

# The Memory of Futures Past in the Postcolonial Imagination: A Hauntological Reading of Mati Diop's *Atlantics*

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Mati Diop's 2019 film *Atlantics* through the lens of hauntology, primarily drawing on the works of Jacques Derrida and Mark Fisher. Diop identifies the ways in which the spectral presence of Senegal's colonial past continues to haunt the present through the diametric symbols of the Muejiza Tower and the Ocean, motifs of modern digital pervasiveness, and the anxiety of inherited cinematic traditions. The argument concludes by stating that the film's final scene—in which Ada, the film's protagonist, smiles at the camera—resists ironic or sincere readings but instead settles comfortably within its unresolved tension.

There is a spectre haunting Dakar—the spectre of colonialism. Mati Diop's 2019 Grand Prix winning film, *Atlantics*, demands reformulation of the oft-cited opening line of *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 73), for a litany of hauntings beset the film. Diop makes some of these hauntings explicit while others remain latent. These include the false promises of failed development projects powered by offshore capital, the revenants of migrants lost at sea, an inherited legacy of New African Cinema, and the quotidian aftereffects of colonial history manifesting in modern Senegal. Through a hauntological lens—constructed from Jacques Derrida's original formulation in *Spectres of Marx* (1993) with later expansions by cultural critic Mark Fisher—I argue that *Atlantics's* hauntings express Fisher's idea of “lost futures” shaped by the omnipresent “spectre of a world in which all the marvels of communicative

technology could be combined with a sense of solidarity much stronger than anything social democracy could muster" (*Ghosts*). Within this framework, Diop constructs a localized hauntology, examining the unsettling spectral remnants of colonialism and global capitalism that continue to shape the postcolonial-Senegalese experience. This concept is exemplified through *Atlantics's* dialectical symbology between the Atlantic Ocean and the unfinished, fictionalized Muejiza Tower megastructure, an exploration of the concerning implications of a hyper-digitalized world, and the complicated film history and production methods undergirding *Atlantics*. The following analysis focuses on the film's central question: is Ada's closing smile sincere or ironic? This essay asserts that the question remains unresolved, mirroring *Atlantics's* political ethos of describing hauntological realities rather than prescribing resolutions.

The titular Atlantic Ocean provides the film's rhythmic undercurrent, whose undulating waves articulate equal measures of hope and despair. Diop employs a sonic motif of waves crashing upon the shores of Dakar, often heard in the background of key scenes. The sound of waves represents what Laura U. Marks calls "haptic visuality," or images which "engage the viewer tactilely" to explore "how the sense of touch may embody memories that are unavailable to vision" (22). Diop explains in an interview which "memories" the Atlantic Ocean is meant to recall: "it was both confusing and terrifying to me, the fact that the coasts for which these young people were leaving were also the starting points for the slave trade their ancestors took part in hundreds of years before" (qtd. in Walsh 8). Diop turns this feeling into metaphor through her protagonist, Ada, who frequently walks along the beach and gazes at the vast expanse that swallowed her former lover, Souleiman. Diop tempers this memory of loss by observing the tide's paradoxical state of constant return, manufacturing an enticing image of hope while producing opposing results. This natural oscillation echoes the reappearance of

Souleiman's animated corpse as a *revenant*, a French title for a folkloric spirit meaning "one who returns."

Equally important in providing the structural framework of the film is the ominous husk of the Muejiza Tower—a monument to suspended futures in contrast to the ocean's recursive past. The film opens with a scene of disgruntled labourers demanding overdue pay, serving as the catalyst for Souleiman's attempted migration and the subsequent possession of the women left behind by their dead lovers (*Atlantics* 00:02:52). John Walsh's article, "The Spectral Climates of 'Emerging Senegal' in Mati Diop's *Atlantics*," is useful for analyzing this symbol, which describes Souleiman as he "stares, dejected, at the tower, receding yet still forbidding, as if driving him away from the prosperous future it is meant to symbolize" (Walsh 7). One may imagine the Muejiza Tower as a lighthouse whose torch extinguishes when boats approach the shore, insofar as it shares the same outwardly hopeful image of the tide while obscuring colonial memories. But for all their similarities, the ocean and tower differ in the tone of their presentation. Diop's "confusing and terrifying" depiction of the Atlantic Ocean hints towards the sublimity of its natural wonder, meanwhile, she goes to lengths to make the tower seem asynchronous, alien, and artificial against the backdrop of Dakar. As Walsh observes, the tower on-screen is a CGI recreation of the unfinished Gaddafi Tower, a real project proposed in 2006 (5), thus affirming Diop's constructed world is pervaded by cancelled futures. The opening line of the film infers this relationship: "every time it's 'just a bit longer'" (*Atlantics* 00:02:52). Though the words refer to the unpaid wages, it also evokes the film's hauntological present in which "time is out of joint" (Derrida 20).

