Diversion,” in *Caribbean Discourse*, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia) 14-26.

³³ *Ibid*, 20.

that “a return to the point of entanglement” through reversion and diversion is essential.³⁴ It is difficult to say whether the point itself is dictated by a historic point of contact between colonized people and their colonizers; more importantly, Glissant clearly associates the “point of entanglement” with the center of an identity crisis, formed by a series of contacts, migrations, traumas, that occur at the level of personal identity.

In light of Glissant’s hypothesis, I propose that within the context of *La Noire De...* (1965), *Caché* (2005), and *White Material* (2009), Sembène’s film should be considered our point of departure and “point of entanglement.” It is important to clarify that historically, neither the setting for the short story in 1958, nor the release of the film in 1965 should be viewed as historic points of entanglement for a universal construction of colonial identity in Senegal, because Franco-Senegalese colonial relations date back to the 19th century. However, because the roughly ten-year period between the setting of the short story and the film includes the political autonomy of Senegal from France in 1960, the period can be regarded as one of entanglement for identity structures pertinent to the postcolonial setting of today. Since *La Noire de...* will be considered alongside two post-millennium films, it provides an initial setting for the process of decolonization, and thus for the process of *disentangling* formal, political colonizer-colonized relations. Although distance had been formally created between the economic and political spheres of Senegal and France at the time, the African country and its people also faced a new arena of *entanglements* during a period of neo-colonialism in which some cultural dependence remained as a personal and collective phenomenon. Following Glissant, we will return to 1958 and 1965 via metaphorical reversion to better set the stage for more contemporary

³⁴ Ibid, 26

analyses of colonial identity. We will also participate in theoretical diversion by attempting to understand where the principles of domination, molding, and forming identities lie in the studied contexts.

La Noire de... stands as “the point of entanglement” and point of departure in terms of this paper’s historical domain insofar as it provides the context for a colonial identity that is developing in a period of decolonization and neo-colonialism. It is most important to note how the film stands as our “point of entanglement” in terms of its colonial subject and in comparison to the two other films in question. *La Noire de...*’s main character inaugurates a trend (“ties a knot”) that establishes a motif of visualizing and constructing her own identity within a colonial framework which remains present in *Caché* and *White Material*. This motif has to do primarily with the manner in which Sembène’s main character, Diouana [Mbissine Thérèse Diop], visualizes her place as a Senegalese woman in relation to her French counterparts. Ultimately, Diouana’s self-visualization not only perpetrates her position as inferior, but also eventually leads to her destruction. Specifically, Diouana places special importance to the space her body occupies, a space she designates as essential to her identity. While she first attempts to use her body to establish a privileged or free identity, this attention for the body is turned to her disadvantage and eventual destruction. Diouana stands as our first example of a colonial character driven to *self-unmaking*.

“Qu’est-ce que je suis ici?”

La Noire de... begins with a black and white opening sequence of a ship floating into the French Riviera. In conjunction with shots of sunbathers in the French Riviera, and in comparison with the rest of the film, the opening sequence remains the most abstract

and documentary-like. While the released version of the film is black and white in its entirety, the original version of the film began with a ten-minute color sequence of the French Riviera before diving into an hour of claustrophobic black and white.³⁵ Sembène's decision to remove the color sequence from the released version ensured that viewers experienced Diouana's isolation as a Senegalese maid arriving to France for the first time. Throughout the film, one experiences the growing darkness of Diouana's difference as a foreigner and as an object to be used by her masters. The use of black and white is a visual reminder of the monotony and feeling of imprisonment that invades her life as an African maid in France, as it visualizes the racial dichotomy and friction occurring between her black figure and the whiteness of Madame and Monsieur.

Most importantly, however, the use of black and white enhances an intimacy through which we experience Diouana's pain. In this film, there is no hope for Diouana's happiness or survival; this morbid reality is inherent in every shot. Diouana is introduced as a woman in search of a place through which she can establish an identity of her own choosing. She is naively dependent on her location, on others, and on objects to secure her sense of self. However, because she is continually disappointed by her surroundings, she feeds a sense of innerness the film enhances most noticeably through the use of voice-over. This innerness, which eventually reaches the point of self-implosion, is also mirrored through the inherent proximity of black and white film. From the onset and throughout, *La Noire de...* provides no sense of visual translucency, freedom, or escape.

³⁵ Louis J. Parascandola, " 'What Are We Blackmen Who Are Called French?': The Dilemma of Identity in Oyono's *Un vie de boy* and Sembène's *La Noire de . . .* ." *Comparative Literature Studies* 46, no. 2 (2009): 372.
<http://muse.jhu.edu.proxy.lib.uiowa.edu/>

We first see Diouana after the boat has docked into the harbor. She is wearing a white, silk dress with black polka dots, a matching white headscarf, large, white earrings, a dangly, beaded necklace, and high black heels we can hear as she walks out of the ship and onto French soil. Almost instantly, we are introduced to Diouana's voice, a quiet voice that will hardly ever leave her lips, but instead will remain hanging in the air as voice-over. She first speaks in the form of a question: "Est-ce que quelqu'un est venu m'attendre?" Diouana's initial and continuous need to ask questions concerning her place or her identity is one of several ways in which she is characterized as a subject in search of herself. Doubt surrounds her social place and the physical space she occupies. In her questioning, there is also an insecurity that is somewhat prepared for disappointment; it is as if through her questions, she were able to defend herself from the potential pain of a resounding "NO." As she stands on French soil for the first time, she wonders if anyone is waiting for her arrival, and thus we are immediately introduced to Diouana's dependency and the reality that if no one came, she would be a helpless, African woman stranded in the French Riviera. Luckily, we see Monsieur has indeed driven to the harbor in search of Diouana, and although he seems to treat her with respect, when he carries her bag and asks her how her trip was, Diouana stands next to the car door in hopes that Monsieur will open it for her like a true gentleman. Instead, he quickly jumps into the car and we see Diouana's feeling of disappointment, the first of a series of unmet expectations in France that will lead to her self-inflicted death.

The ride from the harbor to Antibes is short, but sweet; we hear the sound of a blissful, jazz-like piano and through "le Chemin de l'Ermitage," we see the luxury and the wealth of the beach and its numerous sunbathers. Meanwhile, Diouana looks out the

window silently. In the short story, Diouana's initial desire to move to Antibes is triggered by a sudden disgust for her home country of Senegal: "Tout ce qui vivait autour d'elle était devenu laid, minables ces magnifiques villas qu'elle avait tant de fois admirés."³⁶ Alternatively, France represents "la beauté, la richesse [et] la douceur de vivre."³⁷ Diouana also fantasizes about how she will consequently move back to Senegal to help her family and friends with the riches she has collected in France. In the film, however, it is unclear whether Diouana necessarily dislikes Dakar; it is rather her urgent search for a place and an identity that is highlighted. It is clear that for Diouana, being successful at finding a job working as a maid for a European family would grant her a secure place and identity. In Dakar, Diouana thus visits a series of European families offering maid services. She is continuously rejected until she decides to join the group of unemployed females waiting for work in the maid' square. One day, Madame, wearing impenetrably dark sunglasses, scans the workers as if she were window-shopping or choosing a fruit at the market. While a dozen of the women rush towards Madame in hopes of "providence," Diouana sits aloof. Noticing Diouana's apparent docility, Madame offers her a job. Diouana agrees and after she has worked for Madame in Dakar taking care of the children, Madame invites Diouana to continue working for her in France.

Much as Diouana waits for "quelqu'un" at the harbor, she had waited for "providence" at the maid's square. Both Monsieur and Madame notice her while her attitude is depicted as passive and aloof. Although her search for a job in Dakar is

³⁶ Sembène, "La Noire de..." 163.

³⁷ Ibid, 165.

initiated by her actions, the moment in which Madame chooses her occurs in a setting where she is considered as an object; ultimately, she is singled out for being the only woman in the square who waits submissively. Diouana's personal search for place and identity is thus characterized as successful or disastrous depending on the actions of others. Ultimately, she is presented as a character of *reaction*, not of action, much like Sembène viewed Senegal at that time.

Sembène situated the short story in the month before a 1958 referendum, "in which Senegal's president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, campaigned for Senegal to maintain formal ties with France within a francophone community."³⁸ Sembène favored complete separation of Senegalese-Franco relations, as he opposed American imperialism in order to prevent African cultural alienation. In a 1992 interview, he explained:

We are left with a society which is growing more and more impoverished, emptying itself of its creative substance, turning more and more to values it does not create...if America is calling the shots in Senegal at present, it's because those who govern Senegal allow this to happen. So we find ourselves with a society on its knees, waiting for America to provide...a society can't live on handouts.³⁹

Although the previous citation is specific to Senegalese-American relations in the 1990s, it mirrors the attitude with which Sembène approached Senghor's promotion of the French-speaking commonwealth in 1958. It also introduces an understanding of how neo-colonialism still controlled Africa as it reached the new millennium. *La Noire de...*, released five years after the independence of Senegal from France, stands as a reminder of the ways in which Sembène wished Senegal would stop "waiting" for France's

³⁸ Sheila Petty, "Mapping the African 'I': Representations of Women in *La Noire de...* and *Histoire d'Orokoa*." *Social Identities* 6, no. 3 (September 2000): 305-321. *Academic Search Elite*, EBSCOhost

³⁹ Ousmane Sembène, quoted in "If I Were a Woman, I'd Never Marry an African," interview by Fírinne Ní Chréacháin, *African Affairs* 91 (1992): 244.

permission or aid to grow as an independent nation with its own culture, economy, social life, and government. Through Diouana's description as a character of *reaction*, one who waits for the grace of Madame and Monsieur to advance, Sembène criticizes the apparent willingness of Senegal to "live on handouts" from France. At this point in the film, Diouana represents an extension of a post-independence Africa that still acts as if it were a colony.

