(Im)possible Inscriptions: Silence, Servitude, and Suicide in Ousmane Sembène's *La Noire de…*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the tensions between inscription and voice, silence and servitude, that are staged in Ousmane Sembène's novella *La Noire de…* (1962) and its eponymous film adaptation (1966). In contrast to existing scholarship on *La Noire de…*, I center my reading on the space of suicide itself—the bathtub and the interior space of the bathroom—which I show to be a highly symbolic site, charged with meanings. Taking up Gayatri Spivak's characterization of suicidal resistance as an impossible message inscribed on the body, I show that Sembène figures Diouana's suicide in the bath not only as a watery death, but also as a writerly one. I argue, moreover, that the bath manages to distill a racialized discourse on hygiene while presenting Diouana's death as occurring at the intersection of two models of neoslavery.

INTRODUCTION[1]

As Gayatri Spivak reminds us in her essay "Terror: A Speech after 9-11," resistance that takes the form of suicide is "a message inscribed in the body when no other means will get through" (96).[2] Suicidal resistance constitutes an effort to make the body signify radically and at any cost. Like Bhubaneswari Bhaduri—the subaltern woman whose suicide Spivak "reads" in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"—Diouana Gomis, the protagonist of Ousmane Sembène's short story *La Noire de …* (1962) and its eponymous film adaptation (1966), "use[s] her gendered body to inscribe an unheard message" (Spivak, "Terror" 97). A young, idealistic Senegalese maid who leaves her native Dakar for the "promised land" of Antibes, France, only to find herself isolated, humiliated, and effectively

held captive by her white, French *patrons*, Diouana ultimately slits her own throat ("se tranche la gorge") in the bath of her employers' home and dies. It is this voiceless and "unheard" message that Sembène restages, reinscribes, and allows to reverberate in text and film.

While a number of studies (e.g., Petty; Langford) offer important insights into the interlocking concerns of race and gender that Diouana's suicide presents as an act of resistance mediated through the black female-gendered body, scholars have not, on the whole, afforded much critical attention to the space of suicide—the scene of bodily inscription—itself: namely, the bathtub and the interior space of the bathroom. Rachael Langford gestures at the possibility of such an analysis in her reading of the film, when she suggests that "[t]he bathroom is a highly symbolic location" for Diouana's suicide (19). However, while Langford recognizes the bathroom (though not the *bathtub*) as a space dedicated to self-care and as the site of past conflict between Diouana and her employers, she ultimately stops short of exploring the symbolic potential of the bath. My analysis builds on existing scholarship on *La Noire de…* by taking up the "tensions between text and voice" (Langford 20) that are staged in Sembène's work but specifically addresses those tensions through a close-reading centered on the understudied space of the bathtub and its representations in both the novella and the film. I argue that the bathtub in which Diouana kills herself emerges as a highly symbolic object, charged with meanings, and must be placed at the center of any reading of the act of suicide.

Given the various symbolic values that the bathtub will be seen to take on, it is surprising that, in the increasingly robust scholarship on *La Noire de…*, this space largely has escaped critical attention. It is noted frequently in criticism on Sembène's films that he afforded great significance to the semiotic function of (often quite ordinary) objects—such as masks, articles of clothing, or posters (Pfaff 57–61). In Sembène's own words:

> Generally, I use certain objects as sociocultural and historical reference marks. Film language requires a certain punctuation and some objects allow me to punctuate my films. (qtd. in Pfaff 57)

If the bathtub can be said to "punctuate" *La Noire de…*—if it can be said to speak a filmic *language*, as Sembène seems to suggest—it does so in a doubly coded and highly ambivalent way. The bathtub is the place where Diouana, on the one hand, asserts herself as a thoroughly unmanageable and *intractable* black body and, on the other hand, simultaneously strives to make herself legible. This essay takes Diouana's suicide in the bath as a point of departure for a broader consideration of the modes of inscription, silencing, and voicing that are at work in *La Noire de…*. Following Gayatri Spivak's analysis of "subaltern" suicide, I begin precisely at that point in Sembène's film and text where voice is radically given over to (bodily) writing, to the making of a trace, and the marking of a message. First, I analyze the visual framing of the suicide scene, demonstrating how Sembène's filmic language stages a writerly death that activates various cultural and historical references and opens onto a racialized discourse on hygiene that subtends the narrative in both the novella and film. I then move on to read Diouana's suicide as occurring at an impossible intersection between two forms of enslavement—two models of silence and servitude—that make simultaneous claims on her body as a subaltern female

subject. I bridge from this consideration of silence and servitude to an examination of the ways in which Sembène holds orality and writing in tension throughout *La Noire de…*. Finally, I show that Diouana's is not the only "silence" that signifies, since the material conditions of the production and distribution of Sembène's film reveal additional forms of neocolonial silencing as well as further openings for resistance and critique.

SCENES, SITES OF SUICIDE

Any analysis seeking to engage with both the textual and cinematic versions of Sembène's *La Noire de…* must adopt a telescoping lens, attempting to shuttle between text and filmic text without conflating the two.[3] In this respect, it is useful to understand Sembène's project as consisting in a work of *réécriture*: what film scholar Nancy Virtue has called an act of "cinematic re-writing" (557).[4] Despite the multilayered processes of rewriting and restructuring involved in Sembène's transition from text to film, both the short story and the film "present the basic facts of Diouana's path to suicide almost identically" (Virtue 557). That the suicide is presented similarly, even "almost identically," in each case, and the fact that this suicide centers around the space of the bath, allows us to treat the bathtub as a kind of intertextual hinge by which we might attempt the aforementioned shuttling between textual and audiovisual modes.

In the film, the suicide scene consists in a series of dramatic high angle shots that brutally insist on the physicality of Diouana's extended naked, bleeding body darkening the water of the bath. Sembène's cinematic framing of suicide alludes to, even self-consciously cites, a number of visual intertexts: well-known images that depict watery and writerly deaths, or that ruminate on the relationship between suicide and language. For one, Diouana's death in the bath resembles representations of the suicide of the tragic playwright and stoic philosopher Seneca, who killed himself by slitting his wrists and the backs of his knees while submerged in a bath of warm water in order to speed the hemorrhaging. Sembène's mise en scène is also such that Diouana becomes an Ophelia figure in high-contrast: a modern Millais in black-and-white (Figures 1–2).

