Studies in French Cinema

ISSN: 1471-5880 (Print) 1758-9517 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsfc20

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To cite this article: Rachael Langford (2001) Black and White in Black and White, Studies in French Cinema, 1:1, 13-21

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1386/sfci.1.1.13

Black and White in Black and White

Identity and Cinematography in Ousmane Sembène's *La Noire de…/Black Girl* (1966)

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Abstract

This article starts by outlining the common co-ordinates of the identities constructed for Africa and Africans by French colonial imagery. It then goes on to explore the significance of key features of Sembène Ousmane's film La Noire de.../Black Girl *(1966) in relation to identity formation. Thus the use of voice-over, interior locations, geometric relations, and the framing of shots are considered for the insights they give to the economics of identity formation in the post-Independence period. The article concludes by suggesting that* La Noire de... *attempts a dual critique which aims both to lay bare central structures of colonialism and to depict strategies of identity formation for the colonised which would allow black to evade domination and determination by white.*

Introduction – The Function of Cinema

The black and white film of 1966 *La Noire de…,* by the Senegalese novelist and film-maker Ousmane Sembène, was the very first feature-length film made to be both made in Africa and directed by an African. Until the mid-1960s, only non-Africans had depicted Africa on film. Indeed, such laws as the *décret Laval* of 1934, applying to French colonial possessions, had aimed at preventing Africans from making potentially critical films about their lives and their countries (Vieyra 1958: 108–09, Diawara 1992: 22–23). From the mid-1960s onwards, however, francophone Africans in particular turned the camera on themselves and their continent, for themselves and their continent, with increasing frequency and confidence. Thus, just by virtue of its temporal location, *La Noire de…* can be seen to be a most significant film in the development of post-colonial cinema in Africa, for it marks a point of decisive change in the relationship of images between Africa and the West.

Given this landmark status of *La Noire de…,* it seems all the more noteworthy that issues of colonised and post-colonial identity and of the power relations on which these identities are founded should be at the core of the film. Significantly, the cinematography as well as the narrative content of *La Noire de…* is used to explore these issues of identity. In this article, I shall argue that this dual approach lays bare key structures central to the French colonial domination of Africa and Africans, at the same time as it suggests oppositional strategies which would allow Africa and Africans to evade domination and determination of their identity by Europeans.

For the francophone African film-makers of Ousmane Sembène's generation, cinema was a way of communicating to other Africans meditations on African experiences, both contemporary and historical, which for the first time were not mediated by outside eyes. Thus for Sembène and his contemporaries in francophone African film-making, the cinema presented itself as a forceful means of communicating African experience in ways which would counter the images propagated by Europeans determining the identity of Africa.

That pushing for change through counter-representation should be the chosen mandate of the first generation of francophone African film-makers comes as no

surprise when some of the defining features of French colonialism are considered. As Aimé Césaire pointed out (Césaire 1955: 8–9), although colonialism was first and foremost an economic escapade, it differed from previous European territorial conquests carried out for economic gain by the ideological discourses of legitimation with which it apparelled itself. Nicholas Thomas has argued with regard to these discourses that, 'Colonial cultures are not simply ideologies that mask, mystify or rationalise forms of oppression that are external to them; they are also expressive and constitutive of colonial relationships in themselves' (Thomas 1994: 2). Representation is thus a vital issue.

Critics have codified the representations of the colonised promoted by colonial discourse into three broad categories: representations that infantilise, that bestialise, or that romanticise the dominated population. At the root of all of these representations lies the idea of the non-subjectivity, or lesser subjectivity, of the native individual. In order to create and maintain native populations in a dominated position, it was vital that this idea of a lesser subjectivity be constantly promoted through written and visual media, both in Europe and in the colonies. For France, it served to legitimate her colonial presence abroad, and to justify the costly armed interventions against native resistance to the French colonial presence, in Madagascar in the 1940s as much as in Algeria in the 1830s (Benot 1995).

All such types of representation – infantilising, bestialising, or romanticising – are legislative of identity, insofar as they set down from the outside the defining co-ordinates of the colonised individual's being. To use the terminology of Paul Ricœur, they manifest a refusal to accept parity between 'soi-même' – self – and 'un(e) autre' – another (Ricœur 1990: 126 and 140–48). Following Ricœur's analysis, colonial discourse can be described as identifying the native person's *mêmeté* or 'identicalness', to other natives, and fixing this identity as temporally immutable. At the same time, however, all notion of *ipséité*, of selfhood, which rests on the recognition of an ethical subject capable of agency, is evacuated from the identity accorded the native individual in colonial discourse.