When Diouana arrives at her new home, a tall, beach-side building, she first notices an African mask she had previously given Madame and Monsieur as a gift for hiring her back in Senegal; a mask whose place as symbol of Africa and of Diouana's naïveté will later be explained carefully. Diouana's encounter with this mask is quickly followed by a long sequence of her cleaning and cooking, no longer wearing her white dress, earrings, necklace, or heels. "Qu'est-ce que je suis ici?" we hear her ask herself, continuing with an inner self-questioning that will only increase as her depression worsens. The disappointment of being overworked, of not being able to go outside the apartment to experience "la beauté, la richesse [et] la douceur de vivre" she expected in France, brings Diouana's sense of identity into question: what or who is Diouana in France if her expectations for monetary and social fortune are continually destroyed? It would be too simple to say that as an extension of post-independence Senegal, Diouana falls completely at the mercy of French Madame and Monsieur. Instead, I find it essential to consider how Diouana has constructed the basis for the destruction of her own identity outside of her interaction with the French.

As noted above, Diouana arrives in Antibes wearing a white, silk dress with black polka dots, a matching white headscarf, large white earrings, a dangly, beaded necklace,

and high black heels. She leaves her wig and headscarf on while she cooks and cleans, even wears her earrings, necklace and high heels to mop the floor. The children Diouana was supposed to watch over have not arrived and the doors remain locked day and night. Yet Diouana keeps and wears her accessories much as she wears her eagerness; determined to embody the fantasy of beauty and fortune she was promised in France. Diouana's relationship to her body is further elaborated when flashbacks provide access to her time in Dakar. As Diouana first searches for a job, she goes from one European door to the next offering her maid services. One particular day, the day her voice-over introduces as "le jour où tout a commencé." She exits a luxury building where her work has been rejected by many households and meets what we suppose to be her boyfriend. At their encounter, Diouana notes how her boyfriend "ne faisait que me regarder" as her mind focused on her search for work and on two African women wearing long dresses walking past them on the street. Diouana describes the street as empty except for these two women, whom she looks at fondly in admiration of their beauty.

In this sequence, the distribution and participation of gazes is of utmost importance. While Diouana notes how her boyfriend does nothing but look at her, she focuses her gaze on the two women. This sequence—along with another in which she and her boyfriend lie on a bed looking at photos of women in an issue of *Elle* magazine, just before Diouana takes her wig and dress off to have sexual relations—demonstrates several details regarding Diouana's relationship to her own body. It is apparent that Diouana's fondness for the two African women is similar to her fondness for the women on the pages of *Elle*. In looking and in fantasizing, Diouana longs for the luxury and opportunity to dress lavishly, in a way that would grant her a sense of self-beauty.

Although it seems clear that her idea of beauty is not necessarily Westernized, since she also admires the two women dressed in traditional African garments it is important to note that after *Elle* magazine was launched in France in the 1930s, its images of femininity went hand in hand with “la joie de vivre,” a philosophy of optimism and lightness influenced by American culture.⁴⁰ So not only might Diouana be admiring the beauty or elegance of both the African women on the street and the women featured in *Elle*. She also feeds her idealized vision of France and fantastic expectations of her upcoming move while flipping through the glossy pages. Her vision of her body and her beauty at this moment proves to be determined from the outside.

As she walks past the two women, she does not feel beautiful. Later, she tells her boyfriend of her expected travel to France with pride, asserting –to his discontent and disbelief – that she will go visit the country because she has promised her *patronne*. Perhaps, of course, France will grant her the opportunity to be more like the two African women and like the magazine models. With this thought, she removes her wig and undresses herself in her boyfriend’s bed. These situations thus designate Diouana as a character who rejects the gaze of her boyfriend when she is unemployed; that is, when she longs for more beauty through opportunity; later, she welcomes his gaze after she has been given the hope for fortune. Ultimately, she desires to be looked at, to be in a place of opportunity where she feels beautiful enough to receive gazes of admiration. Diouana views her body as one she wishes to fight for in order to adorn. In this way, she designates her body as demarcating her sense of self-identity.

⁴⁰ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 79.

The importance Diouana places on her body and its adornment is complicated by the colonial situation that surrounds her. Kristin Ross notes that in the roughly ten-year period of the mid 1950s to the mid 1960s, the period in which Sembène wrote and filmed *La Noire de...*, France's colonies are somewhat "replaced, and the effort that once went into maintaining and disciplining a colonial people and situation becomes instead concentrated on a particular 'level' of metropolitan existence: everyday life."⁴¹ This focus on everyday life was mainly geared towards controlling the domestic life of French men and women. The reason was that the mass media, mainly advertisements and featured articles in beauty magazines, among them *Elle*, inundated women with promises of cleanliness, particularly the cleanliness of their domestic life.

Ross notes that "a chain of equivalences is at work here...: if the woman is clean, the family is clean, the nation is clean."⁴² I would like to add another *if* to "the chain of equivalences" Ross proposes by adding, "if the maid is clean," as a subset of "the family," something else belonging to "the woman." In *La Noire de...* it is clear that what occurs is a meeting of the importance of colonies for France in the earlier part of the century with the new essentiality of everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s. Diouana is an extension of a colony and of domesticity. For Madame, hiring Diouana is thus like acquiring an extension of her domestic life that must represent her well. In this way, Diouana in France is sadly more similar to the accessories she proudly wears as she cleans and cooks than to the two elegant African women or magazine models she admires. She is treated as a kind of household appliance.

⁴¹ Ibid, 77.

⁴² Ibid, 78.

We see Diouana's place as accessory and object most during a scene in which Madame has invited friends for lunch and has asked Diouana to make traditional African rice (*riz maffé*). Diouana obeys Madame's orders in hopes that after cooking the rice she will finally have the opportunity to visit "Nice and Monte Carlo," because Madame will finally give her a paycheck so she can go shopping for "dresses, heels, silk undies, and pretty wigs." Importantly, however, just before the guests arrive, Madame scolds Diouana for dressing so elegantly while mopping the floor and fetches an apron she ties onto Diouana. It is at once shocking to see Diouana and Madame so physically close to each other. At this intimate moment, Madame forcefully ties an apron onto Diouana, symbolizing both Diouana's place as inferior servant and Madame's power of ownership. Additionally, this moment also replaces Diouana's fantasy of buying "dresses and silk undies," with Madame's desire for Diouana to most importantly embody a functional domestic life worth showing off at lunch parties.

To Madame's pleasure, Diouana proves to be a riot. After much talk of the rice being delicious but a bit too *élevé*, or a bit too *fort*, both adjectives used to label "the exotic," and arguably as "summational statements" to highlight the difference separating the French enjoying the rice and the African who made it, one of the guests approaches Diouana and kisses her, assuring that he has never kissed a *Négresse*.⁴³ This guest had already made his sexualized interest in Diouana public, staring at her intently when she walked into the room to serve, and commenting jokingly (arguably, offensively) that he hoped the rice was an aphrodisiac. At this moment, Madame remarks at Diouana's apparent unhappiness as the older man objectifies her; she walks into the kitchen to

⁴³ see Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 255.

assure Diouana that the man was only kidding and that she is proud of her for making good rice, “les indigènes [after all] ne mangent que du riz.”

Philip Rosen comments on Madame’s place as a “class figure... a kind of subaltern who governs the colonized laborer in the domestic sphere.”⁴⁴ During the lunch scene, Diouana functions as Madame’s domestic appliance, one who functionally prepares lunch while exhibiting a certain kind of *wow* factor worthy of the 1931 Paris Colonial Exhibition. While Diouana wished the move to France would grant her physical beauty, the use of her body is appropriated by Madame and made into a practical *and* exotic object, while it is objectified further, this time sexually, by one of Madame’s guests. Interestingly, Rosen notes that Madame’s responsibility as “governor of the domestic sphere” and how she accordingly interacts with Diouana is complicated further by her relationship with Monsieur. During dinner, Monsieur does not speak a word; instead, he gulps down a lot of red wine. In fact, Monsieur’s drinking habits have severed relations between him and Madame by causing her to feel bored, lonely, and frustrated during their French Riviera “vacation.” Two important factors regarding Madame and her interaction with Monsieur and how this relationship affects Diouana deserve comment.

First, as Rosen suggests, “one might say that it is [Madame’s] job to mediate, activate or ‘translate’ the power of her husband and his superiors to Diouana.”⁴⁵ If we assume, given gender hierarchy roles of the 1950s and 60s, that Madame is in fact responsible for “translating” Monsieur’s power over to Diouana, her responsibility is

⁴⁴ Philip Rosen, “Nation, inter-nation and narration in Ousmane Sembène’s films,” in *A Call to Action: the Films of Ousmane Sembène*, ed. Sheila Petty. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 40.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 40.

complicated by Monsieur's passivity and apparent indifference towards her. Not only is Monsieur portrayed with a drinking habit, but when Madame attempts to have a conversation about Diouana's withdrawn behavior, Monsieur is also portrayed as an ignorant buffoon who brushes Diouana's depression off as a consequence of the climate! Madame is thus left alone in power; with only indifference and ignorance to "translate." Ironically, Madame is a subaltern within a failed patriarchal structure where she succeeds in passing on frustration and overcompensating for the structure's failure with meanness and tyranny.