The Shakespearean intertext is not without precedent, given that Aimé Césaire evokes a similar image—a *martiniquaise* Ophelia who floats downriver in stanza 15 of the *Cahier*—in his description of suicide onboard the slave ship:

> Au bout du petit matin, le morne famélique et nul ne sait mieux que ce morne bâtard pourquoi le suicidé s'est étouffé avec complicité de son hypoglosse en retournant sa langue pour l'avaler; *pourquoi une femme semble faire la planche à la rivière Capot (son corps lumineusement obscure s'organise docilement au commandement du nombril) mais elle n'est qu'un paquet d'eau sonore.*
>
> At the close of foreday morning, the famished mount—and no one knows better than this bastard of a mount why a man choked himself to death with the collusion of his hypoglossis as he shoved his tongue backward in an effort to swallow it; *why a woman seems to float on her back in the Capot River (her corpse a dark glow, arranging itself obediently at the command of her belly button), but she is merely a bundle of resounding water.* (80–83; emphasis added)

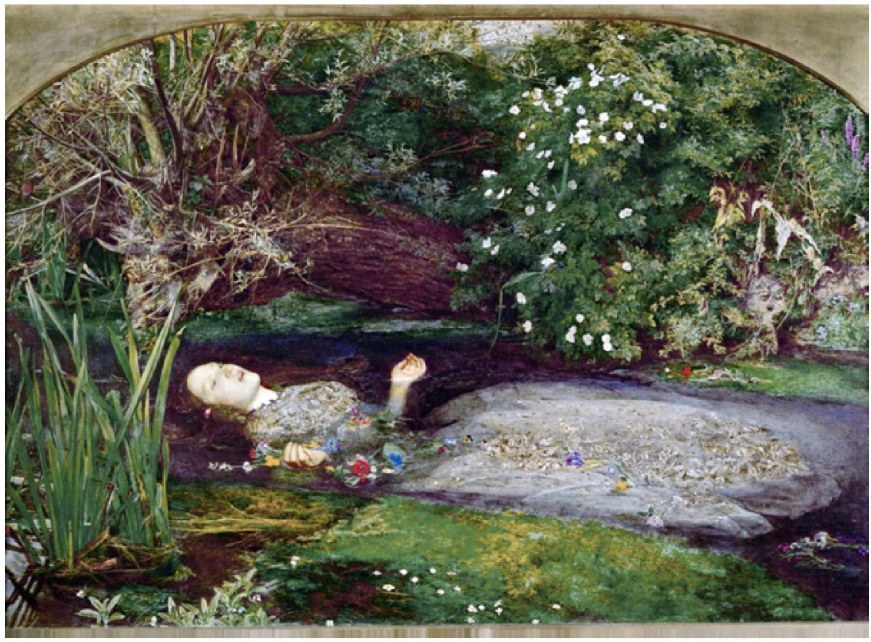

Figure 1: Detail from *Ophelia* (1852), John Everett Millais. Source: Tate Britain, London (inv. N01506).

Figure 2: Diouana in the bath (Criterion).

In both Sembène's and Millais's staging, the elongated female body is figured in a pose of languid recumbency, with the head positioned in the left-hand third of the composition and the rest of the body stretched out to the right. In each case, the body is framed by an oval enclosure: the oblong shape of the bathtub, in the case of Diouana; for Ophelia, the water plants and lush bank that bound her on all sides. The arresting visual framing of Diouana's suicidal body is accentuated further in the film by the sharp and urgent strains of music—likely a mix between kalimbas and *xalam*, a Wolof string instrument—that gradually increase in volume and intensity as the camera pans to reveal the lifeless body. In this way, Diouana's death forms the dramatic visual and sonorous climax of the film, in contrast to the novella, where the shock of the maid's death is attenuated somewhat, reported at the outset of the text and then narrated in analepsis (Sembène 150–51).

Sembène's mise en scène of the suicide even more strongly recalls another watery (and writerly) death: that of the murdered French revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat (1743–93), famously portrayed in Jacques-Louis David's canonical political painting, *La mort de Marat* or *Marat assassiné* (1793). Scholars typically have read Sembène's visual citation of David's work as an ironic commentary on Enlightenment thinking and republican values—which professed the revolutionary ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* even as the institutions of French slavery and colonialism persisted. Often overlooked, however, is the reflection on writing and (revolutionary) violence available in David's painting and subsequently mobilized by Sembène.[5] Indeed, Sembène's filmic eye lingers on the bathtub in a medium shot long enough for us to watch the bloody patrimonial razor slip from Diouana's extended, lifeless right hand before panning to a close-up of the bloodied blade: a nod to David's composition, which uses Marat's elongated arm to draw the viewer's eye not only to the quill, but also to the blade (Figures 3–4).

While it is difficult to verify, for certain, that such painterly images consciously informed the filmic language of Sembène's portrayal of Diouana's suicide, the articulation between Sembène's moving tableau and the paintings of Millais and David is particularly salient given the ways that each framing stages voice and inscription in the context of a watery death. In *Hamlet* (4.7), Ophelia famously allows herself to drown, pulled down by garments "heavy with their drink," while singing. Meanwhile, David's painting depicts Marat, the radical journalist and editor of the revolutionary periodical *L'Ami du people*, lying dead in his bath: arrested, quite literally, in the midst of a scene of writing. In David's rendering, the white quill pen is equated chromatically with the knife (which has a white hilt), and the visual dialogue between these two objects is taken up on a larger scale by a compositional triangle that invites the viewer's eye to cycle between the instruments of writing and death; the paper or parchment, which is marked by both ink and blood; and the crimson gash on Marat's otherwise pale, unblemished skin. The painterly signature even takes epistolary form: *À MARAT—DAVID*. In Sembène's staging of suicide in *La Noire de…*, the articulation between death and writing is compressed even further than is the case in David's painting. David depicts Marat in the process of writing on a piece of parchment or paper, whereas Diouana transforms her own body into the surface of inscription. For David, the instruments of writing and death (the quill, the pen) are visually equated but ultimately separate; in Diouana's case, they eerily coincide. While Marat's left hand holds a piece of paper with legible writing on it, Diouana's left hand is invisible,

Figure 3: Detail from *La Mort de Marat* or *Marat Assassiné* (1793), Jacques-Louis David. Source: Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (inv. 3260).

submerged in the bath, and her blood has made an abstract kind of dysgraphic "writing"—an indecipherable inky smear—on the gleaming white side of the tub.