Theorists of anti-colonial struggle in Africa have highlighted the extent to which the colonised individual comes literally to embody this inferior state of subjectivity ascribed to him or her in colonial discourse. Indeed Fanon argues that exposure to colonial discourse imprints on the mind and body of the colonised an inferiority complex which makes the colonised concur in perceiving him- or herself as less than fully human, as less fully a subject than the coloniser (Fanon 1952: 88).

Ousmane Sembène's film *La Noire de…* can be seen to confront these issues of identity and subjectivity and to suggest tactics for contesting the reduction of the African to mere *mêmeté*/identicalness. In the following sections of this discussion, I will discuss the ways in which the exploration of identity in *La Noire de…* intersects with the film's depiction of competing economies, and of the place of the body within these economies.

Identity Formation – The Economics of Silence

The film narrates the experiences of a young Senegalese girl, Diouana, who finds work as a children's maid with a French family living in Dakar. When the family returns to southern France, Diouana continues in their employ: full of the excitement of seeing the colonial mother country so praised by her employers, she has parted lightly from her family and fiancé. Once in service in Antibes, however, Diouana finds herself exploited as an unpaid skivvy. Isolated from the outside world and daily humiliated in her work, she finally commits suicide. Subsequently, the father of the French family

makes the trip to Dakar to return Diouana's belongings to her parents. Monsieur attempts to press money on her family; her mother silently refuses to take it. Amongst Diouana's belongings is a carved mask, which appears as a leitmotif throughout the film. The final shots of the film show Monsieur hurrying away from the family's settlement, followed closely by Diouana's younger brother wearing the mask that had accompanied her to Antibes and has now returned to Diouana's family without her.

The act of suicide, the leitmotif of the mask, and themes of money, gift and production are central to the film's confrontation with colonial and neo-colonial discourse on African identity. The cinematography of *La Noire de…* is as important as the narrative content of the film in making this confrontation, and several aspects of the film's cinematography stand out in this connection.

Structurally, the film inverts the paradigms both of the colonial travelogue and the colonial memoir: the dramatic action of the film is constituted by Diouana's journey into the interior of metropolitan France and her experience of the barbarism of its indigenous population, and her perspective is given in first-person voice-over. Although Malkmus and Armes argue (1991: 171) that the use of voice-over in *La Noire de…* colludes in the colonial silencing of the African by depicting a passive Diouana unable to speak on her own behalf, I would argue that it forms a vital challenge to such silencing. Firstly, it bears witness to the film's contestatory reversal of the narrative paradigms legitimating colonialism, because it allows a neo-colonised African 'I' to frame a travelogue-memoir. It thus allows the audience privileged access to Diouana's 'for intérieur', her innermost being, while highlighting the extent to which her French employers tacitly deny that she possesses any such interior.

And secondly, it foregrounds the extent to which Diouana chooses to present herself to the white world solely as an indelible and unadministrable 'foreign body', as a strategy of resistance. This choice of Diouana's constitutes an ironic play on the fear and loathing of African interiority that lies at the heart of all the colonial discourses infantilising, bestialising or romanticising Africans, as evidenced for example in Sonolet and Pérès (1952: 88). In such discourses the African figures first and foremost as a docile body to be exploited and administered; the use of first-person voice-over in the film therefore lends full weight to Diouana's strategy of self-presentation as an unadministrable body in her employers' home, a strategy whose ramifications will be discussed further below.

One of the most striking features of *La Noire de…* is the occurrence of a short colour sequence near the beginning of what is otherwise an entirely black and white film.[1] This sequence links in to the inversion of the colonial travelogue and memoir paradigms. It records Diouana's car journey to the family's apartment as her male employer, following her arrival in Antibes from Dakar, drives her from the port. The sequence is highly parodic of the kind of travel film that packages land and people for leisure-time consumption. Representing Diouana's vantage-point in the moving car, the camera sweeps across picture-postcard vistas of wide bays, sparkling blue seas and of the streets of sunny Antibes itself, to a soundtrack of the characteristically cheerful, carefree music that accompanied the mini-travelogues of wide and small screen in post-war France. Yet the journey depicted here is only a journey from Antibes docks to a small suburban apartment; and thus the sequence deftly parodies the commodification of travel and space which was one of the features of the emergent leisure society in post-war Europe. This was a commodification which saw the colonial administrator in Africa replaced by the moneyed tourist, but in which the relations of economic inequality between black and white remained.