Since Madame is left to reign over domesticity in what should be a fixed, patriarchal household, she is characterized as angry, bored and thus similar to Diouana. These shared symptoms underscore Diouana as a victim of the aforementioned "chain of equivalences." If we appropriate Ross's rationale for unhappiness, the chain would be: "if the woman is unhappy, the family (and maid, as I proposed) is unhappy, the nation is unhappy." However, since Monsieur does not participate in constructing a traditional patriarchal system and the children are nowhere in sight, the chain of equivalences for this French family is out of order. The woman's unhappiness is the product of an unstable family structure; and the maid, not only a foreigner within this dynamic but also an acquired domestic tool, carries the psychological burden of a destabilized structure. All things considered, Diouana's body remains an extension of Madame; she is Madame's object, at the service— if not also the mercy—of her offensive guests and of her frustration.

In *La Noire de...* what lies at the end of the "chain of equivalences,"—the nation—is defined in terms of division. That is to say, the division between France and

Senegal manifested through Diouana's perspective and the opposing attitudes that surround her. Additionally, and most importantly, Diouana's personal interaction with her homeland also highlights the importance of her body. While Diouana's attitude towards her homeland seems at first ambivalent, and her attitude towards France one of complete idolatry, the perspective of Diouana's French counterparts embodies a colonial visualization of Senegal. Importantly, Madame and Monsieur are a "*coopérant* family...Diouana's employer is an advisor in the program that France created after Independence to assist in the development of Senegal's technical infrastructure."⁴⁶ Thus, just as Senegal at the time was dependent on France for technical infrastructure, Diouana in France becomes completely dependent on the family's cooperating generosity.

Furthermore, during the lunch sequence, talk of Senegal's weaknesses predominates conversation. While Monsieur and Madame try to convince their guests to come visit Dakar a discussion arises in appropriate *coopérant* fashion concerning Senegal's "safety." Senegal is a "dangerous" place because of all "those civil wars" and "Sanghor's influence." And while Senegal "is not like Congo," its independence has irrefutably made "them [les indigènes] less natural." As might already be apparent, the table talk that occurs concerning Senegal proves to be nearly absurd, almost satirical of France's superiority complex at the time. It is thus made clear that the French who surround Diouana conform to stereotypical colonial personalities that bluntly view newly-independent Senegal as inferior and still in need of support from a much more "civilized" country. The lunch sequence is significantly interrupted by the first of a series

⁴⁶ Ibid, 72-73.

of flashbacks to Dakar and to a Senegal in which we are given essential glimpses of Diouana's proper perception of her homeland.

Diouana's relationship to her homeland is epitomized through her body, adding yet another way in which her physicality encompasses the essential space for her identity. The way in which her body plays a significant role in defining her relationship with African nationhood can be explained by observing two distinctive moments: the first occurring at La Place de L'Indépendance, during the second flashback to Dakar when she first tells her boyfriend of her move to France, and the second occurring throughout the film in her interaction with a traditional, African mask. The first example, a sequence, begins with Diouana and her boyfriend walking near "La Place de L'Indépendance," where a huge monument that reads, "À nos morts la patrie reconnaissante (1936-1945)," commemorates the death of the *tirailleurs sénégalais* who fought for France in World War I and II, and who later became Sembène's main characters in his film, *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988). Diouana is full of joy, wearing a new, white dress and white bag Madame has just given her, musing over her upcoming move to France. A photographer approaches the young couple to take a photo, a photo Diouana then later takes to France and longs over in her sadness. But at this moment, Diouana walks away suddenly, upset with her boyfriend for getting friendly while the photo was being taken. Her mind still on France, she asks her boyfriend: "Tu crois que la France est plus belle?" shortly before he becomes upset at the thought of her going and, as Diouana imagines, condemning her for wanting to participate in "l'aide domestique." Lost in her fantasy and indifferent to her boyfriend's rage, Diouana begins to skip up the stairs of the monument, yelling: "En France! En France! En France!" Suddenly, in contrast with her excitement, the fictional

footage is interrupted by a series of brief documentary shots of the official ceremony that was held at “La Place” to inaugurate the *tirailleurs* memorial.⁴⁷ Ignorant of the importance of the memorial and lost in her French illusion, Diouana climbs to the top of the memorial, continuing to skip up the stairs like a child. Once her boyfriend sees Diouana’s body atop the memorial, he pleads for her to climb down, yelling: “c’est du sacrilège!”

Once again, the importance Diouana places on the opportunity for new clothing is highlighted because her happiness is evidently tied to the gifts Madame has given her, and to the prospect of France bringing even more material prosperity. In her new dress, with her new bag, and an eagerness for France, Diouana prances amid the history that places her own country of Senegal and France at saddening odds. France, as her boyfriend and her surroundings try to remind her, was responsible for the death of the *tirailleurs* commemorated right under her feet. But Diouana, possessed with the idea of France granting her more beauty, rejects and ignores the way in which some view France as hurtful to the historic and now independent development of Senegal. Significantly, Diouana throws her dressed body into the air and on top of the memorial, in celebration of her acquired hope for more beauty. As long as France grants her superficial affluence, her place and support of her homeland, loses all meaning. As we remember, Senegal with its women dressed in beautiful African garments and its European magazines, has reminded Diouana only of what she does not have, and thus of what is more promising “en France.”

⁴⁷ Ibid, 38.

Similarly, Diouana's interaction with a traditional African mask, one of her little brother's toys, further elaborates and complicates her physical relationship to Senegal. During the first flashback to Senegal, we witness the beginning of a dialogue that will be held through the movement in the giving, and taking back of a traditional African mask. The first time we are introduced to the mask, Diouana's little brother wears it on his face as he plays in the hot African sand. In ecstasy of meeting Madame at the maid's square, Diouana playfully takes the mask from her little brother and puts it over her own face. Running in circles around a woman carrying a bail of well water over her head, Diouana chants: "J'ai du travail chez les blancs! J'ai du travail chez les blancs! J'ai du travail chez les blancs!" With the mask still covering her face, she runs over to her mother to share the news, and she then takes the mask off of Diouana's face and throws it to the floor as she importantly reminds her to "être courageux." Diouana then offers her brother 50 francs for the mask and decides to give it to Madame as a symbol of gratitude for hiring her.

As noted before, the mask is what Diouana first encounters when she walks into Madame and Monsieur's apartment building in Antibes. A stark reminder of what she has left behind, the mask is also a reminder of her mother's warning: Diouana must not get lost in play or in hiding, she must look past the colonial mask that haunts her, the one carefully and consistently reducing her to body. Unfortunately, the way Diouana views her identity as body is not only indicative of the colonial situation she is in, it is also perpetrated by her own construction. She does not fight to find an alternative for her place as more than a decorative object for dresses or tool for cleaning. Ultimately,

Diouana feeds the colonial stage in which she was already destined to tragically *self-unmake*.

Refusing to clean the dishes, dress “appropriately,” or play with the children who have now returned to France, Diouana eventually gives in to her innerness and rejects her working duties. Monsieur then approaches Diouana with the money he had not yet paid her, thinking that it will cure her strike of sorts. She blankly stares at the paper bills being handed to her; why should she accept them? What will she do with them? Diouana reaches her hands out and falls to the floor with the money, weeping. At once, Monsieur casts off her depressed behavior as mere folly and sickness. Madame, however, will not so willingly accept Diouana’s grievances. As a sign of rebellion and as a desperate way of gaining some sense of self during her last moments, Diouana takes the mask she had given Madame off the living room wall. “Cet masque est à moi!” Diouana screams when Madame tries to take it back. And Diouana succeeds in keeping the mask even if Madame considers this re-appropriation an ungrateful act. For Diouana, taking the mask back just before she slits her wrists in the bathtub is a matter of dignity.

By buying the mask from her little brother and giving it to Madame, Diouana never actually followed her Mother’s advice. She was never courageous enough to think of her identity as beyond body. Instead, she yielded to the fantasy of France (pretty dresses et al.) and thanked Madame for “the promise” of a new place, a new sense of self outside of Senegal. Her suicide paradoxically concludes her journey through *self-unmaking*. On one hand, her self-inflicted death signifies a refusal to accept her role as domestic appliance. But, on the other hand, her suicide is complete surrender. We never witness Diouana actively fighting for an alternative. She never asks Madame why the

children have not arrived as she had promised. She does not ask Madame for her earnings. She does not try to return to Senegal, a possibility that could have had worse cultural implications.⁴⁸ In an essential way, her *self-unmaking* reiterates her place as submissive Other. It is an acknowledgment of the persistent weight and continuous effects of colonial hierarchies on her identity.

It is worth noting that Sembène, before releasing his first novel in French (*Le Docker Noir*, 1965) moved to Marseilles where he tried to earn a living as a docker and a trade-union leader.⁴⁹ Sembène's hard-knock experience in France as a foreigner could very well encompass a personal influence on the basis of Diouana's disillusioning immigration story. Additionally, in telling the story of Diouana, Sembène documents the actual suicide of an African maid, reported in a 1958 issue of the French Newspaper, *Nice-Matin*.⁵⁰ More importantly, however, through Diouana's suicide, Sembène admires a continued resistance of France's power over Senegalese economic, social, and cultural identity. As tragic as her self-sacrifice may seem, Diouana's internal narrative lets us know that she will kill herself in a passionate refusal to become a slave, her last words she speaks to herself being: "Madame m'a menti. Elle m'a toujours menti...Jamais plus

⁴⁸ Wolof and Peul tradition considers suicide an honorable choice during times of slavery and war. This tradition is kept alive through the Wolof saying, "Bagn Gathie nangou Dee," which roughly translates to "accept death to reject shame." According to this tradition, Diouana's decision to commit suicide as opposed to returning to Senegal demonstrates bravery; however, in the eyes of her French counterparts, and within colonizer-colonized dynamics, her suicide continues to reiterate her place as submissive Other.

