

Can The Subaltern Speak?: Silence and Sound in Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and *White Material*

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Abstract: This paper examines how sound and silence structure the representation of colonial memory in Claire Denis' films *Chocolat* (1988) and *White Material* (2009). Drawing on Leela Gandhi's concept of postcolonial "remembering," I argue that Claire Denis uses auditory forms—silence, overheard speech, radio broadcasts, and music—to register colonial tensions that persist beneath the surface of everyday life. Although critics such as Laura Ceia suggest that Denis's focus on white women risks reproducing colonial hierarchies, this paper contends that the films instead expose the instability of white colonial perception. Across both films, sound is a medium through which suppressed histories surface and escape colonial control.

For Claire Denis, filmmaking begins not with an idea but with a deep conviction that gradually takes form. In a 2010 interview with *Filmmaker Magazine*, Denis describes her creative process as a vague "illumination" that "crystallizes" into a question she must answer through cinema (Denis qtd. in Wigon). In both *Chocolat* (1988) and *White Material* (2009), that question concerns the racial and colonial structures that shaped French presence in Africa. Set during late colonial rule and its violent postcolonial aftermath, these films examine the intimate sphere of settler life through applications of silence, overheard speech, and music. In *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Leela Gandhi describes a colonial system of violence whose residues persist psychologically after independence is gained. Drawing on Gandhi's theoretical framework, I argue

that Denis uses sound and silence to articulate repressed structures of desire and violence that shape relations between white and Black people both during and after colonial occupation.

In *Chocolat*, the protagonist, fittingly named France, returns to Cameroon and recalls the unresolved racial dynamics of her childhood. The film is structured as a frame narrative, in which the majority of the plot takes place in the 1950s, during the height of French occupation in Cameroon. France's childhood is heavily shaped by the tender relationship she had with one of her parents' servants, a Black Cameroonian man named Protée. In *White Material* (set in an unnamed postcolonial African nation), the protagonist, Maria, stays on her coffee plantation despite advice to leave amid rising political violence between African rebel groups and their government.

Both films center on white women living in French Africa—a choice that has drawn criticism. Laura Ceia contends that Denis's aesthetic strategies “tacitly endorse structures of inequality” by privileging white interiority while rendering Black characters voiceless and peripheral (286). Pointing to Denis's visual framing and unequal distribution of dialogue, Ceia argues that the films reproduce the colonial trope of the white woman who claims Africa as her own, while Black women are marginalized (284). Ceia further suggests that Denis romanticizes Africa as a homogeneous Edenic landscape or, alternatively, pathologizes it as a space of chaos and death. However, I contend that Denis mobilizes these aesthetics precisely to destabilize them and reveal the extent to which white supremacy structures the behaviours of those white woman settlers. My position aligns more closely with Laurie Edson's claim that *Chocolat* “deliberately stages its own insufficiency as authoritative representation” (118). Edson suggests that the film does not pretend to offer a transparent account of colonial Africa; instead, it uses the limits and distortions of its white protagonists to demonstrate the hypocrisies and harms of colonial beliefs. What is at stake in

this debate is not simply the visual representation of racial dynamics but also Denis's commentary on the insidious persistence of colonialism. Denis's choice to centre white women's roles within colonial stories does not amount to a moral alignment with their choices and perspectives on race and colonialism.

Gandhi's concept of postcolonial memory offers a compelling lens for understanding Denis's use of white women's gazes. According to Gandhi, newly independent nations often attempt to erase painful memories of colonial subordination, even though "the mere repression of colonial memories is never, in itself, tantamount to a surpassing" (4). To counter this "amnesia," postcolonial thought should perform a "re-membering" that actively confronts and processes the trauma of the past (9). The hyphen emphasizes that this remembering is not a passive act, but rather an active choice to reassemble fractured histories. Gandhi states that any encounter with the colonial past reveals "the seductive narrative of power" alongside "the counter-narrative of the colonized," and that it is necessary "to re-member both" (22, 4).

In both films, Denis locates this uneasy act of remembering in the fractured perception of white women. Their limited vantage points are continually disrupted by what they cannot interpret or refuse to acknowledge. Colonial memory in these films often surfaces in forms that the white characters cannot fully control, such as in silent interpersonal tensions, radio broadcasts, and music. These films repeatedly highlight what young France, her mother Aimée, and Maria, the plantation owner in *White Material*, cannot understand, albeit with the subtlety and ambiguity of Denis's filmmaking style. Anne McClintock's analysis of colonial gender structures helps illuminate why Denis's white female characters simultaneously appear privileged and profoundly limited. McClintock argues that colonial systems rely on a gendered hierarchy in which white women occupy a paradoxical position: they are elevated as symbols of racial purity and imperial stability, yet denied real agency within the structures they symbolically uphold

(61). In her words, white women function as “boundary markers of empire,” tasked with embodying imperial order while remaining excluded from the domains of political and economic control (22).