Critic Sheila Petty further reads the final high angle shot of Diouana's lifeless body as a sort of detached witnessing of the suicide, by which this "act of self-destruction becomes an act of self-actualization" (314). That Sembène presents us with an image of Diouana's entire body would seem to support such an analysis, since he resists any "voyeuristic fragmentation," fetishization, or eroticization of the suicidal body (Petty 314). The cinematic effect of Sembène's figuration of the suicide is also highly typographic: Diouana's blackness becomes a mark set off against the stark-white of the bath and the white enamel tiles of the bathroom's

Figure 4: Diouana in the bath (Criterion).

interior. In this sense, the suicidal inscription is doubled and displaced: Diouana inscribes on her black female-gendered body while simultaneously introducing the blackness of her skin and blood (in black-and-white, the chromatic difference between the two is effectively neutralized) as a mark, or stain: a sort of *tache noire* at the heart of the white home. Her braids even seem to form a letter on the crown of her head, the character "X": a mark of negation, cancellation—but also the mark used in place of a signature for people, like Diouana, who cannot write (in the history of French colonization, notably enslaved persons).

Rachael Langford reads the typographic nature of Diouana's high-contrast death as a reversal of the historical model of colonialism, deeming it "a most successful invasion and conquest of white by black" (19). This "invasion," however, is short-lived, for in the film an additional displacement and doubling occurs when the camera "wipes"—an editorial transition that implies *erasure*—from the scene of suicide to a scene that we might interpret as its photographic negative: a high angle shot of French men and women darkening their white bodies on the glittering sands of the beach in Antibes (Figure 5).

Beyond this editorial wipe, Sembène's visual framing of the suicide provides a further, winking reference to processes of erasure by including a bar of soap in the initial shot of Diouana's death (Figure 4). This object points in several directions. On the one hand, it recalls an early scene in the film in which we see Diouana scrubbing the bathtub, as though uncannily preparing the eventual space of her suicide. This scene also exposes the deception to which Diouana has been subjected in coming to Antibes: hired as a nanny for the children, she finds herself

Figure 5: "Sun and fun" (Criterion).

exploited as a lower-status *bonne à tout faire*, about which she internally complains bitterly.[6] On the other hand, the soap, as well as the stark transition between the scene of suicide and the scene of sun and fun on the beach, anticipates a later scene in which we see the bathtub thoroughly "wiped" clean, all traces of the maid and her bloody death removed.

At the same time, the bar of soap manages to distill a racialized discourse on hygiene—of *saleté* and *propreté*—and mobilizes notions of degeneration, blackness, and indigeneity that subtend the narrative. In the novella, Diouana's blackness is compared explicitly to a contagion:

> Persécutée, elle se minait. Diouana, lorsqu'elle était à Dakar, n'avait jamais eu à réfléchir sur le problème que posait la couleur de sa peau. Avec le chahut des petits, elle s'interrogeait désormais. Elle comprit qu'ici elle était seule. Rien ne l'associait aux autres. *Et cela la rendait mauvaise, empoisonnait sa vie, l'air qu'elle respirait.*
>
> Persecuted, she undermined herself. Diouana, while in Dakar, had never had to think about the problem posed by the color of her skin. With the heckling of the children, she now wondered. She realized that she was all alone here. Nothing connected her to others. And it made her wretched, poisoned her life, the air that she breathed. (166–67; emphasis added)

In both the text and the film, moreover, it is implied that Diouana chooses the bath as the space of suicide precisely because it marks an act of defiance: a sort

of extreme self-regulation that simultaneously asserts, once and for all, the utter "unruliness" of her body.[7] Specifically, Sembène stages Diouana's decision to commit suicide in direct response, at least chronologically speaking, to an altercation with Madame. Their exchange centers on this racialized notion of hygiene:

> Trois jours après Diouana prit son bain. Madame lui succéda mais trois heures après sa promenade. Elle revint vivement :
>
> —Diouana ... Diouana, s'écria Madame, tu es sale quand même. Tu aurais pu laisser la salle de bains en ordre.
>
> —Pas moi Madame. Les enfants eux, viye.
>
> —Les enfants ! c'est pas vrai. Les enfants sont propres. Que tu en aies marre, c'est possible. Mais que tu mentes comme les "indigènes," j'aime pas cela. J'aime pas les menteuses et tu es une menteuse.
>
> Elle garda le silence, pendant que la nervosité faisait trembler ses lèvres. Elle remontait à la salle de bains, se dévêtit. C'est là qu'on la trouva, morte. (173–74)
>
> Three days later, Diouana took her bath. Madame followed her, but three hours after her stroll. She came back in a fury:
>
> —Diouana ... Diouana, Madame shouted, how filthy you are. You could have left the bathroom tidy.
>
> —Not me, Madame. The children, them, yes.
>
> —The children! It's not true. The children are clean. It's possible that you are sick of them. But you lie like the 'natives,' and I don't like it. I don't like liars and you are a liar.
>
> She remained quiet, while her trepidation made her lips tremble. She went back up to the bathroom, undressed. It's there that they found her, dead.

Madame not only cathects the charge of dirtiness from the physical condition of the bathroom onto Diouana herself ("tu es sale" 'you are filthy'), but also accuses Diouana of lying—a serious and highly insulting accusation in Senegalese culture. That the children are dirty or improper, that they could be anything other than spotlessly clean, is a possibility Madame refuses to entertain. If lying is a sin, a stain, then soap signals the possibility of ablution: it functions as much as a boundary between the races as a means of preserving the precarious whiteness of the *patrons*.

Soap, and the hygienic discourse captured by the space of the bath more generally, thus hardly can be considered innocuous in this context. As Anne McClintock demonstrates in *Imperial Leather*—in which she traces a social history of soap in the context of 19th-century British imperialism—soap, especially soap bars, spectacularly mediated between the cult of domesticity and new imperialism:

> Soap flourished not only because it created and filled a spectacular gap in the domestic market but also because, as a cheap and portable domestic commodity, it could persuasively mediate the Victorian poetics of racial hygiene and imperial progress. (209)

The "poetics" of racial hygiene and imperial progress described by McClintock is all the more significant when brought to bear on the death of a Senegalese maid. For the history of French colonial Dakar—in particular the urban planning that led to its "morphogenesis" into a regional African capital—is deeply intertwined with a history of segregationist sanitation policies (Bigon). These policies deeply impacted Sembène's own family; the spatialization of violence produced by residential sectorialization, quarantining, and urban *assainissement* were defining features of the author's childhood in Casamance, the same region Diouana is from (Gadjigo 49–57). As an instrument of cleanliness and hygiene, the bathtub succinctly figures this urban history and its racist underpinnings, which operated by mixing "biological fact" with "social metaphor" (Bigon 99). It is a metonym for what Kristin Ross has analyzed as France's culture—or cult—of "cleanliness" during decolonization.