⁴⁹ Parascandola, "'What Are We Blackmen Who Are Called French?'" 367.

⁵⁰ Sheila Petty, "Mapping the African 'I': Representations of Women in *La Noire de ...* and *Histoire d'Orokia*." *Social Identities* 6, no. 3 (September 2000): 305-321. *Academic Search Elite*, EBSCOhost

elle me mentira. Elle voulait me garder ici comme une esclave.” Sembène warns the Senegalese people that the dangers of colonialism have not ended with African independence and remain powerful in 1965. Sembène’s message of resistance, however, does not change the outcome of the story: a colonized subject has been lost to her own *self-unmaking*. And in this loss a motif is established, a habitual submissiveness from the colonial subject, perpetrated by his/her choice to create their place of identity negatively, through their own destruction.

CHAPTER 2

MICHAEL HANEKE'S *CACHÉ* (2005)Double-occupancy

Ousmane Sembène's *La Noire de...* (1965) stands as our "point of entanglement" and point of departure within this paper's historical timeline. Sembène's film introduces our first observation of a colonial identity whose core has been knotted in its arrival to *self-unmaking*. If Diouana establishes a trend, an entangled and self-destructive knot present at the core of colonial identity structure, we continue with Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005) with the intention of highlighting how the knot remains tight within other colonial subjects some forty years later. In *Caché*, Diouana's self-destructive identity remains present in extensions of the colonized, while discovering a self-creating, *self-making* identity in extensions of the colonizer.

In his eighth feature-length film, *Caché*, Austrian filmmaker Michael Haneke (born 1942) tells the story of how an upper middle-class Parisian named Georges [Daniel Auteuil] struggles to repress a tragic past with an Algerian man. In a 2005 interview at Cannes, Haneke explains, "the moral question the film raises is how to deal with the question of guilt."⁵¹ And this guilt, as Haneke later clarifies, is experienced by a European "us," and specifically concerns the manner in which Europeans (in 2005) still separate themselves in considering themselves superior to those from the countries of a colonized past:

"All of us have such hidden corners in our lives, we all feel guilty, about the relationships between the industrialized world and the third world... For example, I am sure you oppose strict immigration laws that have been introduced in almost

⁵¹ Michael Haneke quoted in Karin Badt, "Family Is Hell and So Is the World: Talking to Michael Haneke at Cannes 2005," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 50 (2005).

every European country. And yet what would you say if I were to suggest that you take into your home an African family?”⁵²

Haneke is talking from a European perspective to a European audience that designates the Other as “third world,” and—in this case— “African.” Specifically, *Caché* depicts a European guilt through the inability of Georges to accept the resurgence of a traumatic childhood memory with an Algerian boy, Majid [Maurice Bénichou]. Not only does the film represent the sustained avoidance of the colonizer to accept and take responsibility for the persisting underprivileged position of the colonized African in a postcolonial world. But also, as Haneke suggests in the interview, by creating an “us” apart from them, the film speaks to a European inability to accept the reality of modern-day Europe as a shared space where former extensions of the colonizer and colonized coexist; an inability to accept that the “African family” is *already* an integral part of Europe.

In *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*, Thomas Elsaesser coins the term *double-occupancy* to pinpoint Europe’s modern existence as a space that is doubly occupied by Europeans and non-European people.⁵³ In order to define *double-occupancy*, Elsaesser briefly notes Ludwig Wittgenstein’s discussion of the duck-rabbit⁵⁴ and Jacques Derrida’s term of writing “under-erasure” (*sous-rature*) to demonstrate the manner in which the potential for differing perspectives can exist in the same representational

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005.

⁵⁴ see Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology. Volume I*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

space.⁵⁵ In terms of the illusory drawing, one can say the drawing is of a duck or of a rabbit; and in terms of “under-erasure” in writing, one can read a text by considering the meaning of the crossed-out, yet undeleted word, or ignore it and consider the text without it. Both examples illustrate slippage and unstable meaning. Elsaesser supports his own idea with Wittgenstein and Derrida’s models, given that his idea of *double-occupancy* is also founded on the basis of differing meanings (or entities) coexisting in one emblematic space. Importantly, for the discussion of *Caché*, such *double-occupancy* refers to the coexisting of two or more ethnicities and/or nationalities sharing the same nation space of Europe.

Historically, Elsaesser defines double-occupancy as a “counter-metaphor to Fortress Europe,” delineating Europe’s resistance, particularly after World War II, in adapting more lenient immigration policies and ending the continent’s siege mentality.⁵⁶ He then proposes *toujours occupé* as a motto for the reality of modern Europe, the reality that ironically defines Europe as a collection of nations that have *always* been or *still* are (*toujours* can mean either word depending on the context) occupied by non-Europeans, no matter how resistant their mentalities may have been to the idea of sharing their nation with an array of other ethnicities and cultures.⁵⁷ Elsaesser elaborates : “there is no European, in other words, who is not already diasporic in relation to some marker of difference—be it ethnic, regional, religious or linguistic—and whose identity is not

⁵⁵ see Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

⁵⁶ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 108.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 108.

always already hyphenated or doubly-occupied.”⁵⁸ Most importantly, Elsaesser wants the use of *double-occupancy* to embody both the acceptance *and* the refusal of the historical, multicultural presence in today’s Europe. And this in order to highlight the manner in which Europe is made up of a plurality of religious and ethnic cultures that do not always acknowledge each other, but rather continue to try to protect themselves from each other.

I have chosen to address Elsaesser’s categorization of *double-occupancy* to better introduce the guilty European consciousness in which Haneke builds *Caché*. The term helps us visualize *Caché* as essential to our observation of “entangling” colonial identities, a continuation from our “point of entanglement” established in Chapter 1. Elsaesser clarifies that the state of *double-occupancy* should not be confused with a state of multiculturalism, as the latter ignores a potential for conflict, and different attitudes such as assimilation and autonomy.⁵⁹ Fascinatingly, Elsaesser’s clarification echoes the definition and uses of the term *creolization*, mentioned in the introduction through the work of Édouard Glissant as the phenomenon of mixed and complex identities, a product of national, cultural, ethnic, and social “entanglements” at a universal scale.⁶⁰ *Double-occupancy* and *creolization* both attempt to define the “entanglements” that occur when multiple ethnicities and nationalities share the same space.

Setting the stage for *Caché* as that of *double-occupancy* is thus essential to our continuing understanding of *self-making* and *unmaking*. Schematically, it is fundamental to our observations of how extensions of a former colonizing nation [Georges, France] and a former colonized nation [Majid, Algeria] continue to develop their senses of self in

⁵⁸ Ibid, 108.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 110.

⁶⁰ see Stuart Hall, “Créolité and the Process of Creolization,” 27-41.

relation to each other, and thus in response to the reality of a postcolonial setting. Through Georges's refusal of *double-occupancy* not only do we see the failure of a shared space, we also begin to witness an urgency for *self-making*. Given that Georges is a native to the space he occupies, we observe first-hand how an identity that has not been a direct product of colonialism—that is, a product of forced migration or *creolization*—faces the consequences of an “occupation in reverse.” Essentially, Georges refuses to accept that his space as a Frenchman in France can be shared with an Algerian whose nationhood for Georges represents both trauma and conflict at the personal and national level. So when Georges begins to receive mysterious mementos of a past involving Majid disguised as surveillance tapes and violent child drawings, he actively begins to participate in his own *self-making* by overcompensating for the fall of his mental and family space to *double-occupancy*. In contrast to Diouana in *La Noire de...*, whose colonial situation reduces her identity to body and object (*self-unmaking*), Georges represses the memory of Majid and *self-makes* by creating a defensive public image.

In contrast to Georges, and similar to Diouana in *La Noire de...*, Majid's body delineates his identity and the space he occupies. Unlike Diouana, however, Majid reduces himself to body in the present because of the traumatic loss of his parents during the October '61 massacre. After the loss of his biological parents, Majid was adopted by Georges's family and then sent to an orphanage because of a lie Georges told his parents. Majid's early forced migration between families and orphanages evidently echoes that of a displaced slave, or of a comparable piece of tradable property. Reaffirming the way he had always been treated like a disposable object, Majid physically *self-unmakes* through violent suicide. Spectators are thus given the sense that Majid has spent most of his life

waiting, as an Algerian, for his presence to be accepted in a French space. But given his childhood rejection by Georges's family and the loss of his birth parents, history has taught him that a successfully shared space as an Algerian in France is highly unlikely. Ultimately, the failure of *double-occupancy* is what also leads Majid to *self-unmaking*.

“Alors?” “Rien.”

The establishing shot of *Caché* is mystifyingly inert: a fixed shot of a sophisticated but understated house on a Parisian street in the 13th arrondissement that lasts through the entire credit sequence. The film's first audible word (Alors?) makes us realize that this establishing shot may not occur in real-time; that is, it seems to be an image *being watched* on screen by whoever is speaking. To our already ignited surprise, the image is rewound and then paused before our very eyes, as the second word (Rien.) gives way to a discussion between a female and male voice, involving the nature of the image: Who taped it? Where does it come from? Where was the image shot?

The sequence that follows shows the protagonist, Georges Laurent, as he anxiously walks outside his house (the same residence established in the opening shot) to try and see where the camera filming his house could have been located. We realize that we were not watching the opening shot at the time of its original recording, but during a playback on a TV monitor belonging to Georges and his wife, Anne [Juliette Binoche]. From the onset, the film thus instills in us an unsettling insecurity, because for the continuation of the film we cannot decipher filmic narration from narration via mysterious surveillance.

Additionally, the playback and rewinding of the establishing shot further remind us of the malleability of film and our vulnerable position as spectators. We are indeed watching

Haneke's construction and our understanding of the film is susceptible to the enigmatic layers of narration and reality he introduces.