1 In the British Film Institute and Ministère de la co-opération versions. *La Noire de…* was originally 70 minutes long rather than 55, and contained several colour sequences. It could not be distributed in this version as Sembène did not at the time possess the *brevet de long métrage* which would have allowed him to do so.

Further, because the camera angles in the sequence are mimetic of Diouana's perspective on seeing France for the first time from the moving car, these images also highlight the widespread false idealisation of France in this period by Africans such as Diouana. We hear Diouana's *patron* beside her asserting that, 'C'est beau, la France!' ('France is beautiful!'), to which she assents feelingly. Bernard Dadié has described this idealisation of France by would-be migrant workers almost as a waking dream which framed all phenomenological perception of the realities of France and the French (Dadié 1959: 7–9). This idealisation is rooted in colonial discourses of the nineteenth century which portrayed France as the epitome of European civilisation in order to legitimate French conquest and rule abroad. In the period following the Second World War, this idealisation was promoted by official discourse in France for many of the same reasons motivating the British encouragement of immigration from the Caribbean at the time: new entrants to France were needed to contribute to (but not primarily to benefit from) the economic reconstruction of France. The colour sequence of *La Noire de…* can therefore be read as making reference to the historical shifts in economic relations between metropolitan France and its former African colonies. Such economic relations are inextricably connected to processes of identity formation both for the formerly colonised and for the former colonisers.

The insistent reference to economic relations via the cinematography of *La Noire de…* is continued in the frequent inclusion, in shots of the interior of the Antibes apartment which Diouana comes to regard as her prison, of stark black and white oppositions in the décor. The floor of the kitchen where Diouana spends much of her time is made of a mass of small white tiles with the occasional scattered dark tile; the floor of the living and dining room, which she enters only to clean or serve, is striped with thick black and white bars, as is her bedroom floor; the front door to the apartment is white with one thick, dark band across the middle; while the bathroom to which she has only very restricted access is entirely white. In this context, the colour sequence of the film can be seen as recording a literally and metaphorically transitory moment for Diouana. As she travels from the docks in Antibes to the apartment, she is not yet caught in the relations of economic inequality that characterised her position in Dakar and which are about to become more stark in Antibes; her naïve picture-postcard view of France in these instants represents a moment in the film free from determination by black and white relations. The irony of this 'free' moment's brevity and parodic nature is therefore all the stronger, as the technicolor view is framed both by the film's narrative structure and by its black and white cinematography as facile and unreal in the context of the film as a whole.

Neo-Colonial Economics: Practices of Resistance

The leitmotif of the mask in *La Noire de…* also serves to highlight the economic determination of the identity of the colonial and post-colonial subject. Diouana's younger brother gives the wooden mask to her, and later Diouana gives it as a gift to her employers. They appear interested in it for its aesthetic qualities, and hang it on the wall of their house in Dakar, and again on the wall of the Antibes apartment. By the end of the film the mask has become a bone of contention between Diouana and her female employer, as Diouana has taken the mask down from the wall in Antibes to keep it in her room, saying that it is hers. This enrages Madame, as she believes the mask belongs to *her*, it having been given as a gift. After Diouana's death, the mask is among the few personal effects returned to her family by her employers; and at the end of the film, Diouana's younger brother picks up the mask and wears it as he follows Monsieur

away from the settlement. It is the little boy slowly dropping the mask from his face filmed in close-up that forms the final image of the film.

The mask's status as a gift is a vital one. In *Le Sens pratique* Pierre Bourdieu considers the operation of gift-giving in Kabyle populations, and discusses the ethical structures underlying the gift economy. For Bourdieu, a specific set of implications about the status of both the receiver and the giver of the gift is contained in the exchange of gifts (Bourdieu 1990). According to Bourdieu, gift economies rest on an open recognition of what Ricœur terms 'soi-même comme un autre' ('oneself as another'); that is, they rest on a recognition of the other as an ethical subject having equal value as oneself. Bourdieu further argues that the exchange of gifts is an exchange that is varied in practice. He cites in particular the subject's use of time lapses in the exchange of gifts as evidence that a human mastery or 'practice' is at work in gifting, and that the exchange of gifts is a dynamic one which both implies and recognises the ethical status, and the agency, of the subjects involved.