In committing suicide Diouana thus "becomes [most] fully the unadministrable, uncircumscribable body which has so aggravated her employers" (Langford 19). To do so in a space dedicated to daily care of the body—what we might read as a site of ritual purification, cleansing, or even baptism—lends a further charge to her act. In another sense, Diouana's decision to die in the bathtub makes her body an object of ritual sacrifice. Specifically, her death rehearses the traditional practice of French and Senegalese Muslims in HLM ("habitation à loyer modéré" 'rent-controlled housing') killing sacrificial sheep in their bathtubs during the celebration of aïd al-Adha or aïd el-Kebir, an annual rite colloquially known as *la fête du mouton*, and as *Tabaski* and *Korité* in Wolof. In a recent ethnological study on the prevalence of this practice in France's metropolitan centers, Anne-Marie Brisebarre notes how the bathtub becomes a lay solution for accomplishing such an elaborate sacrifice in unaccommodating urban spaces such as the cramped apartment building. Brisbarre explicitly refers to the sacrificial objects as "moutons égorgés dans les baignoires" 'sheep with their throats slit in bathtubs' (608), in what emerges as an eerie parallel to the grisly mechanics of Diouana's own death.

SILENCE AND SERVITUDE

Diouana's suicide typically is read as both a form of anti-(neo)colonialist resistance and a final assertion of her own agency—one accomplished through a devastating act of bodily inscription, to recall Spivak's phrasing. A closer examination of the way Sembène presents Diouana's death reveals a more complex mapping of intersecting histories, allowing us to read her suicide as an act that makes interlocking claims about silence and servitude and how they come to bear on subaltern female subjectivity. That Diouana specifically enacts her suicide on the organs of speech, on her throat, aligns her death with other forms of suicidal resistance that traditionally took the form of radical self-silencing—most significantly perhaps the acts of self-destruction aboard the slave ship, by which slaves committed suicide by swallowing their tongues, tearing at their throats, or using their hands to choke themselves.[8] The transatlantic narrative is an important one in *La Noire de…*, given that Sembène's overarching claim is that, by naively embracing the myth of France, Diouana effectively becomes a slave:

> Vendue… vendue… achetée… achetée, se répétait-elle. On m'a achetée. […] On m'a attirée, ficelée et je suis rivée là, *comme une esclave.*
>
> Sold… sold… bought… bought, she repeated to herself. They bought me. […] They drew me in, tied me up and now I'm locked up (*rivée*) here, like a slave. (172; emphasis added)

Her journey to France, Sembène suggests, makes Diouana a prisoner of her own skin, her horizons limited to the narrow confines of her black body[9]:

> Les larges horizons de naguère se limitaient à la couleur de sa peau, qui soudain lui inspirait une terreur invincible. Sa peau. Sa noirceur. Craintivement, elle fuyait en elle-même.
>
> The previously expansive horizons of not so long ago were limited to the color of her skin, which now provoked in her an invincible terror. Her skin. Her Blackness. Fearfully, she retreated within herself. (167)

In both the text and film, Diouana travels from Dakar to Antibes by boat, unlike the white family who travel by aircraft.

Even before Diouana's fateful Mediterranean crossing, Sembène gestures at the imbrication of these two histories—that of Diouana's neocolonial domestic enslavement, on the one hand, and that of the French Atlantic Triangle, on the other—when he includes the spectral image of Gorée Island, a site infamous for its role in the slave trade:

> Là, penchée sur la large fenêtre ayant vue sur la mer, Diouana, *transportée*, suivait le vol des oiseaux, haut sur l'immense étendue bleue ; loin, l'île de Gorée se dessinait à peine. Elle avait en main sa carte d'identité elle la tournait, la retournait, l'examinait et se souriait intérieurement.
>
> There, leaning out of the large window overlooking the sea, Diouana, *transported*, tracked the flight of the birds, high up on the immense blue expanse; far away, Gorée Island was barely visible. She had her ID card in her hand, she turned it, turned it over, examined it and smiled inwardly to herself. (159–60; emphasis added)

On the level of wordplay, *transportée*, of course, manages not only to capture Diouana's mental reverie in this scene, but also suggestively points to her looming conversion into commodity, into human cargo soon to be ferried across the sea where a form of neoslavery awaits: she is "taken from Africa as if she were some sort of parcel, transported like unimportant cargo rather than by plane like the family" (Parascandola 368).[10] As a pseudo-aquatic space that is transformed into a site of self-actualizing violence, the bathtub manages to recall the hold of the slave ship, situating Diouana's suicide under the ghostly sign of slavery. And in the film, the oblong shape of the bath surrounding Diouana's extended body provocatively parallels famous cross-section illustrations of slave ships ("coupe d'un bateau négrier") (Figures 6–7).[11]

Sembène thus imbues Diouana's death with historical and pan-African significance, inscribing her final act within a transatlantic genealogy of suicidal resistance.[12] The bath appears to function as a fluid, maritime, and quasi-nomadic

