Untamed Storms: Cinema's Oceanic Contingency and Mati Diop's *Atlantics*

Laurence Kent | ORCID: 0000-0002-0700-4931
Lecturer in Digital Film and Television, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK
laurence.kent@bristol.ac.uk

Abstract

The ocean, for Jean Epstein, figures the disruption that the cinematograph offers for human perception, presenting a nonhuman view on the world. This article will critically engage with Epstein's writings on water to reflect on Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019) and its particular conception of the oceanic. *Atlantics* positions the ocean within the perspectives of its filmic subjects but also in excess of them. This perspectival nature of the oceanic speaks to a liminal space between male and female, living and dead, human and nonhuman, which mirrors contemporary debates within Black studies around the exclusion of Blackness from the normative category of the human: the contingency of the definition of humanity based on racial exclusion. As a result, it is not only the nonhuman perspective that the ocean provides in *Atlantics*, but a spectral haunting of those deemed other than human by global capitalism, which disrupts, as a queer prophecy, the veneer of necessity that the neocolonial order requires to sustain itself.

Keywords


The eponymous ocean of Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (*Atlantics*, 2019) haunts the film, mediating multiple perspectives that hover between those of the human characters, nonhuman agency, and colonial history. The film's narrative revolves around the death at sea of young Senegalese men, exploited and unpaid in their home city of Dakar and looking for opportunities elsewhere. The film does not directly follow this story of migration, however, but focuses on the women left...
behind, who become possessed by the spirits of the drowned men, returning to exact revenge on their boss. More specifically, it centres on Ada’s (Mama Sane) coming-of-age tale and her love story with Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), who dies at sea but comes back in the body of the local police officer. Against the backdrop of Senegalese worker oppression and the horror of young men lost at sea, multiple filmic interludes placed throughout the film give the Atlantic ocean “a metaphysical or supernatural power itself” (Pisters, 2020: 177). This spiritual force of the sea finds voice in the film’s engagement with supernatural possession, where those drowned at sea take over living bodies in order to right worldly wrongs.

Diop’s work sits in a tradition of migrant cinema from Senegal, including that of her uncle Djibril Diop Mambéty, whose 1973 *Touki Bouki* can be seen as a transitionary film that began to “reimagine a geography in which departure to France is no longer centralised in the same way that it is in earlier texts” (Rofheart, 2014: x). Manthia Diawara (1992: 46) places Mambéty’s film in the “didactic-fictional” genre of African cinema; these are films of Manichaean divisions involving “a quest (mostly symbolic) to the West, characterizing alienation, and a return to the sources as a way of solving the problem.” In Diop’s *Atlantics*, the ocean provides a contradictory embodiment of this symbolic quest: it is a site of alienation and death, but also the primordial source from which humanity evolved and the source of (neo)colonial division engendered by the Transatlantic slave trade. The presence of water thus gestures to a complicated internal view of a transnational outside; as Allan Sekula and Noël Burch write, “the ocean remains the crucial space of globalization: nowhere else is the disorientation, violence and alienation of contemporary capitalism more manifest” (2011: 78).

Much has been written on how Diop’s film engages the oceanic, and this article will continue the conversation through attention to a history of cinema’s embroilment with the disorientation, violence, and alienation of the ocean itself. The ocean, haunted by history, performs a living death for those men in the film lost at sea; it is formally implicated in their subsequent supernatural possession. These ghostly palimpsests have been flagged by Diop, herself born in Paris and a French actor before her directorial work. When discussing influences on her film and the specific meanings of her filmic images to Senegalese people, she conjures historical tales of the drowned:

I was very intrigued by [...] stories from Bretagne, a western region in France, which is geographically open to the Atlantic, where a lot of Senegalese immigrants have settled. There are many tales or legends of seeing Senegalese people on boats from afar or of Senegalese who never arrive,
assumed to have drowned, and whose spirits go on to haunt the inhabitants of the villages there.

Black, 2019

This article suggests new layers to this hauntology, conjured by successive waves of transatlantic migration, by traveling away to the Bretagne islands, back in time to the first half of the 20th century, and into the writing of Jean Epstein, who explored this locale in a series of maritime films. Although a return to Epstein might seem out of place, especially in view of the colonial resonances underlying some of his writings, his theoretical insights into the connection between the cinema and the oceanic can provide a fertile conceptual space within which to explore Atlantics’ engagement with the ocean. For Epstein, the movements of the sea figure the disruption that the cinematograph offers for human perception as an alienated point of view. As James Schneider explains, “by using cinema to grant perspective to the non-human – to the oceans, tides, the tempests,” Epstein believes that “humankind gains a vital perspective on itself” (2012: 195). Agency from outside the human floods the screen, suggesting the unstable nature of perception.

