The menace of migration in the Mediterranean Sea caught the world’s attention in 2013 after 366 Africans were caught in a Lampedusa-bound voyage of catastrophe. Ever since, the phenomenon has received more attention than ever before, and many critics have described the media response towards the event as alarmist in constructing the identity of the migrants as invaders, and the epiphenomenon that follows – the censorious and protectionist angst of Europeans.¹ The event also hurled forward the horrors of crossing the Saharan desert, and the slave bazaar of black migrants who perceive Europe as an insignia of hope. One of the most eloquent and poetic responses to this event is Josue Guebo’s Think of Lampedusa, a serial poem that historicises the violence and trauma, modern slavery and the looking askance of the European in the wake of this trajectory. Beginning from a confessional angle, the Ivorian poet’s persona intones: ‘I will tell you for the last time/my history, my wave.’² This former intention, it seems, has gained a late response in Mati Diop’s 2019 film Atlantics (Atlantique in the original).

As a filmic reply to the predicament of irregular migration from postcolonial Senegal, Atlantics is a landmark achievement by an auteur with an outstanding cinematic vision. Diop’s imaginative fecundity was already evident in her earlier film, Mille Soleils, and Atlantics announced her as an artist with a clear political, economic and social consciousness. Scholars have linked Mati Diop’s directorial vision to her uncle, Djibril Diop Mambéty, the maker of

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² Josue Guebo, Think of Lampedusa, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 2014
major films such as Badou Boy (1970) and Touki Bouki (1973). Lauded as a film that adds serious voice to one of the most vital discussions of the century, *Atlantics* translates the experience of migration in the most visually possible way through the coastal city of Dakar, which becomes the metonymic city for most of the sub-Saharan region that the majority of the migrants come from. While many film critics, such as A O Scott, have also maintained that the film resists belonging to any genre and is aesthetically experimental, I contend that this mechanism is a method of abjection, one that not only reveals the power of horror in migration, but which also unveils and questions the oppressive institutions that occasion it. Hence, I use this medium here to theorise Diop as a cineaste of abjection.

*Atlantics* begins as a compelling story of some workers at a construction site who are reacting against the manipulative practices of the management and demanding that their salaries be paid. After all, they have been working for four months and it is only ethical that they are remunerated commensurately for their labour. Later, in a close-up shot, the film introduces the audience to Souleiman (a role played by Ibrahima Traoré). While others are chanting resignedly ‘Lahila illa lahu’ (there is no God but God), Souleiman sits dejectedly cowed in the lorry that is taking them back home after their work at the site, in a scene that returns us to Marx’s argument about the triumph of late capitalism and the renewing of hope in the opium that religion offers.

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3 In a review of *Atlantics* by David Fear on *Rolling Stone*, Mati Diop is described as a protégé of her uncle, who is famous for *Touki Bouki*, a film popular among audiences in Francophone West Africa; see David Fear, ““Atlantics” Review: Ghosts, Grace and a Senegalese Girl’s Story, Perfectly Told’, *Rolling Stone*, 15 November 2019 https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/atlantics-movie-review-netflix-910718/ accessed 1 March 2020