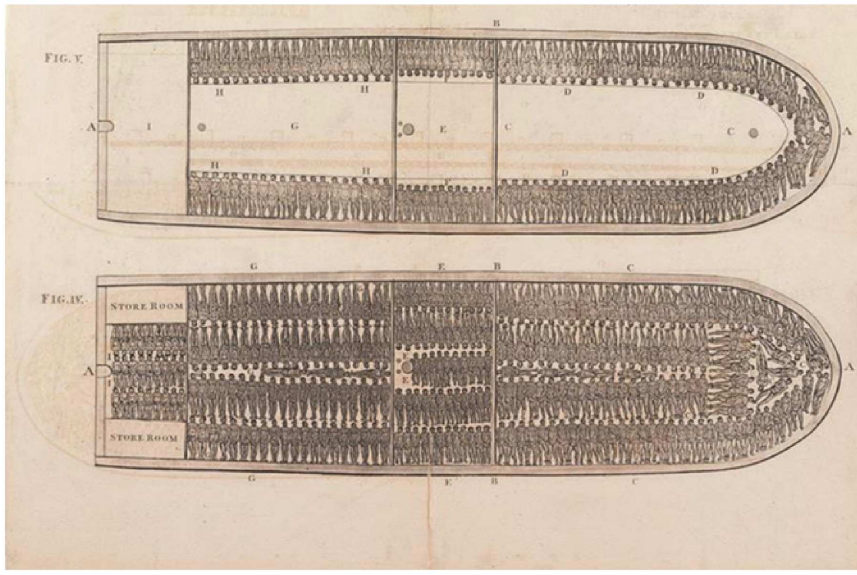

Figure 6: Detail, *Plan and sections of a slave ship*, Carl Bernhard Wadström (Darton & Harvey, 1794–95), Yale Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, BrSides fol. 2012.9.

Figure 7: Diouana in the bath (Criterion).

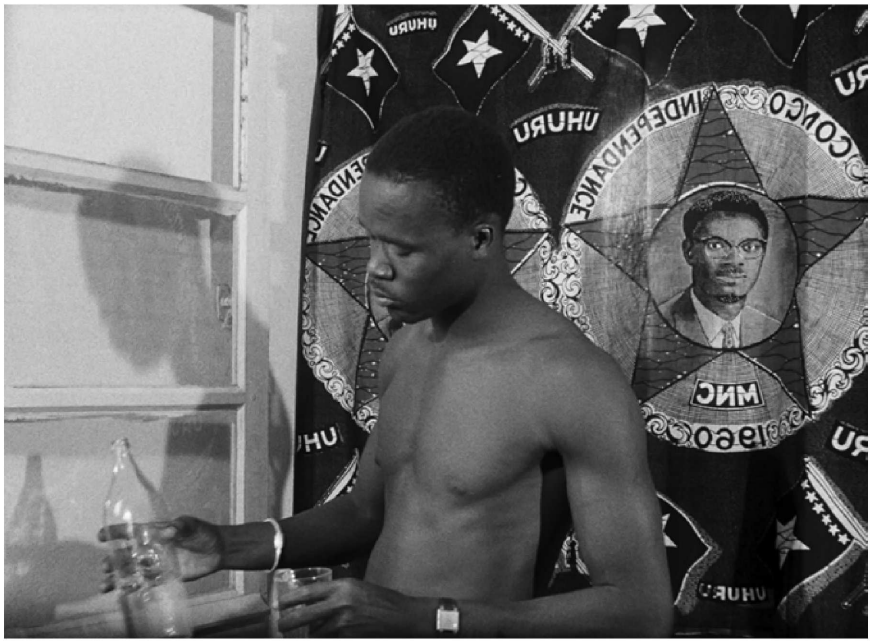

Figure 8: Diouana's lover (foreground), flag with Patrice Lumumba and Uhuru (background).

space: in the film, Diouana packs her bags—she is preparing for a *journey*, a trans-migration through voluntary death. That she is accompanied in this scene both by her suitcase and her traditional mask—an object that makes the Mediterranean crossing twice in the film—underscores this point.[13]

However, the fluid, nomadic nature of the bath is complicated when we consider that the bathtub also constitutes an *espace clos*: a highly bounded, protective amniotic vessel. It recalls not only the sea, but also the womb, holding watery death and rebirth in the same hand. This womb-like nature of the bath—and the bath as a typical place of *accouchement*, of labor and childbirth—is all the more significant if we consider Diouana's suicide not solely as an act of resistance vis-à-vis an oppressive neocolonial economic model, but also as reflecting a desire to remove herself from a patriarchal economy of bodies. Her suicide constitutes not only a radical rejection of her enslavement in Antibes, as well as a refusal to participate in what we might take to be an equally oppressive nationalist, hetero-reproductive script: one by which she would be expected to have remained in (or returned to) Dakar, marry, and have children, rather than pursuing an impossible union with *La Belle France*. In the film, Diouana's rejection of this hetero-reproductive model is dramatized most obviously by Sembène's introduction of the character of Diouana's brawny (and mostly shirtless) boyfriend, whose political leanings are made clear through his visual association with Patrice Lumumba and "Uhuru," and who cautions Diouana against pursuing what he perceives to be an unconventional lifestyle (Figure 8).

The equation of Diouana's boyfriend with a nationalist, anticolonialist narrative of hetero-reproductivity—one that pays little attention to sexual difference (Sohat)—is made rather explicit in the film: in analepsis, we see Diouana and her shirtless boyfriend occupy the same bed, and Diouana removes her hairpiece and unfastens her dress as the scene fades out of focus. That the act of sex is made clear in the film is itself significant, given the relative absence of sex elsewhere in Sembène's cinema.[14] Sembène seems to didactically point out Diouana's entrapment between these two models of servitude: domestic neoslavery on the one hand, marriage on the other. This gendered reading stands to nuance more conventional interpretations of the maid's death, given that the suicide can be seen to function not merely as a critique of Diouana's naïveté (and, by extension, the idealism of many Africans who embraced the myth of France after independence), but also as a means to illuminate the specific positionality of the subaltern female trapped between two repressive systems.

We are reminded here of Spivak's analysis of the suicide of the young Indian woman Bhubaneswari Bhaduri in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" As Spivak remarks in a later text, "Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular," the focus of subalternity in her original essay was

> ... the singular woman who attempted to send the reader a message, as if her body were a "literary" text. The message of the woman who hanged herself was one of unrecognizable resistance, *an unrecognizable refusal of victimage by reproductive heteronormativity.* (478; emphasis added)

The foil of Diouana's boyfriend—as an embodiment of what Spivak calls "reproductive heteronormativity," which Diouana ultimately rejects by taking on work as a maid in France—most clearly dramatizes Diouana's radical opting out of a predetermined, nationalist script. However, such a reading remains available in the novella as well, given that Diouana bucks convention by embracing France as an unconventional (and ultimately fateful) female-gendered love-object:

> La "France," elle martelait ce nom dans sa tête. Tout ce qui vivait autour d'elle était devenu laid, minable ces magnifiques villas qu'elle avait tant de fois admirées.
>
> "France," she thrummed out the name in her head. Everything that lived around her had become ugly, those magnificent villas she so often had admired suddenly shabby. (154–55)

In taking her life, Diouana radically rejects neocolonial enslavement while simultaneously signaling her unwillingness to rehearse a different, but perhaps equally undesirable, form of subjugation: an unwillingness, in other words, to trade one model of servitude for another. Her death reveals the extent to which the female postcolonial subject finds herself impossibly positioned at the untenable intersection of two oppressive regimes that make overlapping claims on her body.