Denis also uses white women’s perspectives to explore what Gandhi calls the “relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire” that exists between the colonizer and the colonized (4). This dynamic plays out in *Chocolat* between Aimée and Protée, where Protée is often the object of ambivalent intimacy within the colonial household. Protée is central to the household because he labours and cares for the daughter of the colonial family—yet the family also keeps him at the margins. This in-betweenness constitutes a liminal position, which is demonstrated when Aimée’s husband, Marc, arrives home a day early and Protée greets him. Protée stands in the foreground of the shot with his gaze fixed on Aimée and Marc as they kiss (*Chocolat* 45:13). In this scene, both male characters express desire and power. Marc’s authority is evident in the ease with which he moves through the domestic space, openly displays affection for his wife before Protée, and addresses Protée only for practical, servile purposes. Protée, by contrast, occupies a position of enforced yet partial proximity to power through his ability to overhear intimate speech between his white employers.

Protée’s presence within the household also unsettles the colonial fantasy of stable social hierarchy, as he is forced to hover on the boundary between dehumanization and real human intimacy. The colonial domestic space, defined by proximity, dependence, and surveillance, embodies what Gandhi calls the “ambivalent and symbiotic relationship” that characterizes the relationship of underlying colonial violence (11). Colonial power operates through the enforced closeness of shared spaces that blur the line between the private and the political. Aimée, as Protée’s employer, has the power to create intimate moments between herself and Protée. These moments reinforce a mutual dependence: Aimée relies on Protée for household labour and childcare, while Protée relies on Aimée for money and basic respect within

the colonial sphere. When Aimée asks Protée to help her button her dress, they share an extended moment of silent intimacy (*Chocolat* 35:09). The long silence, accompanied by ambient sounds of the household, creates the sense that any speech in such an intimate setting would be unprofessional, thereby upsetting the unspoken rules of the colonial household. Yet the lack of speech also increases a sense of sexual tension: the sound of Protée’s hands on the fabric of Aimée’s dress draws audible attention to the physical and social barrier that lies almost broken between them. Aimée’s attraction to Protée exemplifies what McClintock calls the “porno-tropics” of empire—a European trope of projecting forbidden sexual fantasies and anxieties onto African bodies and landscapes (22). In this context, Protée’s silence in the household unsettles the desire that Aimée projects onto him. He does not actively contribute to this sexual tension between himself and Aimée, yet he does not actively resist it either, at least until later, when Aimée attempts to express her desire more explicitly. This desire, from both characters, operates within the coercive structure of colonialism. The relationship between these two is not consensually chosen, and so any genuine respect and reciprocity that might emerge is curtailed on both ends by the fraught power dynamic that enabled their intimacy in the first place. Violence and intimacy are closely connected in this film, and Protée cannot reject the former without also rejecting the latter.

Protée’s relationships with white men are less tender than his relationships with white women. In Protée’s interactions with the traveller Luc, his silence becomes a form of resistance. When Luc visits the family and speaks to Protée with open rudeness, Denis shows how silence can register as a form of strength rather than submission. Protée never verbally engages with Luc; even at the culmination of their antagonism, when Luc attacks Protée and the two men wrestle, Protée remains silent. Luc initiates the encounter when Protée is working quietly outside, and Luc demands, “Beat it. Leave me alone” (*Chocolat* 1:23:30). Protée simply continues working until Luc begins to push

him. In the end, Protée throws Luc off the veranda just as he had done to the rug he was in the midst of cleaning. This repeated action of throwing casts Luc as just another aspect of the physical and emotional labour Protée is forced to perform to maintain order in the household. The contrast between Protée's placidity and Luc's loud and aggravated speech during the encounter makes Luc appear childish and Protée mature and composed. Directly afterward, Aimée, who has overheard the fight, reaches out to touch Protée who sits exhausted in the dark on the threshold of the doorway. He stands up abruptly and shakes her off. His continued silence is a more forceful rejection of her desire and of his own than any verbal refusal could be—a spoken response would grant recognition to the colonial fantasy of the erotic other, whereas silence is a low-stakes rejection of colonial intimacy. Protée expresses a form of autonomy that Aimée, Luc, and the broader colonial household cannot fully interpret or control. In this sense, Denis's portrayal of Protée's silence visualizes the struggle Gandhi describes, turning the absence of speech into a form of resistance within an unequal colonial soundscape.