The digital afterlife of the Muejiza Tower links with one of the film's major themes: the encroaching of technology into daily life. Here, Diop clarifies that digital recreation does not equate neutral representation; rather, this tool is often wielded to project false realities. For example, later in the film there is a brief shot of a television displaying a 3D model of the finished Muejiza Tower against a perfect

blue sky (*Atlantics* 00:30:42). Juxtaposed with the film's introduction—where we witness the tower hollowed out and barren, filled only with dejected labourers staring at a thick layer of oppressive red dust (*Atlantics* 00:01:39)—the viewer now sees the tower in its idealized state. The sinister nature of this image lies in its ability to reanimate a dead project and forcibly project it into the realm of possibility, thereby becoming a sort of digital zombie. Furthermore, this contrast manifests as the “material and virtual power of global capital in postcolonial Africa” (Walsh 5), revealing how technological spectacle can mask the exploitation underpinning the promises of neoliberal development projects.

Additionally, *Atlantics* shows that digital zombification can also apply to human lives, beyond even the literal act of “ghosting” via Souleiman’s abrupt abandonment of Ada. In an early scene, Ada’s arranged fiancé, Omar, gifts her an iPhone, telling her, “it will change your life” (*Atlantics* 00:29:29). But one may suggest the smartphone does not merely change one’s life, rather, it multiplies the self by creating a new plane of existence. Fisher writes, “now, with cyberspace available on every smartphone handset, we are never outside it” (*Ghosts*) and this permanent state of online availability allows the self to interact with others without being physically present. This is accomplished through the spectral semiotics of a social media post that allow for remote interpretations of character. Taken to its extreme, contemporary technology questions whether online subjects have the right to die, or does the digital footprint ensure that, like Souleiman, one can always return in spectral form. Diop visualizes this with Souleiman, who continues to exist for Ada within text messages and mysterious calls received long after his death (*Atlantics* 1:03:00). Souleiman’s digital zombification, alongside the weaponization of the Muejiza Tower, serve to advance Diop’s hauntological survey of a world unable to escape its unresolved pasts, a condition perpetuated by modern technologies.

There is an additional sort of haunting in the film's production process, as Diop reanimates dead aesthetics inherited from the history of Senegalese filmmaking. In *Atlantics*, Diop acknowledges the influence of her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty's work within New African Cinema, specifically in films such as *Touki Bouki* (1973). This connection is noticeable from the beginning of *Atlantics*, in which a herd of cattle trot down the street (*Atlantics* 00:01:54). This alludes to the opening shot of *Touki Bouki*, showing the herdsman protagonist, Mory, as a child driving cows through the countryside (*Touki Bouki* 00:00:54). Through this contrast between the dense urbanity of *Atlantics* and Mambéty's rural setting, Diop evokes an intergenerational pastoralism for Senegal before neoliberal industrialization as symbolized by the tower. Both also feature a young romance, with *Atlantics* following Ada and Souleiman, while *Touki Bouki* has Anta and Mory, however, the filmmakers differ massively in tone and sincerity. Mambéty, drawing inspiration from the French New Wave, especially the work of Jean-Luc Godard, employs ironic humour in *Touki Bouki* to stage a critique of neocolonial conditions. Comparatively, *Atlantics* rarely breaks from its mournful register. Contrasting the films' somewhat inverted narratives reveals the necessity of such tonal distinctions. In *Touki Bouki*, Anta leaves Senegal on a boat for France while Mory stays behind (*Touki Bouki* 1:14:00), but in *Atlantics*, it is Ada who stays behind and Souleiman who leaves, leading to his death. Through a hauntological lens, Diop's lack of irony signals that the "ship has already sailed"—the hopeful future once satirized by Mambéty is no longer believable enough to mock. *Touki Bouki's* haunting presence nevertheless exemplifies Fisher's claim that contemporary art struggles to formally innovate due to neoliberalism depriving "artists of the resources necessary to produce the new" (*Ghosts*). A postcolonial context doubly emphasizes this struggle, such that it often requires bending one's vision to secure funding and fit Western standards.