Thus, water, in its perpetual mutability and formal variability, becomes a figure of contingency, an image that forces the thought of the non-necessity of the world as it appears to us: the possibility that perception and logic could be otherwise. Here, the alienation of perception underpinning Epstein’s philosophical and poetic obsession with cinema can thus productively open us up to a discussion of the role of contingency and thinking differently within contemporary Black aesthetics. Atlantics positions the ocean within the perspectives of its filmic subjects but also in excess of them. This perspectival nature of the oceanic speaks to a liminal space between male and female, living and dead, human and nonhuman, which, as we will see, mirrors contemporary debates within Black studies around the exclusion of Blackness from the normative category of the human: the contingency of the definition of humanity based on racial exclusion. As I hope to show, it is not only the nonhuman perspective that the ocean provides in Atlantics, but a spectral haunting of those deemed other than human by global capitalism, which disrupts, as a queer prophecy, the veneer of necessity that the neocolonial order requires to sustain itself.

The Perspective of the Wake

Existing analyses of Atlantics (Kayır, 2022; Pisters, 2020) often focus on the filmic interludes whereby images of the ocean are overlaid with atmospheric
music or accompanying voice-overs that seem to occur outside the space-time of the film’s narrative. What has not been as extensively commented on are the shots of the ocean that are placed within narrative space, but which work to disrupt a direct association with perspective. Diop places these images of water within a character’s point of view but also in excess of an individual’s sightline. Tina Montenegro claims that in Diop’s film, “the ocean offers no perspective” (2021: 133), but it might be more accurate to say that it offers no single perspective as it slips between individual, supernatural, material and extra-diegetic perspectives. In this section, I will analyse these moments that play with perspective in order to flesh out the potentials of this oceanic aesthetic.

One of the first extended mediations of water comes after Souleiman and his fellow workers argue with the construction-site managers over the non-payment of their wages. Souleiman is seen looking into the distance on the back of the truck with the other men leaving the work site, the enormous skyscraper they are working on cutting the horizon, which later is shown to be designed as a luxury hotel. His stare can be retrospectively understood as a window into the difficult decision being made around leaving Dakar to seek work overseas, and his look is associated with an intercut tracking shot of the shore. However, looking out the back of the car is not in the same direction as the images of the water, which is to the side of the vehicle. His thoughts are clearly being associated with water, and, as we understand later, his death in the ocean, but the ocean is not directly linked to a point of view; it is in excess of physical vision whereby the ocean becomes symbolic of migrant crossings.

Soon after Souleiman sees Ada in town, the film cuts to an image of the ocean. We hear Ada exclaim, “You’re just watching the ocean. You’re not even looking at me.” When Ada and Souleiman embrace, Souleiman is looking at Ada, again slightly disrupting a direct point of view association between Souleiman and the water. This is the last time that Ada will see Souleiman, at least in his own body. When the two part, Souleiman turns from watching Ada walk away towards the ocean. The image that follows, which the film initially implies is the perspective of Souleiman, is clearly not what he could see. This high angled shot of the ocean, an impassive grey with an opaque fog blurring the line of the horizon, exists in excess of Souleiman’s vision. It is psychologically motivated, as we later find out, by his plans for migration, but the image of the ocean provided disrupts a containment of oceanic vision within the perspective of the individual. Throughout the film, similar shots of the ocean seem to slip between direct pov shots and impossible visions of water that seem to exist outside of narrative space (Fig. 1). Diop plays with these perspectival shots, for
example when the women go to the club to meet the men after work and find out that they have already left. A shot of the shore shows the waves hitting the beach as the women discuss their boyfriends and brothers, but the following shot that might mark a perspectival relation is one of a woman covering her eyes. Water, soon to become a grave, haunts their minds as both a physical entity and as a symbol. Another scene shows the police officer investigating the arson of Ada's marriage bed, raiding Souleiman's room and looking out a small window; the image of the ocean that follows sits in a similarly unclear position between pov and symbolic presence.

