



FILM REVIEW

Borders in Globalization Review
Volume 1, Issue 2 (Spring/Summer 2020): 135-136
<https://doi.org/10.18357/bigr21202019893>

Tragic Hope in Diop's *Atlantics*

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Atlantics

(Original French: *Atlantique*)

Directed by Mati Diop

Released November 2019



A cohort of young Senegalese men approach the foreman of a Dakar port construction project and a tempestuous argument ensues. Their faces contort with the anguish of poverty, injustice, and exploitation. Voices are raised; supplications are brandished. Then come the inevitable excuses. The penurious workers are fed the dependable subterfuge of the managers, CEOs, and owners since time immemorial: "It isn't our fault". In a way, he is right. The foreman is merely a pawn in the complex dynamics of inequality, development, and corruption. And, in their desperation, the laborers can do nothing more than beg and beseech. "Keep your money, but remember we have families", says one of the provoked youths to the insouciant foreman, appealing to the man's humanity. It does not work. The youths disperse, and moments later they are packed in the cargo bed of a truck singing loudly. It is as if they know there is nothing to be done. They are on the wrong side of the socioeconomic border in Senegal's rapid but unequal development.

This "nothing to be done" is the central motif in Mati Diop's 2019 *Atlantics*. Perhaps that partially explains the choice of adopting the supernatural over the course of the film. Souleiman, one of the protagonist pair in the film, is among the outraged faces in the scene. He is also the singular figure not joining the jaunty singing: his



pained heart and his outrage are both visibly apparent on his face. While most viewers and critics may pounce on the candid theme of poverty and corruption in the film, I was also struck by its attention to more internal, even existential, dilemmas: fitting into society, competition, prejudice, social norms and pressure, love, exile, and loyalty. Souleiman and his secret girlfriend, Ada, seem to be the only ones who are permanently recalcitrant to their fates and refuse to accept them.

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In them, the viewer sees the tragic hope of pursuing a different life. The film is essentially a depiction of the borderlands between the often-difficult reality of life and the illusion of a better life.

The viewer may already know what comes next: the inevitable desperate sojourn into the ocean. Souleiman does not sing because he has reached the Rubicon for migrants, the point of no return for Senegalese who have made their intractable decision to exile by ocean. His decision has already been solidified, tempered by the despondence of yet another exploited and invisible worker. In Senegal, 46% of respondents say they would move to another country if they had the means, and 44% say they plan to move to another country in the next five years (Pew Research 2018).

The final leg of the journey for much of the illegal migration between Senegal and the (now heavily securitized) borders of Europe is the central route between Libya and Italy, a principal passage for Sub-Saharan migrants and the deadliest route for migrants anywhere on Earth. In 2006, half of the 30,000 illegal migrants arriving in the Canary Islands were Senegalese, while 1,000 of the 7,000 migrants who died during ocean crossings to Europe were Senegalese (Mbaye 2014). Senegal is one of the most developed and stable nations in Africa, with political stability, strong economic growth, and a good education system, yet almost 47% of the country lives in poverty (Searcey & Barry 2017). Perhaps this explains why Diop's *Atlantics* can feel so jarring and manic to watch: a series of vacillations between comfort, agony, hope, despair, wealth, poverty, beauty, calm, injustice, and love.

So, Souleiman disappears into the azure sea toward Spain. Europe is never shown in the film. It remains a specter in the far distance, a siren luring youths to drown on its treacherous sojourn. Ada, meanwhile, struggles with similar dilemmas: an arranged marriage without love or familiarity that will satisfy her family (and her friends) and bring them comfort, or alienate

her family and society by running away with Souleiman, who is poor but loves her—another transgression of the borders between society's acceptable and the anathema behavior. Ada must furtively visit Souleiman. Pleasure, free will, and contentment, according to the film, are all tantalizing sentiments that do not persist or come easily. When Souleiman vanishes, Ada's family further coerces her into the marriage, finally setting and coordinating a date. Her fate is sealed. The evening consummation is disrupted by a "supernatural" disaster, and that is when the supernatural takes over. Corrupt and greedy managers will be haunted as people seek justice for the abuses against them.

Mere mortals have no recourse against these many injustices and can do nothing to oppose the corrupt elites who exploit them. The movie suggests that those who haunt the rich developer who cheated the laborers, Mr. Ndiaye, have more scruples than he does. They threaten him and demand the salary which they are rightfully owed. They do not harm him, the way he and other corrupt officials and executives have harmed and oppressed the poor and workers they exploit. For those who flee into the unknown of a different life in Europe, the sea awaits. Their memories haunt us all.

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