Global distribution, or being understood by the West, is not always the goal for directors outside the

dominant arthouse circuit—as Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène has said, “Europe is not my centre” (*Caméra d’Afrique* 1:01:01)—however, Diop clearly sets her aim on a more comprehensive audience. This inevitably leads to a morally complex production process, as achieving a global audience often requires collaborating with Western corporations. For example, *Atlantics* was financed exclusively by French production companies and distributed in North America by streaming giant Netflix. In an interview with *Screen Daily*, Diop articulates an ambivalence towards this dynamic: “[o]n one side, we want our films to be seen by as many people as possible. On the other, I sometimes worry it’s all moving too fast and that maybe I’ve betrayed cinema but on the whole, it has been positive” (Diop). She recognizes the value of global accessibility, especially for the Senegalese diaspora, but there is an inherent sacrifice in doing so. Fisher writes, “[a]s public service broadcasting became ‘marketised’, there was an increased tendency to turn out cultural productions that resembled what was already successful” (*Ghosts*), implying there exists a financial necessity to reappropriate forms shaped by the dominant Western culture, similar to how Mambéty’s work is deeply influenced by European arthouse.

These production complexities converge with the rest of the film’s symbolic and digital hauntings upon a crucial question pertaining to *Atlantics*’s conclusive scene. Here, we find Ada, “to whom the future belongs,” (*Atlantics* 1:41:10) smiling at the camera. Does this gesture truly point towards an emancipatory politics in which “what was previously deemed to be impossible seem[s] attainable” (*Capitalist Realism* 17)? Or does she simply recognize that “every move was a cliché scripted in advance, [knowing] that even realising it is a cliché” (*Capitalist Realism* 9), thus making her hopeful gaze a strictly cinematic gesture, unable to transcend systemic realism? On a personal level, her smile exemplifies a radical happiness that betrays external conditions, yet it leaves the audience guessing at its profundity. By the end of *Atlantics*, Ada has cut off her arranged engagement, made peace with Souleiman, and is no longer under investigation by the obsessive detective, Issa. Therefore, at least for the moment, Ada achieves mental

liberation from the patriarchal structures surrounding her. She thus becomes—like the oceanic imagery backdropping the scene—a site of pure potential one can never be sure is heading towards tragedy or transcendence.

It is this very connection with the Atlantic Ocean which provides a convincing counterargument to an optimistic reading. Diop layers the closing scene with the sound of waves crashing, returning to her former motif, and signalling to the audience—alongside her protagonist—that, after the film closes, Ada will return to the same patriarchal constraints as before. It is a reminder of the ocean's untrustworthy facade, inviting hopeful aspirations while washing up eternal repetitions of postcolonial hauntings. Nonetheless, it would be strange to call this moment overtly ironic, considering that it would betray Diop's filmmaking style, yet sincerity appears equally incompatible with the film's hauntological politics. Consider the following allegory: *Atlantics* won the Grand Prix at Cannes in 2019—Diop being the first Black woman to even compete at the festival—suggesting, perhaps, the film taps into a social shift towards a postcolonial consciousness in the West. However, one must question, as contemporary thinkers often have, whether there exists an economy of concern for the Other, where empathic viewers exchange guilt for reputational credit.

Ada's smile does not easily fit into binary categories of sincerity versus irony. It is neither a naive promise of liberatory utopianism nor a cynical wallowing in the bleak aftermath of the colonial project. Rather, the smile crystallizes the hauntological condition Diop evokes throughout *Atlantics* and thereby demonstrates the impossibility of symbolizing the Real, alternatively expressed as a future continually disrupted by recapitulations of a colonial past. Diop also allows room for a radical imaginary in which the subject *feels* the future even while lacking the power to externalize it. *Atlantics* is therefore a slightly tragic, yet lucid, exploration and reappraisal of a world in which one must “learn to live with ghosts,” constituting “a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (Derrida xvii–xviii)—an essential mental step for navigating

a postcolonial modernity beset by unresolved pasts and illusory futures.

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