Later, these perspectival shots of the ocean become more disruptive, with images of water being intercut with those of the women when they begin to get sick. This feverishness is a prelude to their possession by the men lost at sea, and the water becomes powerfully associated with this ghostly takeover of their bodies. The doubling of water and the mourning that inevitably comes after the death of the men evokes the multiple meanings of living “in the wake”
explored by Christina Sharpe: a phrase connoting mourning and the ripple effects caused by the ships that broke water in the Middle Passage. In *Atlantics*, mourning is disrupted by the liminal place between life and death that the men occupy, and the ongoing nature of the disaster. Sharpe articulates this staying in the place of the wake, with its multiple meanings, as an attempt to bring about a new way of thinking the afterlives of slavery and colonialism. By “plotting, mapping, and collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death,” one can “resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially” (Sharpe, 2016: 13).

Understanding that these supernatural possessions take place in the wake, in the symbolic haunting of the ocean as past and future horror, allows for an aesthetic ungrounding of colonial logics. The ocean is the material and symbolic image of these neocolonial impositions, and the way Diop places water in-between multiple perspectives – individual vision, symbolic entity, supernatural boundary between the corporeal and the ghostly – locates it always in excess of a single meaning or purpose. The film thus resists resolution; it stays in the wake and performs wake work that, as Sharpe describes,

do[es] not seek to explain or resolve the question of [Black] exclusion in terms of assimilation, inclusion, or civil or human rights, but rather depict[s] aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within and after the legacies of slavery’s denial of Black humanity (2016: 14).

These paradoxes center around a dominant conception of humanity, or the “misrecognition of human kinship” that Sylvia Wynter posits as underlying contemporary forms of coloniality, and which Akwugo Emejulu glosses as the proposition that “the ‘human’ is an exclusive and excluding category bounded by whiteness” (Wynter, 1992: 15; Emejulu, 2022: 1). To further explore Diop’s exploration of the oceanic perspective, its liminality regarding categories of humanity and living, I now turn to a filmic history of the ocean’s ungrounding capabilities via an analysis of Jean Epstein’s films and writing.

**Epstein’s Philosophical Oceans**

In the history of film theory, it is Epstein who most directly forges a link between the oceanic and the cinematic through his filmmaking and writings. For Epstein, cinema, as an alien or nonhuman perspective, problematizes, and often undermines, ordinary modes of perception and thought. In reproducing
the “mobile aspects of the world,” cinema confers a kind of personality onto its subjects, which Epstein describes as the “spirit visible in things and people” (2012a: 294–295). Film enacts a form of animism whereby continuity and commonality are presented across the human and nonhuman and, in doing so, it “teaches us something about our own vision” (Sullivan, 2018: 414). Christophe Wall-Romana highlights how, for Epstein, “cinema can reveal to us something inherent in the world but beyond our rational apprehension” (2017: 93). Epstein wished to synthesize this poetic-spiritual mode with an awareness of cinema’s scientific impulse; his aim was to not simply escape the rational, but to arrive at an understanding of how perception and our rational ideas of the world can be upended through cinematic means.

Epstein’s thinking spreads across organic and inorganic realms, particularly in his late-1940s writings on the “intelligence” of the cinematograph, the same period when his interest in water was being channelled into a series of maritime films. For Epstein, “animated images bring out the components of a general representation of the universe, which tends to modify thought as a whole in various ways” (2014: xi). Cinema’s ability to see the world differently, through its lyricism but also in speed effects that recast movement and time, is an artificial form of perception that forces us to think otherwise about the structures that humans project onto the world. This is what Epstein terms, approvingly, its “evil” nature: “no one guessed that cinematographic images warn us of a monster, that they bear a subtle venom, capable of corrupting the whole reasonable order painstakingly imagined for the fate of the universe” (2014: 5). This evil is the injection of contingency into the human perceptual machine, and, whilst this article will eventually flesh out the contemporary political valences of such an assertion, it is important to first assess how it is water and the ocean that provide a prime subject for the subtle venom of the cinema, according to Epstein.

The movement of the sea stands in for the mayhem of time and motion that the cinematograph offers for ordinary human perception, and thus for the category of humanity itself. The ocean is a site of real danger, which is dramatized in Epstein’s maritime films, but it also becomes a poetic embodiment of the camera. Just as film ungrounds our notions of the world with its alienating vision, the sea provides moments where groundedness in thought becomes unmoored. The sight of the sea in Epstein’s work accrues these multiple levels of significance, and, specifically, it is around the Bretagne islands that Epstein finds images of the restlessness of matter and the contingency of perception and logic.