In clear opposition to this dynamics of gifting stands the exchange economy of capitalism. In the exchange economy, Marx (1977) noted, the product is produced for its exchange value but bears no personal connection with the producer. In such an economy, the objects that are parted with lie in inert geometric relation to each other, as do the exchangers of objects. Thus the money economy may be seen as the antithesis of a gift economy. The fundamental difference between the gift economy and the money economy may therefore be seen to reside in the observation that gifting does not take place according to a universal formula of equivalence that is abstract and external to it and to those involved in it. Rather, it can be said that as an act it bears witness to the subjectivity of both the giver and the receiver; and that as a structure, therefore, it recognises the Ricœurian formula of 'soi-même comme un(e) autre' (oneself as another). The gift exchange recognises the *mêmeté* or objecthood of the receiver, since gifts by definition can only be given to physical entities other than the self; and at the same time, the *ipséité* or selfhood of the receiver is recognised in the gift, every gift implying the possibility of a return gift and thus alluding to the receiver's potential agency.

These differences of identity-recognition implied by gift exchange and by commodity exchange are highly pertinent to the role of the mask in *La Noire de…*. As mentioned earlier, the film's cinematography emphasises the décor of the apartment in Antibes. This background décor of patterns where black and white are seen in abstract, geometric relation to each other forms the background to Diouana's life in France. Consequently, these abstract patterns can be read as a visual metaphor for the equations of commodity exchange that Sembène, as a Marxist, considers to be the economic background to French colonialism, to post-colonial relations between Africa and France, and to the individual relations between Diouana and her employers (relations which the film depicts as a microcosm of these global relations).[2]

It is in this décor or metaphorised economic context that the mask that has been given by Diouana to her employers as a gift hangs in the apartment in Antibes. It is shown hanging isolated on an otherwise blank white wall, a position that makes several discernible allusions. It can be seen alluding to Diouana's social isolation in the white French family, and to her social and geographical isolation in metropolitan France. Further, its location speaks of a misrecognition of its identity: the mask is perceived by the white family only as an art object, and their entire behaviour towards Diouana shows their (wilful?) ignorance of the mask's standing as a gift implying reciprocity and equality of relations. Indeed, when Madame is given the mask, she does not thank

2 Sembène's film *Xala* (1974, Colour, 115 mins) foregrounds this analysis of the link between French capital and the power structures of post-colonial Senegal quite explicitly.

Diouana; and Monsieur's remark, 'Il a l'air authentique, dis-donc!' ('Goodness, it looks quite authentic!'), conveys only pleasant surprise at the potential exchange value which such rare 'authenticity' confers on the mask. Thus the mask can be seen to comment on the colonial and neo-colonial refusal to recognise the subjectivity of native Africans, they too being considered mostly only as object-bodies summoning no ethical obligations.

The film's positioning of the mask as an inert art-object hung on the wall comments in addition on specific, historical, economic effects of colonialism. In gift economies, the value of the gift is not founded on questions of 'taste' or exchange value, but on the mutual recognition of the status of the giver and of the receiver as ethical subjects. Yet over time and in contact with Europeans, masks and other supposedly 'primitive art works' became commodities for exchange outside the community rather than objects of primarily social value within communities. By the end of the 1950s observers were noting that, although masks were still feared and respected by younger generations of Africans, they were increasingly being produced in an organised commercial manner, and sold to European ethnologists, art collectors and tourists for money (Balandier 1957 cited in Gaudibert 1991: 11; Ströter-Bender 1995: 37).

La Noire de…'s depiction of the French family's classification of the mask as an art object for display may therefore be understood as referring to this entry of social and sacred items into the art markets of capitalism. Sembène's own comments on the function of the mask in the film tend to concur with this interpretation: 'The maid gives it [i.e. the mask] to her mistress with the sole aim of pleasing her, having noted the attraction of these masks for 'whites' (I denounce here in passing a mania of Africanists).' (Prédal 1985: 39)