The opening shot, as we learn, comes from the first in a series of surveillance tapes that are sent to the Laurent's residence along with eerie child drawings of stick figures vomiting blood and a decapitated rooster. These child drawings hold an uncanny similarity to other cryptic images that appear in the narrative. Around twenty minutes into the film, for example, another inert shot shows what seems to be a view of a street outside of Georges's bedroom window. We are then inside an elegant residence, moving through a dark living room where we find a little boy helplessly coughing blood. At this point, an evident connection can be made between the child drawing of the stick figure coughing blood and the little boy. But identifying the boy is not yet possible, as it is challenging to identify the image's source. Is this image occurring in George's psyche? Is it an image belonging to another surveillance tape? Has the drawing just simply come to life? Is this an image of the past, present, or future? And to mystify the origin of the boy and residence even further, a real-time sequence of Georges and his son, Pierrot, walking outside of their house to their car immediately follows.

As the film continues, we realize that there is no way of confirming the source of the dark image of the boy in the living room. We can, however, confidently posit that the image occurs in Georges's unconscious and is triggered by the abrupt appearance of the surveillance tapes and drawings at his doorstep. All evidently reminiscent of Georges's childhood interaction with the Algerian orphan his parents decided to adopt, these tapes and drawings have invaded Georges's otherwise calm life with ghosts from the past. As a child, Georges was possessed by a fear of having to share his family space with an

Other, so he falsely accused Majid of killing the family rooster with a hatchet and of vomiting blood. We are given access to the resurgence of this past in Georges's psyche through the sequence of the boy in the living room and other images that are intermittently injected into the narrative.

The most shocking of these sequences resurfaces after Georges receives a surveillance tape of someone driving through the rainy countryside and then stopping in front of the entrance to his childhood, country home. Outside this brick house, we later see young Georges witnessing a young Majid decapitating the family rooster. The boy we can now identify as young Majid was the same boy coughing blood in the living room. In this moment, he is portrayed as a villain, ruthlessly ending the rooster's life as the camera lingers on the animal's last, flapping moments. The sequence ends with young Majid coming towards young George with the hatchet, before switching to a shot of a panicked adult Georges waking in bed. Here, the sequence of young Georges and Majid is clearly coded as a dream (or nightmare). But most images showing young Georges and Majid remain generally classifiable as distortions occurring in Georges's psyche; that is, dreams, false memories, or fantasies clearly stemming from his guilt surrounding these childhood lies. These distortions are thus triggered by reminders of a childhood fear, the fear of sharing the family space with a rival sibling. Since the child Georges was successful at removing young Majid from his family space, physical mementos of the lies that drove this success trigger a continuous urgency to safeguard the present from past threats of *double-occupancy*. And as we witness Georges's intermittent distortions in the narrative, it is clear that Georges is not completely successful in protecting his present from these past invasions.

Primarily, we notice that the tapes and drawings force Georges into sharing his mental space with Majid and the guilt surrounding him. We also notice how his family begins to crumble at the resurgence of these memories. Anne questions the integrity binding their marriage when Georges refuses to tell her he suspects where the tapes and drawings might come from. Slowly, we then witness a suspicious relationship developing between Anne, and their friend Pierre. Their interaction is most suspicious when the two of them are shown meeting at a café—Georges nowhere in sight— and Anne crying on Pierre’s shoulder in distress about the tapes. Furthermore, suspicion surrounding Anne and Pierre’s relationship increases when Pierrot accuses his mother of having an affair with Pierre. Pierrot’s accusation occurs after he had mysteriously disappeared at the most inopportune moment, deeply frightening Anne and Georges’s with the possibility of him being taken or hurt by the people sending the tapes. Before and after his disappearance, Pierrot sulks, avoids eye contact with his parents, and receives one of the bloody stick figures at school. Throughout the entire film, Pierrot’s moody behavior and possible involvement in the sending of the tapes and drawings remains as enigmatic as Anne and Pierre’s affair.

Georges evidently fails to safeguard his present mental and family space from the persistent threats of *double-occupancy*. However, the consequences of this ongoing threat do not stop him from actively defending himself. Georges, an extension of the colonizer, chooses to *self-make* in response to the continuous threat of the colonized returning to haunt him. But he does not directly confront Majid for some time. Instead, we are first introduced to two essential spaces through which he *self-makes* and protects his identity

from being undone by his past with Majid: the *mise-en-scène* of his family home and the space of his career as literary talk show host.

Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars note how Georges and Anne are visually depicted “as prisoners of their own making, or at least prisoners of their own circumstances.”⁶¹ It is true that Georges and Anne seem to be “hiding” behind the iron clangs of their home, their monochromatic outfits, and their many shelves filled with books. Neither Georges nor Anne are ever shown reading, and the playfulness of their interior design goes only as far as including carefully situated gray, silver eggs and a gamut of silver idols in their living room. Not only do their surroundings cloak them with controlled sameness, but Georges also relies on his belongings to *self-make* his image. The objects which surround him—the books he never reads, as well as the glass dining room table that serves his guests—are simulated and displayed on his TV show, demonstrating that the image Georges strives to build within his bourgeois family space is also one he wishes to project and concretize on screen. The nature of this image is undoubtedly one of apparent intellectualism and controlled bourgeois elegance. And the similarities between the objects that occupy his family space and those in his workspace further highlight the performative quality surrounding the *self-making* of his identity.

It becomes essential for Georges to provide a counter image of himself as he continues to receive tapes and drawings displaying images associated with an identity he wishes to abandon. As long as Georges receives reminders of his past self, it is imperative for him to actively formulate his image in the present. He does so through the projection of a particular image of himself on his TV show. Full-framed, we see Georges

⁶¹ Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars, “*Hidden in plain sight: bringing terror home,*” (*Screen*, Summer 2007), 216.

as he addresses his audience and thanks them (and us) for watching. This is the first time we see Georges in his vocational element. And the fact that “host Georges” is introduced to us full-framed, just like the surveillance tapes and psychic distortions, means that this image can also be confused or mistaken for reality. Of course this is the exact confusion Georges wishes to create, as long as the public sees and believes intellectual, adult Georges over guilty, young Georges. And as the phone calls, drawings, and tapes continue to arrive, we watch Georges at work, editing his defensive, public image. The kind of work Georges puts into *self-making* is especially clear during a sequence in which we see him editing a conversation he hosted about censorship. The round table discussion specifically concerns the censorship of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, and Georges considers it “trop théorique.” So as we watch the full-framed playback of the program, paused and rewound, Georges decides to make the cut at “on est d’accord sur ça” to ensure that his recorded image is not only authentic (not too theoretical), but also agreeable. Will his audience look beyond sugarcoated version of himself? The answer seems futile as long as Georges actively proposes and concretizes a new image to counteract the accusations brought to the surface by the tapes and drawings.

Georges editing in his montage room, however, is interrupted by a phone call from adult Majid. This interruption is significant insofar as it reveals how his *self-making* is fueled by Majid’s continuous resurgence. It also demonstrates how Georges can never really be free from the past interjecting his present. Georges avidly collates, edits, and creates a space in which he believes another image of his identity can exist free of Majid. Interestingly, Georges protects himself via a medium Haneke openly criticizes as unsound. Haneke says he is “most concerned with television as the key symbol primarily

of the media representation of violence, and more generally of a greater crisis, which [he] see[s] as our collective loss of reality and social disorientation.”⁶² In showing Georges editing his TV image and conversations, Haneke provides an example of how fragments of reality are deleted right before our very eyes. This loss of reality becomes “collective” because many loyal fans watch Georges’s show and other programs. One of TV’s most loyal fans— Georges’s mother— says she is never lonely thanks to her “ami avec télécommande.” And if TV ever becomes annoying, Georges’s mother has the perfect solution; she just shuts him up [“je lui coupe le sifflet”]. In *Caché*, TV is hence presented as a medium streaming a series of previously edited images that can be edited further at any given moment by the use of our remote control. Ironically then, not even the fictional space of TV provides a safe area for Georges’s identity to survive without the interruption of other disorienting realities.

Elsaesser notes how—historically –TV initially carried “the role of representing a nation” before the post filmic, digital world of *Caché*. In today’s world, television and film “dis-articulate” national spaces and take on “trans-personal and inter-subjective functions...no longer following the separation of realms into ‘private’ and ‘public,’ ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’”⁶³ In other words, TV has become *creolized* and can now invade bourgeois living rooms with multicultural terror! This becomes clear in *Caché* after Pierrot disappears, and Georges and Anne argue while images of the Iraq War and the Abu Ghraib trials flicker in the background. Even in his sterile living room, Georges cannot escape the looming occupation of his space by Other entities. And, what is worse,

⁶² Michael Haneke quoted in Christopher Sharrett, “The World That Is Known: An Interview with Michael Haneke,” *Cineaste* 28, no. 3(2003): 30.

⁶³ Elsaesser, *European Cinema*, 114-115.

the medium in which Georges protectively *self-makes* actually facilitates the *double-occupancy* he so persistently represses.

“Je voulais que tu sois présent”

At work, Georges has received a postcard with another child drawing vomiting blood; and at home, Anne has had to deal with menacing voices calling to speak to Monsieur Laurent. Georges and Anne finally decide to tell the police of the disturbing tapes, drawings, and phone calls they have been receiving. And as they exit the police station disappointed (at this point, the police cannot do anything to help) a tall, black male crosses them on his bike. “Tu peux pas faire attention, espèce d’idiot!?” Georges screams at the guy and a heated argument full of insults and threats ensues between them. In a film where dizzying levels of reality constantly question our ability to follow a narrative, the interaction between Georges and this unnamed man remains one of the most alarming sequences. Why would Georges snap at this man so quickly? Is this a blatant case of racism? Or would anyone, regardless of their race, have received the same hostility from Georges at that particular moment?