INSCRIPTION AND (DE)VOICING

While the exploration of neocolonial silencing that Sembène stages in *La Noire de ...* culminates most obviously in Diouana's decision to take her life, the suicide participates in a broader discourse on forms of inscription and orality that is articulated

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LES FAITS DIVERS

Auteur d'un vol de linge et de vaisselle chez un cultivateur de Saint-Pancrace

Un ouvrier-peintre est arrêté par la Sûreté de Nice

Le 20 juin dernier, M. Joseph Passeront, cultivateur, demeurant à Nice, villa « Marie-Joséphe », chemin du col de Bast, quartier Saint-Pancrace, signalait au commissariat du 7e arrondissement qu'un vol de linge et de vaisselle, pour une valeur de 70.000 francs, avait été commis à son préjudice.

A ANTIBES

Une jeune négresse se tranche la gorge dans la salle de bains de ses patrons

Gomis Diouana, une jeune négresse de Dakar, a mis fin à ses jours dimanche, vers 13 h., en se tranchant la gorge dans la salle de bains de sa patronne.

Lorsque des coloniaux rentrant en France s'étaient attachés les services de la jeune Gomis Diouana, qui avait vu le jour à Boutoupa au Sénégal, ils n'avaient certes pas pensé que leur bonne aurait le mal du pays au point de se trancher la gorge un jour de cafard. Parlant peu le français et, de ce fait, évitant de confier à ses patrons sa funeste décision, ils ont été les premiers peinés et surpris de son geste.

Il était 13 h. et tout était calme à la villa « Le Bonheur Vert », au chemin de l'Ermitage, à Antibes, calme précédant semble-t-il la tempête, puisque Mme Petit, ne trouvant pas sa bonne dans la villa, dirigea ses pas vers la salle de bains qu'elle trouva fermée.

Pressentant un malheur, Mme Petit fit appel à un voisin qui, à l'aide d'une échelle put, de l'extérieur, voir ce qui se passait dans

Le pendu découvert dans les bois d'Antibes a été identifié...

... mais on ignore encore les causes de ce suicide

Hier matin, nous relations la macabre découverte que firent deux jeunes gens se promenant dans les bois situés derrière le champ de tir des Terriers entre Vallauris et Antibes, bois d'un accès très difficile et où le hasard seul a permis de découvrir dimanche, vers 18 h. 15, le cadavre d'un homme qui s'était pendu à une branche basse d'un chêne.

Le commissaire de police d'Antibes, en raison de cette heure tardive, n'avait pas jugé utile de faire déplacer les services des pompes funèbres, pour une mise en bière dans le cours de la nuit, c'est ce qui nous avait fait écrire que ce service ne fonctionnait pas le dimanche.

Hier, l'enquête a permis de connaître l'identité du pendu. Il s'agit de Magno Durbano, né le 3 avril 1909 à San Pietro Monterosso (Italie), demeurant à Antibes, chemin des Combes, propriété Durbano, exerçant la profession d'ouvrier spécialisé à l'entreprise Colombo et Ser-

Figure 9: "Les fait divers" in *Nice Matin*. "Une jeune négresse se tranche la gorge dans la salle de bains …." 'A young Negress slits her throat in the bath…' (Criterion).

in both the novella and film. Indeed, the notions of inscription, writing, and textualization emerge as important if not "essential" ones (Langford 19) in *La Noire de…*, and these frequently are held in tension with modes of voicing, silencing, and gestures at the (im)possibility of speech. As Sada Niang has argued in his analysis of orality in Sembène's cinema, oral and written forms of communication typically function as "two language-specific codes, ideologically charged and dramatically set against each other" (57). Niang's insight holds true, in fact, for both the cinematic and textual versions of *La Noire de….* In both, Sembène juxtaposes orality and writing in provocative ways. Famously, the idea for the short story emerged from a *fait-divers* report in a French newspaper, and both the novella and the film nod at their intertextual origins by reproducing the original report (Figure 9).[15]

Such a project, a kind of reading *à rebrousse-poil*, puts Sembène in conversation not only with Gustave Flaubert—who found the inspiration for Emma Bovary's suicide among *fait-divers* reports—but also with the work of contemporary scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Marisa J. Fuentes, among others, who read archives "against the grain" in order to sound out the sites where the voices of black women have been violently silenced (e.g., Hartman; Fuentes). Sembène's short story further dramatizes voicelessness and voicing through the inclusion of a fugue-like lyric, "Nostalgie," that was appended to the novella in the original 1962 version published in *Voltaïque*. By recourse to a lyric voice, Sembène explicates and poetically glosses Diouana's suicide, in a recuperative gesture that to an extent rescues her death from the way it is coldly rendered—sentenced to silence and insignificance—in the French newspaper. That Sembène self-consciously inscribed himself

within the griot or *géwél* tradition—considering himself, and artists in general, as *la voix du peuple*—also should not be overlooked (Niang 56). Moreover, Diouana's illiteracy—her inability to read *or* write—is underscored at various points, most obviously through the thematization of letter-writing. In the short story, Madame promises to serve as Diouana's proxy, to write in her place ("écrire à sa place," 172); in the film, Madame and Monsieur quite literally ventriloquize Diouana when they compose a fictive missive home, angering her and causing her to shred the letter. Such ventriloquizing operates on a macrostructural level as well. For instance, in the short story, the details of Diouana's suicide are relayed through the narrative frame of a French police investigation, taking the form of an extended flashback, and then dispassionately summarized in the aforementioned *fait-divers* newspaper report. Diouana's "voice," where it can be said to emerge in the novella, is only made available to us through a heavily mediated narrative structure. Even then, it takes the shape of a pliant and childlike variant of *petit-nègre*: "Viye Madame, acquiesça-t-elle de sa voix enfantine.... Moi dire à maman pour moi, dire aussi à papa Boutoupa, dit-elle" 'Yes, Madame, she acquiesced in her childish voice .... Me say to mother for me, say too to papa Boutoupa, she said' (155–56). In the film, by contrast, Diouana narrates her own story in fluent French, a fact some scholars read generously as a form of contestatory voicing, by which the "neo-colonised African 'I' can be said to predominate" (Langford 15). Sheila Petty, similarly, suggests "Diouana speaks for herself within herself" in the film (309). Nancy Virtue further reads this reframing—i.e., the fact that, in the film, the diegetic space of the plot and the non-diegetic space of the voice-over commentary are made to coincide—as a coming-to-consciousness on the part of Diouana that allows us to understand her eventual suicide not (merely) as a self-destructive act but as one of self-determination (560–61):