This mobility is revealing of the monumental signifiers of neoliberalism in the urban capital, and as the lorry moves along the audience is presented with the hazy image of skyscrapers in the city and the unfinished building where Souleiman and the other labourers work. This initial phase of the film foregrounds a bleak atmosphere of economic despondency in postcolonial Africa, that characterises the pre-departure chapter of irregular migration and is an imaginative precursor to the dispersal of the refugees towards Europe through the precarious trans-Mediterranean route. To balance this, the film generates the interlude of the looming waves of the sea as the truck drives along, setting a mood music that suggests eeriness and forebodes future calamity. However, before all this settles in, the film takes a turn towards the romantic and we are introduced to Ada (Mame Bineta Sane), the main protagonist, who remains silent most of the time in the film but whose actions steer the plot forward. This incipient scene shows Ada announcing her lover’s name, Souleiman, affectionately in the street. The two lovers share a similar economic background, and also align with each other emotionally. This scene that first brings the lovers together also annotates some affects through its technical details: the affect of the love between Souleiman, who is presented as a psychologically degenerated man on the other side of the railtrack, and Ada, who is clearly oblivious of her lover’s travail but is anticipating their evening tryst. But to totalise this affective signification, there is also the affect of fear for the future; and this representation is evident in the intrusive train that roars between the two protagonists, with them not reaching each other for the public embrace that they are anticipating. It is through this scene that Diop builds the template of unfulfilled dreams, along with the other postcolonial pressures in the homeland that predispose one to the traditional push and pull theory of migration.
The scene shifts, and the two are showed bonding at the edge of the sea, with the indistinct sound of the waves adding sonic significance to the amorous moment. Seamlessly, the scene then transfers, without a transition breaker, to an unfinished building and an intense moment of desire that is, however, interrupted by a security guard. It is in this scene that Souleiman tells Ada he has something to say to her. Impatiently, Ada asks him to adjourn their meeting until night when they can meet again at the local bar. However, the resolute Souleiman knows this will be their last encounter before he departs by boat for Europe with the other boys, but he does not reveal this intention to Ada, who is hurrying to return home. Before she departs the scene, Souleiman gives Ada his necklace, which remains a referent for their love. She leaves him, and the scene ends in a symbolic closure with Souleiman observed staring at the vast, grim face of the sea; the film, again, speculates on the dire voyage ahead. From there on, Ada becomes the protagonist of abjection.

Julia Kristeva, in *Power of Horror*, defines the abject as that ‘which is cast out’; so, to be in abjection is to generate disgust and constant ejection, to occupy the position of antipathy and live on the fringes of society. The term can be expanded to the idea of marginality and those who are labelled the ‘trash’ of society. Usually, abjection is conceptualised as the experience of the abject and the condition of liminality that it occasions in moving towards the achievement of selfhood. However, the term ‘abjection’ itself is elastic, as Kristeva points out that abjection is what breaks the rule or ‘does not respect borders’, and is thus a disrupter of cultural formulas – as can be seen in the representational practice of Mati Diop in *Atlantics*. Here, I look at how this notion plays out in Diop’s auteurial vision while representing the horror of migration.

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The first method of abjection I want to draw attention to is the symbolic dream that Ada has after Souleiman’s departure. In this dream, Ada rejects the food that is presented to her by her friend Mariama, who has assumed a role as an allegorical replacement of Ada’s mother. Therefore, when Ada fails to reply to Mariama’s plea to come and eat, this gustatory repulsion can be understood as the repudiation of the mother. When she wakes up in the scene that follows, the film solidifies the previous somatic reaction as Ada’s mother beckons her to follow her, but Ada remains adamant and keeps gazing at the roaring sea. This can be read as an attempt at repelling her mother in order to assert her own subjectivity. Kristeva maintains that this rejection of food is a rebellion against patriarchy, as constituted by both the father and the mother, and is a method of asserting an ‘I’ or a giving birth to the self. Similarly, it is Ada’s rebuttal against the patriarchal hegemony that is rationalised by Ada’s grandmother and mother, which can also be read as Diop making a strong case against the complicity and commitment of the female gender in sustaining the institution of male patriarchy, as in the arrangement Ada’s parents make for her to marry Omar. On the wedding night, when the matrimonial bed is engulfed in fire, it could, therefore, have been what Ada has wished for. It is at this point that the film takes a mysterious turn and becomes a pursuit for a detective (Issa) as it draws in the attention of the law, which is also one of the intrinsic characteristics of the abject.