For days now, Georges has been rejecting the return of the repressed. He will continue to do so no matter how many tapes, drawings, or phone calls him and his wife receive reminding him of his short-lived brotherhood with Majid, and the lies he told to get rid of him. He has been dutifully *self-making* to protect himself from the accusatory nature of this past’s resurgence. Georges’s conscious will not go down without a fight. And at the mere sight of a male Other—a non-Caucasian male that potentially reminds him of the Algerian Majid—Georges unleashes his repressed anger. At this point, Georges is aware of the inherent connection between the tapes/drawings and Majid, and

the next step is to confront him with the suspicion that he has been sending them. Who else would have access to the level of personal information exposed in these mementos? In anticipation to his encounter with Majid, Georges begins to assert himself by verbally assaulting the man on a bike who crosses him. But what power could Georges possibly obtain in his interaction with this innocent man? The answer—of course—is stupefying, as it confirms the continuation of old colonizer-colonized mentalities in a post-millennial context. As a Frenchman in the 21st century, Georges carries the baggage of the supposed national and racial supremacy declared by his colonizing ancestors. And this role tells him he must continue to fear the exotic Other and *self-make* in defense. Perhaps Georges fears all Africans are involved in the torture of his conscience?

Georges thus decides to visit Majid's apartment in order to accuse him of threatening him with their shared past. When Majid seems authentically shocked to see adult Georges at his door, and to Georges's immediate accusations, Majid calmly replies, "T'as pas changé..." Majid's quiet demeanor does not stop Georges from continuing to reproach him. He demands to know if what he wants is money, threatens him with the police, and assures Majid he will regret it if he continues to scare him and his family. Majid denies any knowledge of the tapes or drawings and expresses more interest for "catching up," asking him about his mother, and noting how he has watched his TV show. At the end of their interaction, Majid expresses gratitude for Georges's impromptu visit ["je suis content que tu sois venu"]. Above all, he seems deeply moved by Georges's reappearance in his life. Georges seeks out Majid a second time when he sends the police to his apartment, accusing him and his unnamed son of kidnapping Pierrot. This second encounter is short, but it importantly reiterates the inevitable pattern in their relationship.

The pattern established by their child selves. While Georges accuses Majid of partaking in ill-intentioned actions, Majid meekly (and undeservingly?) receives the consequences of Georges's accusations. In the end, Majid puts an end to this vicious cycle. Before brutally slicing his throat with a penknife, Majid calls Georges so he can witness his *self-unmaking* and the end of their cruel lifetime interaction.

Ranjana Khanna confirms, "Algerians in [*Caché*] can only deny their part in a narrative that has already given them roles."⁶⁴ She adds that—as Algerians whose history has already coded them as subordinates to their French protagonist—Majid and his son have been given the role of criminals. The two Algerians in the film are obscurely credited with sending the tapes and child drawings as an act of vengeance. Additionally, Majid's subservient role is symbolically carried through the film by the continuous removal of his humanness, ending in his suicide. Khanna notes that "the two most shocking images of ferocity in the movie involve an animal and a reference to one. The child Majid's beheading of the cockerel is represented in Georges' dream... [and] that of spurting blood from the suicidal adult Majid's neck."⁶⁵ Furthermore, the beheading of a dog's neck is presented as the turning point of a joke told during the Laurent's first dinner party. The decapitation of animals is thus graphically linked to Majid's suicide; the non-human animal progressively projected onto the foreign Algerian.

What is most essential to highlight about Majid's characterization as animal and his suicide is that it does not stop Georges' from repressing the past. Since the nonhuman is projected onto Majid, Georges does not have to suffer and mourn the death of a human. He can pretend instead that Majid's death is as insignificant as that of an animal. In this

⁶⁴ Ranjana Khanna, "From Rue Morgue to Rue des Iris," (*Screen*, Summer 2007), 242.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 239.

way, Majid's coding as animal and his brutal *self-unmaking* promotes Georges' continuous rejection of *double-occupancy*. Garrett Stewart notes: "Instead of remaining present in the wake of the suicide... and without even looking for the camera which he must surely suspect, Georges flees to a movie theater...to 'kill time.'"⁶⁶ Majid's animal-like characterization thus alleviates the shocking effect of his self-destruction.

Both Georges and Majid construct their identities in relation to each other. Georges *self-makes* as a response to Majid's *self-unmaking* and vice versa. Neither entity, at least in the context of the film *Caché*, can be credited with fueling or starting this cyclical, reactionary process. One can identify the point in which their dynamic started as the moment when Georges's parents decided to adopt Majid. But one can also trace this decision back to the tragedy of Majid losing his parents to the October '61 events, and even back further to France's colonization of Algeria, and to pre-established colonizer-colonized dynamics. Similarly to Diouana's suicide in *La Noire de...*, Majid's suicide thus presents a paradox. Since Majid has always been there to blame for Georges's guilty conscience, his suicide finally puts an end to his role as Georges's servant of sorts. And in ensuring that Georges is present for his suicide, Majid also forcefully reclaims some authority over his own suffering. If he is going to suffer, then he might as well be responsible for his own torment. However, in ending his life, Majid perpetrates the role of dispensable inhuman he has inherited as an extension of the colonized.

October 17th, 1961

Elsaesser's introduction of the term *double-occupancy* demonstrates how a phenomenon that was traditionally viewed as an outcome of forced, mixed nationalities

⁶⁶ Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 199.

in colonies, now exists alternatively in the domain of the colonizer, Europe herself. Furthermore, Elsaesser's choice of rhetoric invokes the period of the German Occupation in Europe. Specifically for France, the period of the Occupation not only represents a moment of forced and tragic *double-occupancy*; it also acts as a reminder of France's Vichy Regime under German military control. As Henry Rousso theorizes in *The Vichy Syndrome*, the tragic period of the Occupation (1940-1944) established a kind of "neurosis" and a series of memory symptoms through which the French articulated their history after the moment of Vichy.⁶⁷

One of the memory symptoms Rousso categorizes as stemming from the Vichy neurosis is repression and the subsequent "return of the repressed." Rousso explains how repression and the consequent resurfacing of old divisions in part led to such events as The Algerian War.⁶⁸ Georges's traumatic past with Majid evidently mirrors France's traumatic past with Algeria. And Georges's ongoing desire to repress this past also mirrors a memory symptom of France concerning its relationship to Algeria, specifically its recollection of October '61. On October 17th, 1961, under orders from the head of the Parisian police, Maurice Paupon, the police attacked thousands of Algerian demonstrators and drowned hundreds of them in the Seine River. Georges's associations with the events of October '61 are defined partly by his parents' experiences and decisions. It is because Majid's parents are victims of the massacre that Georges' parents consider adopting the orphaned boy. As a naïve child, Georges thus understands the historical event as the reason for being threatened with *double-occupancy* from a young age. The continuation

⁶⁷ Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1-11.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 60-97.

of an adult repression is thus seeded in the childish denial to share space with an Other. In this way, Georges develops an understanding of a historical event through childhood intolerance that skews his ability to confront history beyond his own personal experience. Furthermore, “the dominant memory” in relation to the October ‘61 massacre inevitably influences Georges’s access to its recollection. This is especially true because the event was followed by a cover-up and the end of the Algerian War (1954-1962): “Despite initial attention in the press and the organizing of a number of smaller-scale demonstrations by Algerian and French groups, the events of October ‘61 are generally thought to have ‘disappeared’ from collective memory for approximately two decades.”⁶⁹ And only recently, fifty years after the tragedy, and six years after the release of *Caché*, Jacques Panijel’s documentary *Octobre à Paris* (1962) was publicly projected as part of the *Mediapart* film festival in Paris. The documentary, immediately censored in 1962 because of its graphic footage of the ‘61 tragedy, had rarely been shown in public since it had obtained its release license in 1972.⁷⁰

Given Majid’s connection to the events of October ‘61, critics have viewed the violent spectacle surrounding Majid’s suicide as a replacement for any reconstruction of the October ‘61 events.⁷¹ In other words reiterating the idea that Majid plays the part of *self-unmaking* to reemphasize a previously established dynamic between colonizer and colonized in which the colonized is brutally sacrificed. The ways certain memory

⁶⁹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 232.

⁷⁰ “Octobre à Paris,” <http://octobre-a-paris.com/autour-du-film.html>.

⁷¹ Michael Lawrence, “The Death of an Animal and the Figuration of the Human,” in *On Michael Haneke*, eds. Brian Price and John David Rhodes (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 74.

communities in France have historically repressed the event's memory is also importantly highlighted through the depiction of Georges's repression. One could thus argue that Georges and Majid metonymically represent the role of French and Algerians in relation to October '61. However, I wish to clarify that *self-making* and *unmaking* in Haneke's *Caché* more generally (and importantly) frames the baggage of colonizer-colonized relations in a postcolonial context. It is not only specific to October 17th, 1961.

CHAPTER 3

CLAIRE DENIS'S *WHITE MATERIAL* (2009)Extending the postcolonial paradigm

Four wild, yellow dogs run across a dirt road. We follow the road's semi-lit trajectory for a couple of seconds, then we are inside a residence, following the light of a flashlight as it shines on different African masks, some gold, some made of wood. The score by composer Stuart Staples engulfs us. The sounds of cellos, violins, windpipes, and organs synchronized to the movement of the flashlight as it flickers from mask to mask, wall to wall. The flashlight continues to move across different rooms, shining on messy beds, clothes hanging on doors, and then stopping to illuminate a dead body. "C'est le Boxeur," we hear a voice say as the flashlight's glow scans the "Boxer's" blank gaze, limp body, and his shirt stained with blood. Another voice confirms his death. The voices coming from the now barely visible soldiers whose flashlights, we realize, have brought us here to this place of disarray and bereavement.