In Le Tempestaire (1947) – a film that echoes Atlantics in some aspects of its narrative – the sea is positioned as the potential murderer of a woman’s fisherman husband. We follow her tense anticipation of news from his sea
voyage, but most of the film consists of cinematic experimentation with footage of water. To emphasize the chaos of the ocean itself, and the trauma of time spent waiting for news of possible deaths at sea, Epstein manipulates the timescale of shots of the water, often reversing and slowing down this footage. A pivotal moment in the film comes when the woman goes to visit an elderly man, whom she has been told is the eponymous “storm tamer,” in order to find out the fate of her husband at sea. As the storm tamer looks into his crystal ball, images of the sky are intercut, and the footage is sped up to reveal a liquid-like movement of clouds in the air. An image of the sea then appears, its motion slowed down, and with each new image of water it is slowed down further. Movement then erupts in this languid motion of water through a sudden frantic intercutting of images of machinery and the crystal ball itself (Fig. 2). The storm tamer blows on the crystal and the water is shown in reversed motion, which could be taken as a self-reflexive gesture whereby the old man stands in for the film director. The re-functioned order of cause and effect creates a jarring image of the water, a rupture in causal reality. This is dramatized in the narrative when a voice intrudes on the scene, causing the crystal ball to drop and shatter on the floor. The husband then walks into the room, alive and safe. As well as the causal structure of water’s movement being reversed, the storm tamer’s power over the sea is temporally positioned after its implied effect on the life of the protagonist’s husband. Either the plot falls flat on the notion that he was already safe, or it suggests the possibility that the mystical result of the crystal ball was to save the fisherman after the fact. Abstractions of the movement of the sea make a mockery of the causal logic of matter alongside this disruption of a narrative logic of cause and effect.
In this sequence, then, the human perceptual schema is ungrounded, and the connection between the storm tamer and cinema is defined such that both are deemed to possess “the power to transform reality,” to cite Erika Balsom (2018: 44). Epstein becomes aligned with this old man; in the face of modernity, he seems to pick the side of superstition and magic against rationality. While such an allegiance is not always found in Epstein’s theorizing of cinema as a scientific instrument, in the films he made in Brittany, including *Finis Terrae* (1929), *Mor’vran* (1930), *L’Or des mers* (*Gold of the Sea*, 1932), and *Le Tempestaire*, the director often romanticizes Breton culture and the pre-modern lives of the inhabitants of these islands. As James Schneider writes, when Epstein began his film work off the western coast of Brittany in 1927, “he found cultures that had remained virtually untouched by industrial society” (2012: 196). Epstein saw in these persons, which he used as nonprofessional actors in his films, a mirror of the temporally dislocated ocean; as Schneider posits, for Epstein, the role of cinema was “to invest all filmed subjects with a trace of the oceanic” (2012: 196). In turn, this chimes with what Sigmund Freud defines as an “oceanic feeling:” the sensation of an unbreakable primordial bond between oneself and the outside world. This is not mastery or autonomy but the loss of the self in the sense of a limitless and unbonded oneness: a “feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole” (1962: 12). For Epstein, the cinematograph allows reflection on this primordial oneness, whereby “the reality of space and time [...] loses its contours, its consistency, its necessity” and becomes pure contingency: “a conditional, floating, allegorical, and intermittent reality” (2014: 55).

Although Epstein’s thoughts on historical contingency by way of water is productive and valuable, his emphasis on the timelessness of the ocean proves problematic in that it suggests an isolated and fetishistic understanding of culture. As Balsom observes, it is only in Epstein’s film *Mor’vran* that “the sea is fleetingly acknowledged as a means of global circulation and conduit of the colonial project” (2018: 43). In the film, incidentally, a letter is shown being posted to a French soldier on leave in Dakar (the location of Diop’s film, which we will soon return to), and maps are utilized to provide geopolitical specificity to the ocean. In *L’Homme à l’Hispano* (1933), Senegal is where the protagonist aims to rebuild a fortune, suggesting that these colonial spaces are primed, for Epstein, as sites of war and wealth extraction.