There is a lack of emotional synergy between Omar and Ada. Omar constitutes another abjection for Ada, as she is constantly disgusted with his presence. This can be observed in a lucid way later in the film, as Ada is seen selling off the material basis of their love – the iPhone that Omar purchases for her. This lack of desire towards Omar is exacerbated by Souleiman’s sudden absence, and Ada’s attention turns towards finding out where Souleiman might be and she becomes more preoccupied with memories of him. When Ada receives a
mysterious message on her phone that she believes is from Souleiman, she becomes convinced that he is not dead, although her intimate reflection below anticipates contact with the abject as constituted by the dead body of Souleiman:

Some old local fishermen come back from fishing, with such a full net that everyone follows them to see what they’ve caught. People rush forward, shouting that they’ve caught a big fish. Children and the whole neighbourhood came for a look. But as they approach the net, it’s not fish they see there but Souleiman’s lifeless body.

She then confesses to Dior, another female confidant, that she has received a message from Souleiman, and she enters into a process of abjection and becomes psychologically volatile – or what Rina Arya describes as in ‘psychological turbulence’. Since we are told, in an approach to tie up the loose ends of the story, that Souleiman’s boat has capsized, and so neither the inspector nor Ada can any longer be in any doubt about Souleiman’s death, one then suspects that it could not have been possible for Ada to have received the message from him.

Yet Ada is still being tracked by the detective for keeping the details of Souleiman’s hideout secret, and this occasions an interregnum in which she distances herself from her parents and her relationship with Omar becomes more strained. She is later asked by the inspector to come to the police station to be questioned on the same subjects of arson and Souleiman’s whereabouts. These tensions further compound the already frail relationship Ada has with Omar, and when he comes to bail her from the police station she passes her final remark and annuls the relationship. The departure of Souleiman and the other boys thus assumes a signification of abjection in the film. This process of abjection interrupts the reality of the day, and night also becomes infused with an ethereality. For instance, while she keeps the door of her heart closed to Omar, Ada is interested in opening it up to Souleiman at any opportunity an occasion might present. Thus, when she waits at Dior’s place, under the impression that the mysterious message is from Souleiman, as against the migration rumour, her opening of the door brings a double fold of meaning; firstly, the door is symbolic for her open heart for a conciliation; and secondly, it is an attempt to confirm the identity of the sender of the mysterious text who she anticipates to be Souleiman. She is surprised to only see the inspector who interrogated her earlier. The image of the inspector soon transmogrifies into that of Souleiman and she becomes locked out of the terrain of clear-mindedness, and this helps Diop to concretise the gothic angle of her narrative. In essence, the process of abjection suggests chaotic psychological experiences, and this funnels us further into the weighty impact of the occasion of displacement that this irregular migration constitutes for both the migrants and those left behind.

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8 See Kristeva, op cit, p 3
As the film progresses, Issa, the detective, becomes more psychologically tense; he feels threatened and controlled by something outside of him. When he assumes responsibility for the case and sees himself in the video on Omar and Ada’s wedding night, this is a contact with the abject, since he does not attend the wedding. The wedding event is held at the house of Ada’s parents – and besides, the arson that sets fire to the matrimonial bed has not occurred. After this encounter, the detective begins to find a way of freeing himself from this contact with the abject; his body becomes possessed, manipulated, and he is seen mystically taking up Souleiman’s identity. By the end of the film, Issa transgresses his boundaries and he is seen having sex with Ada (the abject is amoral and knows no law).9 The following scene shows him at the office later, reporting to his boss, the Commissaire, that the case is closed, a rejection that signifies the freedom for him to regain control of his life. This resignation also indicates his resistance to the corrupt regime of power and the repressive state apparatus as represented by the Commissaire. On the part of Ada, this sexual encounter is also a means to a reconstruction of self from the horror that has pervaded her life. As she affirms: ‘Some memories are omens, last night will stay with me to remind me of who I am and show me who I will become.’ From here on, Diop emphasises her vision of selfhood, and fuels more feminist variables. Yet it is a concern that Diop’s portraiture perhaps borders on the excessive in the masculinising of this horror of irregular migration, as it is both females and males who are involved in the search for hope aimed towards Europe – but the film only presents an all-boy migration story. Regardless of this, however, the film does project a strong feminist vision, and gestures towards Barbara Creed’s postulation on feminine monstrosity.10 While leaning greatly on Kristeva’s theory of horror, which itself has a psychoanalytic foundation,