> Unlike the short story, which presents an omniscient narrator who awakens his readers by interpreting for them an act of suicide that has already been interpreted and mediated from a French perspective, the filmmaker/narrator enacts a gesture of *self*-awakening on the part of Diouana. (560; emphasis added)

While Virtue asserts—and I think quite rightly—that Diouana's suicide represents an attempt at self-actualization, her analysis, like those of Langford and Petty, seems to disregard the fact that Diouana's interior monologue is not a straightforward use of voice-over (*voix-off*), but rather yet another example of colonial silencing, by which Diouana's *for intérieur* is overwritten or colonized by someone else's voice (and not, for instance, voiced by Mbissine Thérèse Diop, the Senegalese actress who plays Diouana in the film). As Tobias Warner notes in his analysis of "free indirect discourse" in Sembène's film, *La Noire de ...* was shot silently, with the speech of actors dubbed in post-production in France. Sembène's limited budget prevented him from bringing Diop to France to record Diouana's lines; her speech and thoughts were dubbed instead by the Hatian-born actress and singer Toto Bissainthe (1934–94), who lived for most of her life in Paris. The result is a kind of odd estrangement between voice and action, the commentary seeming to sail over, or float above, the events taking place on screen. There is an uncomfortable disjuncture between the Diouana we see on screen and her voice, which is not hers, in the voice-over. From the very first lines she speaks, Diouana is a split,

uncanny being, a fact that takes on even greater significance when we consider that the periphrasis used in Wolof to refer to suicide is the verb *xaru*, which literally means "to split the self" or "to self-split." Bissainthe's melodic metropolitan French ultimately can be read (or heard) as a sign of absence, such that Diouana/Diop's own language (whether Wolof, Senegalese French, Manjak, Serer, or any combination of these) remains legible, audible, only as it is effaced. Diouana's suicide, which transforms her body into a signifier, is one point in the film where her body and a language radically coincide. Suicide is the moment when Diouana, elsewhere sentenced to silence and servitude, her own language receding beneath Bissainthe's mellifluous French, finally "speaks" from within and *through* her own body in a fatal idiom.

SILENCING SEMBÈNE

The forms of colonial silencing at work in *La Noire de …* can equally be seen to operate on a broader scale, given that the material conditions of the film's production and screening bear witness to the extent to which *La Noire de …* constitutes a palimpsestic, even dispersed "text": one that exists in multiple forms and formats, emerging from a complex set of negotiations, suppressions, (re)appropriations, and reworkings. Sembène's *La Noire de …* is typically heralded as "le premier long métrage africain" 'the first feature-length African film' (Prédal). However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, this attribution is not entirely accurate, given that the film originally was conceived as a seventy-minute endeavor but subsequently shortened to fifty-six minutes in order to circumvent certain production requirements of the Centre national du cinéma (see Pfaff 113; Virtue 558; Hennebelle 9).[16] Sembène himself hesitated in his characterization of the film, wavering between calling it "a short feature film" and a "a long short film" (Malčić 169). The excised portion of the film consists of a colored sequence in which the camera follows Diouana's journey along the French Riviera upon her arrival from Dakar (Pfaff 113). The effect is an inversion of what Steven Malčić labels the "archetypal cinematic narrative of spatiotemporal displacement" (176)—namely, Dorothy Gale's journey from black-and-white Kansas to the technicolor world of Oz—serving to further dramatize Diouana's mythologized vision of the metropole.

For the purposes of this essay, the deletion of such a sequence is not (or not just) interesting background information; rather, it testifies to the extent to which Sembène's own artistic vision was shaped, his own message compromised, even partially silenced, by a "vicious circle" of neocolonialist production policy.[17] In yet another turn of the postcolonial screw, the audience of this very message was displaced and, at least initially, highly overdetermined: as Diawara notes, once rights to the film's distribution were purchased by French companies, the film premiered in Paris and was subsequently banned from being commercially screened in Africa (108). Malčić helpfully parses this development as follows:

> Once the film was completed independently, neocolonial institutions bought control of the film's exhibition, and displaced the film geographically from the very audience for whom it was made in a further attempt to keep the Senegalese "behind the times" of their own reality. (171)

Of course, this "displacement" takes on a further irony when we consider that Sembène's "recourse to cinema [was] a means of reaching people who do not read" (Miller 370). By initially blocking Sembène's film from its intended audience, and therefore controlling its reception, French neocolonial institutions achieved a silencing not unlike that which is imposed on Diouana upon her arrival in Antibes, where she finds herself financially dependent, linguistically isolated, physically cloistered, and essentially rendered voiceless in the space of the French home. In a film that stages at its center an instance of radical self-silencing—Diouana's slitting of her throat—which doubles as a kind of incriminating inscription, we should recognize a powerful reflection, on the part of Sembène, on the ambivalent positionality of the Francophone African author and filmmaker. Forms of silencing, Sembène seems to suggest in both text and film, can be instrumentalized. Silence can be made to function as "a tool" of critique (Miller 377); it might even be wielded as a weapon.

READING, WRITING SUICIDE

By foregrounding the bath simultaneously as a place for "contestatory voicing" (Langford 20)—the shouting out of an injustice—and one of radical silencing, Sembène posits the bathtub in *La Noire de…* as a deeply symbolic space, but also as a fundamentally ambivalent one. The bath emerges as the site for a bloody act of writing and as an instance of complete erasure or negation. It is in the space of the bath that Diouana, in committing suicide, can finally "voice" a message—it is her "ultimate form of expression" (Pfaff 113)—but only at the cost of an extreme form of self-silencing.