Can Epstein’s imaging of an alien perspective on the human in the form of cinema’s oceanic proclivities be disentangled from this disavowal of colonialism? Epstein used the cinema to experiment with the contingency of perception, the idea that the way we see the world could be otherwise, and
that seemingly stable and fixed rules such as those of causality become “a mere spectre created in the mind” (2014: 48). Elsewhere, Epstein writes that when “all forms liquefy in a perpetual mobility, the principle of identity becomes as unsuitable to them as it is to ocean waves,” poetically linking the contingency of logic that the cinema conjures with the oceanic obsession that marks his maritime films (2012b: 332). For Epstein, however, the history of the ocean is exclusively a primordial one, a time before humans and of “old marine fauna” from which we all descend: these are “maternal waters” and the “fundamental viscosity” of pure matter pervades the living and the non-living (2014: 29).1 What is ignored here are the waves of historical occurrence that shape the image of the ocean, which instead comes to stand in for that from which everything originally arises.

Diop’s film powerfully offers a corrective to this ahistorical ocean in its unearthing of colonial historical narratives. Its use of the oceanic as a historical marker can be deemed the contemporary aesthetic mirror of what Hester Blum has diagnosed as the turn to the sea in “oceanic studies,” whereby “the sea […] become[s] central to critical conversations about global movements, relations, and histories” (2013: 151). In their 2003 collection Sea Changes, Bernhard Klein and Gesa Makenthun start from the premise that “the ocean itself needs to be analysed as a deeply historical location,” in addition to its being “material and very real” (2003: 2). By undercutting the “cultural myth that the ocean is outside and beyond history,” Klein and Mackenthun contend that

the sea has served as an agent of colonial oppression but also of indigenous resistance and native empowerment, it has been a site of loss, dispersal, and enforced migration but also of new forms of solidarity and affective kinship, a paradigm of modern capitalism but also of its creative reinterpretation, a figure of death but also of life. (2003: 2)

The sea’s ambivalent nature makes it central to a contemporary anticolonial aesthetics where, more than just being the site of history and horror, it provides a medium for “seeing things in new ways, or seeing them differently” (Klein and Mackenthun, 2003: 2). This is how Epstein’s oceanic contingency

---

1 Christophe Wall-Romana makes note of Epstein’s use of the rare French expression eaux-mères here, with its play on the homonyms for mer/mère (sea/mother) and its likely connection to conceptions of the “oceanic feeling” (in Epstein, 2014: 107n7). It is a phrase used in other works by Epstein, suggesting the important place of this perspective on the oceanic in his cinematic philosophy.
can be retooled in relation to a contemporary liquid aesthetics, an aspect that is especially evident in Diop’s use of a “prophetic” mode in *Atlantics*, as we will now see.

**Neocolonial Prophecy**

Diop’s short film *Atlantiques* (2009), a precursor to *Atlantics*, concerns itself with the specter of migrant crossings in a very different form to her subsequent feature-length work by focusing on three Senegalese men’s discussion of migration by boat. However, both films deploy moments of disruption in relation to causality and time. Balsom argues that the short film’s use of disruptive temporalities, when the characters speak about a voyage in the past tense despite their current location in Senegal, blurs fantasy and reality such that the “linear temporality of modernity, of progress, is undone” (2018: 61). Their reflection upon a past event – death at sea that has already happened – problematizes and draws attention to such a supposedly “necessary” fact of the neocolonial order: underdevelopment and unequal exchange forced on places like Senegal push its workers into overseas labor and exploitation by Western countries through low wages and poor working conditions. Such reliance on labor outside the purview of national employment laws is a purported exteriority to the global capitalist system that in truth constitutes a fundamental economic necessity to its propagation. Diop’s causal disruption links the ocean to a temporal dislocation; indeed, for Epstein, the watery depths is where principles of identity and causation dissolve. The feature-length *Atlantics* similarly connects the ocean to temporal shifts through what I will call its “prophetic” mode, where prophecy works to upend the present and not merely confirm the necessity of a neocolonial future.