The opening sequence of Claire Denis's *White Material* (2009) marks the dramatic discovery of the Boxer's dead body. As the spectators learn, "the Boxer" [Isaach De Bankolé] is a mysterious warrior and leader of the rebel army, fighting in the unnamed African country under civil turmoil where the film takes place. As the film develops through a series of flashbacks that ultimately return to the discovery of the Boxer's dead body and beyond, we learn that after the Boxer was injured, he found refuge in the compound of a coffee plantation. The plantation is the last French property of the African nation and is owned by the father-in-law of the film's protagonist, Maria Vial [Isabelle Huppert].

The fact that the film begins in darkness and death burdens the entire story with a sense of inevitable tragedy, a feeling of unavoidable destruction that leaves no one unharmed.⁷² The discovery of the Boxer's body at the beginning is followed by shots of the burning plantation, soldiers with rifles surrounding the flames, and a tattooed, adolescent boy with a shaved head. The boy, who we learn to be Maria's son, Manuel Vial [Nicolas Duvauchelle], coughs into a handkerchief and desperately covers his face from the fumes before he is forced into a flaming room by one of the soldiers. It is not until the end of the film, when the flashbacks have brought us back to the Boxer's dead body, that we see Manuel's body turned to charcoal. The film's initial sense of catastrophe culminates at the very end when Maria's sick father-in-law walks amid flames and smoke before she stabs him repeatedly in the back with a machete.

So why end with *White Material*? Why highlight the post-millennial tragedy it offers? In numerous ways, Denis's film provides us with the ultimate destruction of colonial subjectivities by departing from the paradigms that are established in Sembene's *La Noire de...* and Haneke's *Caché*. Along with the burning of a European plantation by African soldiers and the violent murder of a male plantation owner by his daughter-in-law, the film consciously annihilates conventional colonial constructs. In a way, the film devastates the colonial family Denis brings to life in her first film, *Chocolat* (1988). But Denis's most recent film not only destroys the classic, colonial family; it also proposes no alternative for Africans and Europeans to coexist harmoniously. Denis creates a postcolonial world where colonial subjects no longer functionally *self-make* or *unmake* in

⁷² Amy Taubin, "Burning Land: *White Material* bears tense witness to African turmoil," (*FilmComment*, 2010), 38.

relation to each other. Ultimately, in *White Material*, neither extension of the colonizer or colonized successfully participates in the dynamic that is so clearly established between Diouana and her masters in Sembène's *La Noire de...* and carried over by Georges and Majid in Haneke's *Caché*. Alternatively, in observing *White Material*'s fearless female protagonist and her family, we witness the failure of identities akin to those of Diouana, Madame, George, and Majid.

After *Chocolat*, Claire Denis thought it horrific to make another "period film" in which the story of a French settler family and its African servants was told. Daughter to a French civil servant, Denis spent her childhood living in Burkina Faso, Somalia, Senegal, and Cameroon, and thus experienced a settler mentality firsthand. For Denis, *White Material* meant the opportunity to tell another story set in Africa, one that would expose the struggles of post-independent African states. The *ivoirité* movement of the 1990's in the Ivory Coast specifically inspired the world of Maria Vial and her coffee plantation. After the 1993 death of president Houphouët-Boigny in the Ivory Coast, landowners were asked to prove their patriotic tie to the country under the administration of the new president, Laurent Gbagbo. This measure created dire civil unrest given that there were still many French coffee growers in the northern part of the country who, in the eyes of the government, did not exhibit a pure *ivoirité*. Much like Maria and her family, these French coffee growers were ostracized; some were even airlifted out of the country. Despite several elements of the film that reference the events surrounding the *ivoirité* movement, the film is set in an unnamed country with allusions to the civil conflicts of many African states. Above all, the allegorical lack of specificity of the film's setting is meant to bring attention to the reality of the failed state in Africa. The film's setting

commemorates the historic struggles of formerly colonized African countries in states of reformation. *White Material* extends the postcolonial paradigm by foregrounding the destruction of its setting and characters, departing from colonizer driven contexts, and transforming colonial subjectivities. The following pages explore how the characterization of Maria Vial and her family challenges the postcolonial expectations introduced in *La Noire de...* and continued in *Caché*.

“Ils ne méritent pas la terre extraordinaire”

Maria loves African soil. Denis displays this love in the many sequences showing Maria’s rail-thin, fragile body walking through fields of endless grass and dirt roads, driving her motorcycle through the plantation and raising her arms to welcome the sun. The hues in her hair and dresses always mirror those of the grass and soil. And she loves to work on the land, adores the power she actively possesses in managing it, even if it does not belong to her. The *sales blancs* running away from civil unrest evidently do not deserve the land. Maria describes them as *nouveaux riches*, “pretentious,” “arrogant,” “ignorant,” and they disapprove [*méprisent*] of Maria and the Africans. Why would she leave this African soil for France, a place where she believes she would become “too comfortable”? Unlike Georges in *Caché*, Maria finds neither elegance nor protection in French bourgeois life. Maria loathes the white French soldiers who come to warn her of the country’s growing danger. They will never learn to appreciate the *extraordinaire* African land, so they will never fill the same place as her or the locals. Maria exhibits a classic settler mentality insofar as she is emotionally tied to the land her husband’s predecessors have cultivated; however, this tie is disproportionate and irrational. A dangerous civil war has ensued and her refusal to give up her role as managing plantation

owner and evolve beyond this facet of a colonizer mentality will result in grave consequences.

Maria's attachment to African soil surpasses any potential attachment she might have to her Frenchness. But in identifying with African land and insulting the *sales blancs* does she extricate herself from her whiteness? Does she rid herself of the racial identification that Frantz Fanon demands in *Peau noire, masques blancs*? Maria exhibits no particular attachment to her white physicality, although several sequences highlight her light skin and strawberry blond hair. It is clearly impossible not to notice Maria and her family's fair complexion under the smoldering African sun, and in contrast with everyone else who surrounds them. They are – in fact— the only Caucasians in the film aside from the French army men who appear briefly at the start of the film. But above all, Maria's color mirrors the land she inhabits, the tan roads she marches on and the blonde savannas she treads through. Significantly, at the end of the film, Maria wastes away in conjunction with the land she incarnates and refuses to abandon. The land thus designates her sense of self and –to some extent—her sense of destiny. Any self-identification to her whiteness seems unimportant, if not inexistent; however, other characters inform her (and the spectators) of the actual dangerous consequences in her lightness.

As the district mayor drives Maria to her burning plantation, he runs his fingers through her hair and says, "Extreme blondness brings back luck, it cries out to be pillaged." And a young rebel leader who finds André Vial's (Maria's ex-husband's) gold lighter, dismisses the luxury item as "white material." In this African country, Maria and

her family do not enjoy the benefits of what Peggy McIntosh calls “white privilege.”⁷³ Instead, their race is reduced to perishable “material,” easily stolen, embezzled, or burned. In *La Noire de...*, Diouana’s body is arguably reduced to a domestic appliance given her supposed national and racial disadvantage as a Senegalese maid in 1960s France. Similarly, Maria’s white body is deemed disposable (like an object) given her now fleeting racial superiority as European plantation owner in postmillennial Africa. But can the treatment of whites as “material” be considered an act of revenge from the former slave? Whether the counter-racism is meant as vengeance or not, the African is no longer sacrificing himself to the supposed racial supremacy of the European. A significant departure from the paradigm established by Diouana and Majid in *La Noire de...* and *Caché* is that in *White Material* there are no black colonized subjects who will self-destruct themselves at the mercy of their white counterparts.

If Maria were more conscious of her physical frailty and her whiteness, she would probably feel threatened by her surroundings. Instead, Maria’s small body seems cranked into overdrive up to the very end; fueled by an attachment to whatever power she might still possess. Since Maria does not own the Vial coffee plantation, fighting to keep the plantation in production during the most inopportune of times gives her a sense of power and identity. But the reality is that because her ex-husband has sold the plantation to the district mayor, her work is pointless. Maria’s irrational behavior and avoidance of reality are reminiscent both of Madame in *La Noire de...* and Georges in *Caché*. Madame and Maria attempt to delegate power as women in a broken patriarchal system. Just as

⁷³ see Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies* (Wellesley College : 1988).

Madame struggles to keep Diouana under domestic control while Monsieur wastes away drinking, Maria relentlessly manages the plantation and even hires new workers after her father-in-law and ex-husband have entirely given up on the land. There are different casualties, however, to Madame and Maria's overcompensating power. While Diouana commits suicide in reaction to Madame's system, a death Madame does not consider herself responsible for, Maria's inability to leave the land eventually results in the death of her entire family.

The similarities between Georges and Maria further explain why Maria's intransigence leads to graver consequences than that of Madame's system. Both Georges and Maria actively repress a truth that demands recognition and a change in consciousness. Georges does not want his past with Majid to infect his comfortable and guilt-free public image, nor does he want to succumb to *double-occupancy*; luckily, Georges resides in a system (21st century Paris) in which he can actively repress Majid's presence and domineer Majid's submissive role. Similarly, Maria refuses to acknowledge the pointlessness of holding on to her father-in-law's plantation. Maria's obstinate nature results in greater consequences, however, because unlike Madame or Georges, Maria does not occupy a system where there are Diouanas and Majids to rule over. There are no Others willing to submit in response to Maria's defenses. Furthermore, Maria and her family live in an African country that is in the process of rebuilding itself within the postcolonial. In *White Material's* world, the legacy of former colonizer-colonized relations presents a return to an undesirable history. Ultimately, in her resistance to change, Maria needs to be protected only from herself.