9 Kristeva, op cit, p 4
10 The details of the ‘monstrous feminine’ are analysed in Barbara Creed’s The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Routledge, New York, 1993
Creed advances that the qualities of monstrosity in horror films are given by filmmakers in their cultural productions as a challenge to the patriarchal order. Creed enunciates this theory against Freud’s characterisation of passive female monstrosity, and her seminal inquiry is evident in Diop’s attempt at feminising the terrain of horror in *Atlantics*. For example, Ada’s friends, who are also girlfriends to the boys, become possessed, and are a threat against the patriarchal agent, Laye, but their identity, rather than being negative, is portrayed on the positive side. They become a face of justice.

Giving more illustration into the reading of abjection, Kristeva surmises that literature is a privileged signifier ‘that represents the ultimate coding of our crisis’. As examples of powerful cultural products, films not only expose us to the process of abjection, but through the crisis of the word and its multiplicity, meaning is collapsed. When this meaning collapses in cultural or literary representation, only the exegetic process of literary reading can reconstruct it. Hence, as the film moves towards its climax, the girls transform into ghosts in the night and they are seen walking to the house of Laye, the owner of the construction site, to demand the money he owes their boyfriends. This mobility is also a form of symbolic movement against the patriarchal and social institution that Laye represents. This is supported by Barbara Creed when she claims that Kristeva’s postulation on abjection is ‘a productive hypothesis for an investigation of the representation of women in the horror film’. When Laye confronts the ghosts of the girls, it is Diop’s effort at the procedure of abjection. Laye’s command that they should all leave his house is an act of ‘vomit’, which can only be generated by the abject. His building is burnt down, which attracts the attention of the law again. The police are called to interrogate the crime, but when one of the girls is arrested and locked in the van, the following morning she has inexplicably disappeared. Laye becomes powerless and is pressured, through the power of horror, into taking the money to the cemetery to pay his debt. Since this is an attack on his ontology, he decides to visit the cemetery, which is also a site, and sight, of abjection – a place Laye does not want to visit. Ironically, what Diop depicts as the abject here is Laye himself, who is the other side of humanity, signifying how Diop entrenches the political-cum-gender vision in the film. Laye is captured as the amoral phase of humanity – one that demands rebellion in order to achieve a redress, since he is the one that occasions the irregular migration in the first place through the accumulated salaries he owes the labourers at the construction site.

In the end, to achieve this representation through aesthetic strategies, the film gathers this momentum of abjection through the scenes of the sea and the impact of the vocal effects that follow every scene, through which Diop displays the horror of migration without presenting her audience with any images of small dinghies on the sea. The sea becomes a motif as the audience follows the plot of the film. After Souleiman leaves, the sea attains a monstrous status and loses its enchanting vista.

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11 Kristeva, op cit, p 208  
12 Creed, op cit, p 69
Diop presents this case more clearly in the pre-nuptial meeting between Omar and Ada, and Ada is seen covering her face with a towel while Omar swims in the pool bordering the sea. The sea is, in the main, used as a transitory mechanism for shifting the scene from one to the next. Likewise, Diop’s use of abjection in the film is also a way of confronting traditional genres, which the film resists; *Atlantics* is a composite of romance, magical realism, gothic and noir, and does not make any central claim on any particular genre. There is also a poetic interruption in the deployment of language; the constant shift between the poetic dialogue and colloquial interlocution is a dimension through which Diop’s method of abjection can be identified. The film combines many elements in one; it is an Atlantic face of postcolonial politics, gender, and the horrors of migration.

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