During one of the many interludes visualizing the ocean, the protagonist Ada speaks over the images from a seemingly oneiric space, describing the future finding of her lover, Souleiman, by fishermen. This prophetic moment, the truth of which is not confirmed in the narrative of the film, evokes the “liquid perception” that Gilles Deleuze locates in the filmmaking of the pre-war French school, Epstein included. Speaking of Jean Vigo’s *L’Atalante* (1934), Deleuze notes that “a clairvoyant function is developed in water, in opposition to earthly vision: it is in the water that the loved one who has disappeared is revealed, as if perception enjoyed a scope and interaction, a truth which it did not have on land” (1986: 79). Another prophetic moment occurs in the scene where Souleiman and his fellow laborers travel back to the city from the neo-futurist skyscraper they are building. As shots of the ocean are intercut with...
images of the men, we see and hear them singing an Islamic chant, featuring the words “Laa ilaaha ill-Allaah,” meaning “there’s no God but God.” These words have a specific meaning within Islamic teaching: before death one is exhorted to speak them. This moment, then, prophesizes the death of these men through textual foreshadowing. Maurice Blanchot writes that prophetic speech “makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence” (2003: 79). This upending of the present, figured in Diop’s film by the disruption to death that takes place through supernatural possession, is the moment when “it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence” (Blanchot, 2003: 79). By disrupting causality through this prophetic mode, Diop’s oceanic aesthetics can be situated within a lineage of cinematic engagements with the contingency of water, but takes on added postcolonial significance as it is rooted in understandings of specific seascapes and their history.

In *Atlantics*, images of the water suggest the haunting of colonial history in what amounts to a different version of the unearthly truth that Deleuze finds in the pre-war French school’s use of liquid perception. The afterlives of slavery find figuration in the ocean as a graveyard, evoking the countless bodies thrown overboard. It is clear that this history was important to Diop, who, in an interview with Be Manzini, discusses the Caribbean poet and Nobel laureate Derek Walcott and the role of his poem “The Sea is History” (1978) during the film’s writing process (Jones, 2021). In this poem, Walcott imagines the ocean bed populated with the sunken remains of stolen peoples, such as in the lines, “Bone soldered by coral to bone” and “leaving their charred ribs like palm leaves on the shore,” giving a history to this watery grave. He starts the poem in this manner:

> Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
> Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
> in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
> has locked them up. The sea is History.

The sea remains this site of death. If we consider the contemporary sea voyages forced upon migrants and refugees, this oceanic history becomes a harbinger of prophetic doom. However, as Enzerink observes in relation to *Atlantics*, the ocean’s “figuration as alternatingly benign and treacherous” provides “a metaphor for both opportunity and loss” (2020: 65).

The ocean is not just the figure of doom, of the necessary continuation of its horrific history, but something more. Speaking to Ada in a voice-over layered
onto images of the ocean, Souleiman says, “I saw you in the enormous wave that consumed us.” Marking a rupture in the linear temporality of modernity, Souleiman reflects on his own death and finds in it the face of his lover, a figure of opportunity in this oceanic demise. That Souleiman returns from the dead complicates not only the inexorability of death itself, but also the notion of necessity in the neocolonial order. In one of the final lines, Ada enigmatically proclaims that “some memories are omens.” Similarly, the ocean represents a historical memory of death that finds repetition in the present, from those murdered through colonial plunder to those deaths factored into the neocolonial calculus of unregulated development that leads to dangerous migrant crossings. The aesthetic form of prophecy in *Atlantics* presents a future that seems inevitable (it has already happened) but which, through oceanic rupture (one reflecting upon their own death at sea), works to disrupt such seeming necessity.

Most notably, this disruption manifests in Diop’s film through possession, the supernatural evasion of death. This ghostly haunting similarly functions to channel a colonial history while gesturing forward to new forms of anticolonial aesthetics. The film utilizes the Senegalese folklore of the *faru rab* in its portrayal of bodily possession, such that, as Rosalind Galt writes, “indigenous spirits travel from precolonial belief systems to postcolonial cinema, bringing with them complex layers of cultural meaning and a potential for resistance” (2022: 97). This use of spirits as a folkloric element figures as historical reparative work, bringing specific national stories to bear on contemporary transnational crises. As in the liminal space of human/nonhuman, figures of possession and the living dead, including the zombie, open a place between death and life, becoming “tropes for the social death and the dehumanizing and commodifying processes that the Middle Passage initiates” (Chassot, 2015: 93). The disruption of the linear progression of mortality allows for revenge and reparations when the workers come back to claim their unpaid wages. The escape from death allows Souleiman to have a final night with Ada, and the wave Souleiman imagines as embodying Ada thus symbolizes opportunity in the supernatural excess of death.