The fact that the mask is completely surrounded by the white wall on which it hangs and is filmed as almost engulfed by that blank whiteness, may be seen to make further economic references. It has been noted that capitalism was, historically, the first economic formation to use propaganda in order to install itself as the pre-eminent economic form (Luxemburg cited in Brewer 1989: 62). This argument is wholly relevant to the film's depiction of the mask. The mask is shown misrecognised in its status as a gift, and isolated and abandoned on the wall of the apartment; yet Madame is furious when she finds that Diouana has taken the mask down from the wall and claimed it as her own. In a clear homology with Diouana herself,[3] the film's cinematography figures the mask as having been inserted into the economy of French neo-colonialism, an economy which seeks to engulf its 'others'. Sembène comments that, 'when she [i.e. Diouana] reaches the depths of despair, she turns it [i.e. the mask] into the symbol of her Africanness, because it is the only remaining link with her homeland' (Prédal 1985: 39). And interpreted in this light, Diouana's claiming back the mask as her own asserts the continuing presence of the 'other', gift economy and of the ethical obligations it implies. Moreover, this reclaiming asserts her continuing ethical status as an acting subject; and these two assertions cause serious interference to the flow of colonial and neo-colonial discourse. Indeed, the only way that Diouana's French employers can contain the interference engendered by these non-verbal assertions is by resorting to a discourse of pathology, and qualifying Diouana as 'malade' – sick – and 'folle' – insane.

The non-verbal nature of these assertions by Diouana that she will not be slotted into her employers' neo-colonial economies is highly significant. Throughout *La Noire de…,* Diouana's rejection of the identity in which her employers cast her takes place

3 The first shots of Diouana in the apartment in Antibes use a spatial organisation that highlights this homology. When greeting Madame, Diouana is held in the centre of the frame with her back to the wall on which the mask hangs. The mask is just beside her head, while Monsieur and Madame are positioned on each side of her, almost like prison warders. The film's opposition of 'Africa' to 'Europe' is very clear in this counter-positioning of Diouana and the mask to Monsieur, Madame and the bare walls of the apartment.

through actions alone, conveyed by her body and its placement. Her initial resistance to the object-identity in which she is cast takes the form of small refusals to regulate her body according to the patterns of work and rest that her employers require.[4] She fails to get up at the appointed hour in the morning, thus forcing her mistress to prepare the family's breakfast herself; she spends much longer in the bathroom than she is allowed to. She protests silently at being made to go barefoot in the house, as Madame insists a black maid should, by leaving her shoes in the middle of the floor and walking nonchalantly away, provoking Madame to shout at her that 'Si tu ne travailles pas, tu ne mangeras pas' ('If you don't work you won't eat'). When, as a result, she is not fed, she refuses to be physically present to look after the children, shutting herself away instead to sleep and daydream in her room.

4 E.P. Thompson cites workers' refusals to time-keep as one way in which the expanding proletariat of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism protested against its exploitation (Thompson 1967). The analogies with Diouana's behaviour seem clear.

The stark culmination of this resistance mediated through the body comes in Diouana's suicide. One afternoon while Monsieur and Madame are out, Diouana slits her throat in the white family's bath. The bathroom is a highly symbolic location for this suicide. It is the most intimate room in a house and the one room dedicated to the care of the body; and in this instance it has also been a space over which Diouana and Madame have been in conflict. Diouana's death in the bathroom thus appears as a didactic one, for this most intimate room of the whites is invaded by Diouana's final proof of her own agency, her act of suicide. Diouana's suicide forces recognition that her identity is not coterminous with her employers' view of her as mere labour; nor with the dinner guest's view of her as merely a pliant sexual body ('Permettez, Madame. Je n'ai jamais embrassé une négresse…'/'Please allow me, Madame. I have never kissed a negress.'). Indeed, by deciding to die naked in the bath, Diouana compels recognition of her having been both *mêmeté* and *ipséité* in life: the suicide does not reduce her to objecthood, thus constituting a victory for colonial discourse; rather, it demonstrates her ultimate agency in deciding to 'disposer d'elle-même' (be at her own disposal). In death she becomes fully the unadministrable, uncircumscribable body which has already so aggravated her employers, but at the same time she indelibly embodies her subjectivity. Moreover, the brutal cinematography in the shots of Diouana dead in the bath depicts a most successful invasion and conquest of white by black, metaphorically reversing the historical model of colonialism: the white bath is shown full to the brim with water turned dark by Diouana's blood, amidst which her own dark body lies. Equivocally, however, this image also shows the likely individual consequence of this struggle for agency. Thus Diouana's act affirms her being as more than a mere object, and the cinematography portraying her act inscribes the struggle for African agency right into the heart of the white home.