Like Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, whose suicidal resistance Spivak famously exhumes and makes legible, Diouana has recourse to suicide as a radical and devastating mode of self-actualizing writing. In each case, the suicide of a subaltern female becomes the point of imaginative departure for an act of reading that subsequently interprets and interpolates the suicidal inscription in the third person within an aesthetic (Sembène) or theoretical (Spivak) work. We might understand the intertextual nature of this intervention as the aesthetic performance of an ethical mechanism.[18] For it is not so much that "the Subaltern cannot speak," but rather that, within the hegemonic neocolonial discourse, the discursive conditions do not exist for her to "be read or heard"—at least not by any conventional means. In taking up the purportedly nondescript *fait-divers* report of a maid's suicide and attempting to restore a certain *épaisseur* or "thickness" to this abandoned and forgotten trace, Sembène models what we might call an ethical, and alternative, act of reading: one that necessarily takes on the form of a kind of (cinematic) writing. His project in *La Noire de…* consists, at least in part, in reading or sounding out Diouana's silence, in unpacking the voiceless or "unheard" message that she inscribes on her body within the space of the bathtub. Though illiterate, at the moment of her death Diouana becomes, paradoxically, a *writer*—leaving an opaque message of resistance that Sembène endeavors to read and re-cite. Her final act may take the form of a radical self-silencing, severing the very organs of speech, but we should read Diouana's suicide—*hear* her silence—as a scream.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers whose insights and suggestions helped to sharpen the focus of my essay. I am equally indebted to Professors Christopher L. Miller and Jill Jarvis for reviewing an earlier draft of this text; to Imane Terhmina and Shanna Jean-Baptiste as well as to the members of Professor Miller's graduate seminar, "The Francophone African Novel" (Spring 2018, Yale University), who served as invaluable interlocuters during the early stages of my analysis; and to Idris Mitchell, who helped me to identify aspects of the musical score to Sembène's film.

2. In her essay, which is framed as a response *to* and *in* a time of terror, and that takes as one of its central figures the female suicide bomber, Spivak draws an important distinction between forms of suicidal resistance: unlike Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, the female suicide bomber "does not"—cannot—"make a gendered point" (96). By exploding herself *as* other, and in that process exploding others, no recoding of the gender struggle is possible (95–96).

3. Throughout the essay, I attempt to differentiate clearly between text and film when relevant to my discussion; if at any point I refer simply to the title *La Noire de…* it should be understood that my claim is meant to apply to both the novella and its cinematic adaptation.

4. For her part, Françoise Pfaff characterizes the work as an act of *translation* that moves between literature and film (114).

5. To the best of my knowledge, Pamela McCallum is the first scholar to have pointed out the striking similarity between David's painting and Sembène's framing of Diouana's suicide (161–62), reading the scene as a parodic reproduction of David's masterpiece that evokes "a canonical representation of heroic death in the suicide of a Senegalese domestic worker" (161). However, McCallum analyzes the intertext of David's painting exclusively under the rubric of revolution and Enlightenment, arguing that "Sembène's figuration of Diouana's death precipitates a series of reflections on the 'dialectic of Enlightenment' in the historical differences and continuities between Senegal and France." The notion of inscription—the idea that Marat's death is not simply revolutionary, but also *writerly*—is entirely absent from her analysis. Similarly, Jonassaint, without citing McCallum, juxtaposes Sembène's framing of Diouana's death with David's painting, stressing Marat's status as a symbol of revolutionary ideals and anti-slavery Enlightenment thinking, but does not address the central motif of inscription (255–56).

6. This scene directly follows Madame's flinging open of the living-room curtains to expose a glimmering expanse of ocean belted by a crescent of white-washed houses—"Voici la côte d'Azure !" 'Here is the French Riviera!'—and the telescoping between aquatic scales (from the ocean to the bath) neatly figures the drastic limitations of Diouana's horizons.

7. This path toward self-regulation is foreshadowed by Diouana's decision to revert to her natural hairstyle just before the suicide.

8. On this topic, see Snyder.

9. It is worth mentioning that Sembène's use of *noirceur* in this passage closely mirrors Fanon's unusual usage of the term in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952): "Le Blanc est enfermé dans sa blancheur…. Le Noir dans sa noirceur" 'The White man is enveloped in his Whiteness…. The Black man in his Blackness' (7). On this topic, see Calhoun.

10. In the short story, the only person to caution Diouana against her voyage is Tive Corréa, an *ancien marin*, who has made the fateful crossing himself and is, at the time of narration, driven to drink.

11. Jonassaint is the first to make this comparison (255–56).

12. In positing Diouana's suicide as an act of resistance against slavery, Sembène likely also had in mind a specifically Senegalese reference: what in Wolof has come to

be known as *Talaatay Nder* (in French, *le mardi de Nder*), the name given to an important episode in resistance to slavery by Senegalese women. In 1820, or by some accounts 1819, the women of Nder defended their village against the attacks of North African slavers and ultimately committed collective suicide, preferring to immolate themselves and their village rather than being sold into slavery.

13. For an analysis of masks in Sembène's films, see Pfaff's chapter "Objects and Their Symbolism" (57–68).

14. Pfaff notes that "[a]s a rule, sex or physical violence are not the main ingredients of Sembène's films except *Xala* … or in *Emitai* and *Ceddo*" (69).

15. "À Antibes, une noire nostalgique se tranche la gorge" 'In Antibes, a nostalgic Black woman slits her throat.' On the origins of *La Noire de…* in an actual suicide reported in *Nice-Matin* in 1958, see Petty (308) and Willey (127). Sembène also seems to suggest covertly that Diouana's suicide is symptomatic of a more pervasive problem, not limited to anti-blackness, namely the condition of immigrant workers in France, since her death is reported next to another unexplained suicide: the death by hanging of an Italian "ouvrier," Magno Durbano, from San Pietro Monterosso, who was found suspended from a tree in the Bois d'Antibes with a resident's permit (*carte de séjour*) in his pocket.

16. Scholars vary on this point; Steven Malčić gives the original running-time as "about one hour and a half" (169). Illogically, Sembène, a first-time director, would have been required to already possess a professional card and to have made a feature-length film. Sembène explains this in his 1969 interview with Hennebelle.

17. For a more detailed examination of the politics of production of *La Noire de…*, see Malčić (168–71).

18. I am grateful to Jill Jarvis for suggesting this phrasing.

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