The supernatural also marks a queer excess, as the men lost at sea come back to take over the bodies of women and “the mutability of gender, sexuality, and desire reimagines bodily hierarchies at the formal level” (Galt, 2022: 104). Near the end of the film the women sit at their local club in stereotypically “masculine” postures, while their male spirit counterparts are seen in their mirror reflections. The role of the oceanic is important here, speaking as it does to what Sharpe, via Hortense Spillers, calls an “oceanic ungendering” (2016: 50). Spillers writes: “Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally
suspended in the ‘oceanic’;” such that “those captive persons, without names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all” (1987: 72). For Spillers, these persons “were the culturally ‘unmade’.” “Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as quantities” (1987: 72). Just as personhood was denied to those deemed less-than-human by the slave trade, the ruthless calculus of this horrific logistical act ungendered and turned into objects and commodities those who were sold. Whereas Epstein speaks of metaphysical principles of identity being lost in the oceanic, we find here instead a very real history of stolen identity.

That said, the ocean also opens itself to new modes of thinking Blackness today outside normative and hegemonic epistemologies. For Alexander G. Weheliye, this means tackling “notions of the human as it interfaces with gender, coloniality, slavery, racialization, and political violence without mapping these questions onto a mutually exclusive struggle between either the freeflowing terra nullius of the universally applicable or the terra cognitus of the ethnographically detained” (2014: 24). Working through these historical practices of unhumanizing is, as Weheliye posits via Wynter, a way of defining “potential exit strategies from the world of Man” (2014: 28). It is this queerness associated with the oceanic that relates *Atlantics* to such projects.

Expounding on what they term “Black Trans Feminism,” Marquis Bey argues that, through “a generative convergence between blackness and gender nonnormativity,” it is possible to see how “blackness, transness, and feminism are radical and fugitive rhymes for one another” (2022: 21, 14). This has important ramifications when reading the “transing” that occurs in Diop’s film through the spiritual possession that crosses gender boundaries. The shift in posture that the possessed women display encourages a formal engagement with their gendered movements, where each gesture is traced out against its place between male/female as well as dead/living. When the women first break into the house of the construction boss, with whited-out eyes indexing their possession, their postures speak to this liminal, gendered in-betweenness. Their legs are spread open slightly further, arms are crossed or hands are interlinked. These queer postures gesture back to the ungendering/regendering process that the oceanic provides in these spirited possessions, an “oceanic feeling” that, as Thomas Moynihan notes (via psychoanalytic thinkers Wilhelm Reich and Romain Rolland), resists upright posture and sees “spines as impositions against fundamental fluidity” (2019: 139). Dissolving back to the ungendered soup of the oceanic inaugurates a move from one set of postures to another, balking at the supposed necessity of death alongside the seeming necessity of acculturated gendered gestures. By invoking queerness
both as a founding and definitional site within Blackness as well as a futural site of resistance, *Atlantics* thus evokes what Kara Keeling, in her *Queer Times, Black Futures*, terms a “queerness in time” that “upends Western humanism’s categories” (2019: 49, 51).

To locate and historicize the ocean entails negotiating the seeming inevitability of the continuation of colonial oppressions on the one hand, while disrupting this neocolonial order via a queer contingency which refuses this necessity on the other. This form of prophecy disarticulates a teleological line by opening up queer futures buried within overdetermined histories of Blackness that serves to explore their liminal positions between man and woman, living and dead, and human and nonhuman.

**Conclusion**

By understanding *Atlantics*’ imbrication with global flows of commerce, we can take what Deleuze called “liquid perception” further and make the role of this aesthetic metaphor and material agency itself a liquid concept. In so doing, we can align Diop’s concerns with contemporary concepts of “liquid Africa” and “liquid Blackness.” Ekow Eshun describes the former as an “Africa whose influence flows across borders and time periods, taking shape in new environments while continuing to carry the memory of past existences” (2021: 77). The status of Diop’s film as a French-Senegalese co-production, and her position as the first black woman to have her feature film debut premiered and awarded the Grand Prix Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2019, speaks to this liquidity, as does the circulation of *Atlantics* across Senegal, Europe, and the US. Suzanne Enzerink, for example, notes,

not only how the circulation and reception of *Atlantics* is shaped by American conglomerates such as Netflix – and indeed, the traces of US economic imperialism make diegetic appearances as well – but also how a film like *Atlantics* urges us to transform our understanding of what is considered the purview of transnational American studies. (2021: 54)