In a world where the racial and hierarchical baggage of the colonial has dwindled, those who once held the power of racial and national supremacy become the victims. Maria ultimately deteriorates as a result of her own unwillingness to move beyond the relic of the colonial. At the end of the film, it is unclear whether or not Maria will survive. She seems not far from ending her own life. Either way, we are left with a feeling worse than the possibility of her self-inflicted death. We can imagine her insisting on living a life in this African country, a life with no family, no property, no place in society, completely surrounded by corruption and violence. Or will she succumb to madness and lose all sense of self like her son Manuel? No matter the outcome, it is clear that Maria's insistence on ignoring the rising power of other systems and her refusal to let go of material prosperity fuels her demise. Ultimately, *White Material* strips the postcolonial colonizer figure (i.e. Madame and Georges) of power.

Manuel Vial provides us with a different response to the destruction of old power and racial relations. Both Maria and Manuel experience manic reactions to the loss of their places in Africa, but Manuel's behavior ironically exhibits important similarities to Majid's character in *Caché*. Manuel is first introduced to us as an adolescent slowly wasting away in the comfort of his bed. Since the school system has deteriorated along with the country's political and social stability, Manuel retreats to his room and welcomes a life with little responsibility. All of his family members complain about his selfish lethargy. After several pleas (and insults) from his mother for him to stop loafing around and quit embarrassing her, Manuel decides to leave his room for a walk on the plantation fields. It is important to highlight that Manuel eventually comes out of his sheltered state and into danger because of his mother. In her refusal to accept the

country's changing state, Maria guides her son into the lion's den. Consequently, Manuel's venture into the African scrubland leads to his self-destructive transformation.

In the plantation fields, Manuel follows two curious intruders with spears. The intruders, two young African boys from the rebel army, strip Manuel of his clothes and cut out a chunk of his blond hair. This encounter metaphorically slaps Manuel in the face with the reality of the danger surrounding him. Taking a chunk of his hair, and calling him "yellow dog," the boys brusquely remind Manuel of the physical differences between them. For Manuel, because these differences demoralize him, he attempts to transform himself into a more ambiguous self. The manner in which Manuel changes himself recalls Majid's animal-like characterization as it invokes *creolization*. Once Manuel realizes that he is no longer safeguarded by his position as son of a wealthy and white plantation owner, he disappears from his family. He then locks himself in a bathroom where he notices a toy animal at the edge of a bathtub, a plastic yellow dog. The spectators are immediately reminded of what the little boys who attacked Manuel called him, and it becomes clear through his transformation that he wishes to be less of a white human and more an animal. As Manuel angrily shaves his head, stuffs his blonde locks down a servant's throat, and flees the plantation with a rifle and a manic, open-mouthed smile, we witness his dehumanization and dog-like embodiment.

Manuel's animal-like characterization is reminiscent of Majid's in *Caché*. This similarity is ironic insofar as Manuel is expected to represent a privileged white youth that is incomparable to Majid's position as an Algerian in 21st century France. Interestingly, Manuel seeks agency and acceptance in his self-dehumanization while the non-human animal is projected onto Majid by a system that reasserts his inferiority.

Unlike Majid's characterization, Manuel's transformation also invokes *creolization*. By shaving his head, Manuel purges himself of one of the most apparent physical traits separating him from the other youth, his hair, a token of his whiteness. If he physically embodies a more ambiguous race or being, he may enter a *créole* identity where there is more room for survival, and a greater chance that the rebel army will accept him.

Perhaps, in befriending the rebel youth, he will be able to re-appropriate his adolescence and find a sense of self. He thus searches and finds the rebel children, eventually befriending them by leading them to his house and playfully giving them all the candy in his family's pantry. The possibility of being wild and free like a child, or like the yellow dogs that open the film, temporarily soothes Manuel's sense of identity before he dies in the fire.

Manuel and the rebel soldiers are the youngest generation and thus presented as responsible for the future of the failing African state. It is worth noting that the only other young character in the film is Manuel's stepbrother, José, the son of André Vial (Maria's ex-husband) and Lucie (one of the plantation's African workers). José is characterized as easy-going, helpful, and also adored by Maria. One could say he more truthfully invokes a *creolized* identity, given that French and African parents raised him. He is the subject that exemplifies a union of France and Africa, and his peaceful manner seems promising. So although there is no solidarity in the film's presented youth, the country's future generation is not comprised only of destructive and violent characters. By including José in the group, Denis seems to be hinting at the possibility of a harmonious relationship between France and its former colonies. The film concludes with a similar tinge of hope.

Is it fanciful to propose that Denis's classic tragedy ends in anything else than utter catastrophe? The final sequence of the film begins with a teenage rebel soldier running away from the Vial's burning plantation. The teenager stops running, gasps for air, and rises from the brush. In his left hand he holds a gun, and in his right, a red beret belonging to the now deceased Boxer. The cellos, violins, windpipes, and organs of Stuart Staples's score continue exactly as they did during the film's opening, and the young boy rises to leave the frame. Arguably, the most significant detail in this ending is the fact that the only surviving rebel soldier clings to the symbol of "le Boxeur."

According to Denis, the Boxer's character was based on the former president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara. While in office, Sankara represented a deep hope for change and reformation in Burkina Faso and other African countries, like Cameroon. Denis wanted the film to begin and end with an allusion to the injured or deceased "Boxer," a character who has no chance of succeeding but continues as a symbol of hope. With this ending, it seems clear that Africans will optimistically continue the fight to free themselves from the baggage of colonial oppression.

The characters in *White Material* complexly depart from the dynamics and subjectivities at the center of *La Noire de...* and *Caché*'s postcolonial world. Maria and Manuel share important similarities and differences with Madame, Diouana, Georges, and Majid. Because Maria and her family no longer occupy a context that allows room for older colonial structures, catastrophe follows any refusal to move beyond the baggage of the colonial. Unlike the world of Sembène's *La Noire de...* and that of Haneke's *Caché*, in Denis's *White Material* there is no longer an extension of the colonizer that can look towards the habitual submissiveness and servitude of the colonized. An extension of

the colonized will no longer sacrifice him or herself in desperation to be recognized or accepted by the colonizer. The white colonizer will no longer protect his space from being occupied or threatened by an exotic Other. The film abandons the habitual submissiveness of Diouanas and Majids, and the expected authority of Madames and Georges. So what remains? Aside from evolving colonial subjectivities and some hope for Africa's future, how does *White Material* conceptually move beyond the baggage of the colonial (the postcolonial) to enter or propose a new era of colonial relations and identities?

White Material revises the postcolonial paradigm by exposing the world of neo-colonialism. The power and control over the Other is no longer enacted by classic plantation owners, passed over to their offspring, and directed onto their African servants. In other words, the baggage of colonialism in a postcolonial setting no longer wholly manifests itself in personal relationships like that of Madame and Diouana, or Georges and Majid. What the film reveals in destroying the aforementioned colonial subjectivities is the persistent and evolving existence of colonialism on larger and much more dangerous scales. Many believe that one of the "positive" outcomes of colonizing Africa was the introduction of the "dynamic features of capitalism."⁷⁴ Of course, any pre-colonial African development was halted. According to Kwame Nkrumah, neo-colonialism is the last stage of imperialism. Exercised through economic means, "the essence of neo-colonialism is that the state which is subject to it is, in theory,

⁷⁴ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'ouverture, 1972), 235.

independent...In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.”⁷⁵

A neo-colonialist presence is woven throughout the film. For example, when Maria drives to the infirmary to buy medications for her father-in-law, the pharmacist leans over to tell her that they only accept dollars. Ironically, on her way there, she had to pay a hundred dollars in order to move past a roadblock of armed rebel members. The mayor's toddler is explicitly shown asking for an orange *Fanta*, and Maria's new hired workers will use English words like “come” and “follow me” when working on the plantation. Importantly, the neo-colonialist force of *White Material* is primarily American and no longer solely European. Historically, since the independence of many African states, the economy introduced by colonialism has become one of the many ways major world powers (such as the United States) keep Africa from relying on its own economic system. Sadly, the control of Africa's economy from outside forces prevents the country and its people from being masters of their own destiny.

It would be reductive to say that neo-colonialism embodies the importance of *White Material's* contribution to the study of evolving colonial subjectivities. The concept of neo-colonialism is significant insofar as it provides an understanding of how the legacy of colonialism resides in spaces other than the domestic and familial spheres of postcolonial. Although neo-colonialism is exercised through economic means, its effects are felt at the cultural and social levels. How will a country and its citizens ever develop a true independent sense of self with exploited goods and manipulated mode of exchanges?

⁷⁵ Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Heinemann, 1965), ix.

Children now become pillagers and soldiers in a desperate fight to regain a sense of being that was once deemed inferior and taken away from their ancestors.

Claire Denis's *White Material* foregrounds violent identities and transformations, and presents a multiplicity of departures from what is expected to determine postcolonial behaviors and relationships. The film builds an allegorical failed state and exposes Africa's continuous subjugation to neo-colonialism. Although the film does not tell us what happens after the plantations have been burnt, the proprietors murdered, the youth devastated, the dollars exchanged, or "the Boxers" remembered, we are left with the hope for regeneration after destruction. The old must be terminated, and even the aftershocks of the old must be reordered. The *self-unmaking* of Diouana and Majid, the persistence of Madame and Georges, and the failure of Maria and Manuel, must be experienced and mourned. Perhaps then, the suffering of colonial subjectivities will continue to evolve—and with hope—dwindle in the fire.

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