This notion of inscription emerges as an essential one. Diouana's suicide is achieved by slitting her throat, and yet this utter negation of voice and voicing is paradoxically her most vociferous statement of her identity. But the scene of Diouana in the bath is not the film's 'last word' on her act: the following sequence shows a *fait-divers* report from *Nice-Matin*, under the headline 'Antibes – Une jeune négresse se tranche la gorge dans la salle de bains de ses patrons' ('Antibes – A Young Negress Slits Her Throat in Her Employers' Bathroom'). The article is shown in close up for several seconds, long enough for the viewer to be able to read its first paragraphs, which explain the suicide as the result of homesickness and an inability to speak French. Judging by this report, Diouana's identity has *post facto* been reincorporated into the paradigms of colonial and neo-colonial discourse. Her suicide is portrayed as the result of over-emotionalism ('ils n'avaient certes pas pensé que leur bonne aurait le mal de pays au point de se trancher la gorge un jour de cafard'/ 'they certainly hadn't thought that their maid would be so

homesick as to slit her throat one day when she was feeling low'). It is also seen to stem from incapacity on Diouana's part ('parlant peu le français, et de ce fait, évitant de confier à ses patrons sa funeste décision'/ 'barely speaking French and thus not confiding to her employers her fateful decision'). Indeed, there is an echo here of the dinner guest who asks Madame whether Diouana speaks French, and on receiving the reply that she understands it but does not speak it, exclaims: 'Comme un animal, alors!' ('Just like an animal!').

And so it might seem that this inclusion of written text into the film portrays Diouana's identity as ultimately defined, in death as in life, by the discourses of colonialism and neo-colonialism that seek to circumscribe African identity. Yet previously in *La Noire de…,* inscription in text has been shown to be deeply untrustworthy. As Diouana is illiterate, she is at the mercy of her employers when a letter arrives from her mother, and there is nothing to stop her being ventriloquised by Monsieur and Madame. Monsieur opens and reads her letter, and then begins to compose a mendacious reply while Diouana silently refuses to go along with the charade. 'Cette lettre n'est pas de ma mère' ('This letter isn't from my mother') the voice-over comments emotionally, as a weeping Diouana is seen tearing the letter into shreds, and later, 'Ce n'est pas ma lettre' ('It's not my letter') as she leaves Monsieur and Madame composing 'her' return letter. Through these sequences of letter-writing and of the newspaper report, therefore, *La Noire de…* challenges the notion that inscribing events, getting them down in 'black and white', will convey their proper identity in any meaningful way.

However, the cinematography of *La Noire de…* shows that one of the major concerns of the film is, quite literally, to present an analysis of black and white through the medium of 'black and white'. And the narrative of any film is just as 'inscribed' as that of a novel: in cinematographic terms it is inscribed onto film stock through the chemical actions of light and dark, and through the placement of objects. Further, Sembène himself has always highlighted the considerable contestatory importance of voicing: 'Artists (…) are the voice of the people (…). Silence is an act of suicide. If we refuse to shout out injustices, if we refuse to defend rights, we are all complicit' (Haffner 1985: 24).

I would argue that through these tensions between text and voice, *La Noire de…* advances a different concept of voicing, one in which 'actions speak louder than words'. Voicing is after all a physical procedure more than a textual one, and Sembène himself has revealed a preference for the visual-gestural, physical representations of film when it comes to inciting resistance (Kakou 1985: 17). Moreover, both the narrative and the cinematography of *La Noire de…* consistently foreground the body as the site and medium of contestatory voicing, its very physicality being shown as a conduit for obstinate resistance to colonial and neo-colonial discourses. Diouana's struggle to assert agency and subjectivity can thus be read as a struggle simultaneously to embody agency but to resist being reduced to a mere body-object.

Thus the narrative and the cinematography of *La Noire de…* combine to delineate a complex strategy of resistance to French colonial and neo-colonial determinations of African identity. For the African individual, resistance is shown to consist in maintaining at all costs the dialectic of identity contained in the Ricœurian dyad of *mêmeté* and *ipséité,* identicalness and selfhood. Diouana attempts to maintain this, through her suicide, by coming fully to embody the second term in the dialectic – *ipséité*/selfhood – which colonial and neo-colonial discourses consistently annihilate.

And although the thoroughgoing embodiment of *ipséité*/selfhood depicted in *La*

Noire de… entails the death of the African, I would argue that the film's dénouement encodes much more than just a pessimistic comment on the possibilities for a *life* of self-determination for post-Independence francophone Africa. For the closing sequences of the film show Diouana's suicide to have forced recognition of Africa by France: it is as a result of Diouana's death that Monsieur has to attempt dialogue with Diouana's family, and it is as a result of her suicide that, finally, the gift of the mask has to become a return, or at least a returned, gift.

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