For Enzerink, Diop’s film thus “helps us to rethink the political work that film can do in a globalized world” (2021: 54). The role of the ocean and its imagery between perspectives, its liquidity across registers of editing, metaphor, and even genre, connects to a larger liquidity of commerce, including the reception and distribution of the film across the Atlantic.
The film ends with an assertion of autonomy by Ada: looking in the mirror but also at the camera/spectator, she states, “Ada, to whom the future belongs. I am Ada.” When she speaks, the ocean’s movement is blurred but visible in the background, the sound of waves accompanying this final moment of self-recognition and futural self-possession. This ending links to the film’s wider exploration of Senegal in a networked globe, but also, since Ada herself is metaphorically tied to the waves of the Atlantic, the sense of opportunity and futural significance that oceanic liquidity provides. Alessandra Raengo’s concept of “liquid Blackness” recognizes that the expression is “simultaneously attractive and uncomfortable,” but that this “instability is intentional in order to maintain a productive tension between experience and expression,” and ultimately that “it is meant to resonate differently with each person who says it, thinks it, or writes it” (2014: 7). Liquid Blackness can illuminate Diop’s own positionality and the imaging of water in-between these markers of opportunity, loss, futurity, prophecy, and past horror. Ada, herself taking on the metaphorical proportions of an Atlantic wave, is in the wake, both mourning and pushing forward, not resolving these tensions but becoming a figure of disruption in Diop’s film, where the oceanic imperative is vital for the anticolonial aesthetics it pursues.

As this article has sought to show, Epstein’s connection between water and the ability of cinema to disrupt ordinary modes of perception and logics of thought provides a productive avenue through which to think a contemporary oceanic aesthetic. Through Diop’s film, in moments of perspectival slippage and temporal rupture, the ocean becomes paramount in a series of anticolonial gestures, which expand upon a co-determination of the cinematic and the oceanic, and push Epstein’s ideas and practices further. Epstein’s vision of the sea was limited in its fetishization of the timelessness of liquid matter, and, ultimately, these oceanic contingencies are tamed, captured and contained within a cinematic logic of special effects and a bypassing of coloniality. In *Atlantics*, the sea re-emerges as political symbol, historical archive, a supernatural site of queerness, and a conduit for prophetic vision. Always escaping, the ocean remains held in tension between past and future, doom and opportunity. Diop’s aesthetics refuses resolution, preferring to stay in the wake of the neocolonial system that haunts Dakar. As a site of historicity, the sea unearths and disrupts colonial epistemologies and temporalities.

Adding a sense of time, place and history to the image of water, and allowing it to flow between different perspectives, gives Diop’s film its particular oceanic aesthetic. Its own place between transnational flows of reception and distribution furthers the sense of its liquidity. Given that the ocean is a site of continuing political strife in global discourses and practices of migration,
which will only increase as the rising waters of climate catastrophe turn more and more people into climate refugees, an anticolonial oceanic aesthetic seems particularly vital for our present moment. Climate refugee migration will bring more perilous crossings across the oceans; these increasing deaths at sea evoke the colonial history of the Middle Passage and those killed in these waters in the past. To stay with these tensions whilst implicating the oceanic in a shared sense of the world is therefore crucial.

Contemporary global capitalism and its strategies of neocolonial rule bring forth a prophecy of ever-deepening inequality. Diop’s film sits in the wake of these developing tensions, and its oceanic aesthetic proves that tackling complicated liquidity, through formal experiments with modes of perception and postcolonial perspectives, is vital for bringing out unheard stories and buried historical narratives. This ambivalence is registered directly in Diop’s short film *Atlantiques* when one man exclaims, “look at the ocean, it has no borders.” The opportunity and ability for interconnection in a possible world free from colonial divisions is, however, quickly tempered when the response is given: “Yet it offers no branches to hold on to.” Liquid perception as a tool of an anticolonial aesthetic must reckon with the dangers of living in the wake, introducing contingency and rupture into neocolonial prophecy without drowning.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Rosalind Galt, whose brilliant syllabus on Contemporary European Cinema introduced me to Mati Diop’s work, as well as the two anonymous reviewers who engaged generously with the draft of this article. Thanks also to Tiago de Luca and Matilda Mroz who have done a stellar work of bringing my piece up to scratch, and to the fellow speakers and audience of the 2023 SCMS Theorizing (Unruly) Ecologies panel, for their insightful comments and supportive listening.

**References**