In *White Material*, silence between characters represents the repression of complex tensions on the part of the white colonizers and resistance on the part of the colonized peoples. One of these significant silences occurs between the protagonist Maria, a landowning white settler, and an unnamed Black woman she encounters in town when seeking replacement workers for her coffee plantation (*White Material* 38:37). A shot-reverse-shot shows Maria's strained smile while the other woman meets it with a level, unreadable gaze. No words are exchanged, and Maria looks away, ignoring the silence. The Black woman, while helping Maria find employees for her plantation, does not grant her the illusion of a pleasant interaction. The woman does not engage with Maria beyond the economic exchange she facilitates for her community. Marcus Dominick argues that white subjects in *White Material* exist in an "affective borderland that results when white Europeans' sense of or

desire for belonging comes up against rejection” (3). This glance is one instance of that “borderland”: Maria depends on Black labour but refuses to confront the colonial violence that shapes her interactions with Black people, no matter how “civil” or economically just she assumes these interactions to be. She fails to comprehend that her position as a proprietor precludes the possibility of being accepted by the Black people in her community. This gulf between the two women, evidenced by a wordless tension, is what Dominick calls “alienation resolvable into intimacy only in violent encounters” (4). The distance produced by racial hierarchy cannot be reconciled through ordinary social exchange, as Maria attempts to enact with a smile. Any illusion of closeness depends upon force. In other words, even “civil” postcolonial relationships—such as the labour exchange between Maria and her Black workers—are shaped by unresolved colonial violence. The repression of this reality, represented by Maria’s glance away, does nothing to repair or disavow such violence.

Throughout the film, reggae music and rebel announcements anticipate the violence that Maria refuses to acknowledge, voicing the uprising before it physically reaches the plantation. The recurring motif of reggae and political speech articulates the revolutionary energy that Maria refuses to take seriously. This constant intrusion of sound embodies what Gandhi describes as the unavoidable return of repressed colonial histories (4) and what Dominick frames as the “postcolonial unconscious” resurfacing through “unwanted intimacy” (5). The radio collapses public and private space: rebel announcements move freely into domestic interiors, businesses, and vehicles. Maria first encounters radio sound in the pharmacy, where she stands at the counter as the pharmacist quietly splits her bills (*White Material* 32:14). In the background, a reggae song plays over the radio. The radio announcer is a rebel, who says “as for the white material, the party’s over. No more cocktails on shaded verandas while we sweat water and blood” (*White Material* 32:20). The juxtaposition

of “cocktails” with “water and blood” stages a material asymmetry: leisure and coolness on one side, bodily exhaustion, heat, and injury on the other. Maria lightly touches the radio with her fingertips as the broadcast plays, a gesture that suggests an attempt to regulate or contain the sound invading her space. Yet sound is beyond her grasp because it does not operate within the spatial boundaries that her authority encompasses. Maria’s desire to maintain her harvest schedule is rendered politically insignificant by the collective momentum of anti-colonial resistance. In a climactic sequence where government authorities confront the rebel group, the reggae song “Any Which Way... Freedom” by Mutabaruka begins to play on the radio as Maria looks out of her window. It also plays in the next shot as soldiers drag the original rebel announcer out of his house (1:24:13). The camera then cuts to Maria’s workers gathered around a fire listening to the same radio broadcast. This song connects a sequence of various scenes and social groups. The song binds these characters together across physical space while also making the ideological distance between them clear. During these scenes, the radio asserts that “There must be a solution / a revolution / any which way freedom must come” (Mutabaruka). These lyrics convey a political sentiment that mirrors the rebels’ call for change to their country’s system. This music plays while Maria’s individual fantasies of ownership and endurance are dwarfed by the complexity of broader historical forces surrounding her. The unnamed African country that Maria resides in is undergoing its own civil dispute, and she does not land meaningfully on either side. Mutabaruka’s song, playing in public spaces throughout the area, renders audible the desires to destabilize the colonial order. The sound dwarfs Maria’s story within a larger, shared narrative of resistance that refuses to be silenced.

Music also plays a major role in the ambiguous final scenes of *Chocolat*. The film concludes at an airport where three Black airport workers have just finished loading African cultural objects onto a plane. Much like the unfairly compensated labour performed by Black bodies

in both films, this scene is a reminder of how colonial economies historically rendered Black workers peripheral to the artistic and cultural value they produce, which was shipped out of the country for appreciation at colonial art galleries. As the workers finish loading, they step off the tarmac towards a field of grass. They begin to talk with one another, but their voices are completely inaudible beneath the music by South African composer Abdullah Ibrahim. However, as it begins to rain, the tone of the scene shifts. The workers pull yellow rain jackets over their clothes and venture beyond a concrete overhead covering, into the field beyond. Their laughter suggests that they accept the change of weather with ease. This laughter, withheld from the viewer's auditory access, becomes a private joy beyond the viewer's sensory access. By overlaying speech with music, Denis isolates her audience of Western viewers from the workers' intimate speech, thereby indicating the unfinished struggle for audibility within postcolonial contexts.

In *Chocolat* and *White Material*, Denis uses silence and sound to reveal forms of colonial consciousness that remain sublimated. Denis's cinema insists that these histories cannot be neatly divided into oppressor and oppressed narratives, nor can they be forgotten through what Gandhi calls a national "will-to-forget" (4). Instead, her films illustrate the psychic residue of colonialism and how it continues to structure desire, belonging, and exclusion long after the French empire's formal end. Formal ambiguity matters beyond the screen: it models how contemporary societies must confront the unresolved, often unconsciously reproduced legacies of colonialism. By displaying the white subject's perceptual limitation, Denis shows that what remains unheard or repressed can still be profoundly resonant.

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