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Crisis and Postimperial Remains: Belonging, Loss, Justice

Abstract: “Extreme injustice becomes a deceptive facsimile of justice, disqualification of equality,” says Theodor Adorno in one of the fragments from *Minima Moralia* (1951/2005). This seemingly paradoxical statement comes in the wake of a reflection on the apparent dissolution (and invisibility) of the working class, at least in terms of fictional representations, at mid-twentieth century. Adorno’s reflections are prompted by a double sense of catastrophic crisis: on the one hand the destruction of Western civilization and any ethical principles of humanity in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust; on the other, the dissolution of a world order that left a vacuum, an abyss, without any sight of what a new order might be. If the abolition (for the most part) of Europe’s colonies was one of the positive outcomes in the wake of WWII, we have long left behind a simple postcolonial phase and, I would argue, have entered rather a post-imperial one, in which nostalgia for the lost “glories” of empire amidst the ruination of neo-liberal policies, abounds. The current crisis is in many ways radically different than the one experienced then, yet it also has significant similarities. If anything, crisis as experienced now assumes more of a perpetual quality, as if enacting a travesty of Kant’s notion of a “perpetual peace” for the postimperial age. Drawing on Adorno, the present essay aims to address the question of crisis and postimperial remains by concentrating on the related issues of belonging, loss, and justice and focusing on Damon Galgut’s *The Promise* (2021) and two films, Mati Diop’s *Atlantique* (2019) and Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles’ *Bacurau* (2019).

Keywords: postcolonial remains, hauntings, migration, justice, belonging, postimperial inversion

1 Crisis, what crisis?

Hannah Arendt took Kant’s minor writings on political theory seriously. Yet, concerning one of the best known ones, his *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, from 1795 she thought Kant must have taken it lightly: “Kant himself called some of them a ‘mere play with ideas’ or a ‘mere pleasure trip.’” And the ironical tone of *Perpetual Peace*, by far the most important of them, shows clearly that Kant himself did not take them too seriously (1992 [1970]: 7). As ready as I am to agree

with Arendt on the relative lack of importance of those writings in relation to the major philosophical works, I would suggest we take *Perpetual Peace* very seriously indeed, not in spite of the ironical tone the very first few lines have, but precisely because of it. This is Kant's opening statement:

"Perpetual Peace"

We need not try to decide whether this satirical expression, (once found on a Dutch inn-keeper's signboard above the picture of a churchyard) is aimed at mankind in general, or at the rulers of states in particular, unwearying in their love of war, or perhaps only at the philosophers who cherish the sweet dream of perpetual peace (106).

The expression, given its context, is satirical. Kant's observation though, if anything, is nothing but: extremely lucid, it serves as a kind of reality check for himself and for his readers. The irony does not keep Kant from outlining the "sweet dream." On the contrary, it prevents him from falling into too easy a cynicism that often hides under the guise of rationality. And it can do that for us too, as we get confronted more and more with a world which, in spite of the many advances conquered in terms of human rights, has fallen into a deep and seemingly perpetual, state of crisis. Indeed, for quite some time now it no longer even makes sense to talk about a singular crisis, as not only do crises keep succeeding each other, but are simultaneously multiple. As David Harvey bluntly puts it: "Crises are essential to the reproduction of capitalism" (2014: ix). The twentieth century might well be characterized as one of unmatched extreme violence, given the two global wars and the Great Depression, all three of them enormous crises that not only led to unforeseen devastation but also to radical changes in society and institutions the world over. The twenty-first century, on the other hand, has had much less spectacular crises. Nonetheless, even if there really is no point in such comparisons, it could be said that the scale of devastation does not seem to have been reduced and we are still at the beginning. Major crises – economic, financial, political, religious, humanitarian, not to mention the climate crisis, nor the protracted wars waged by Europe and the USA either directly or indirectly a bit all over the world and, more recently, the conflict waged by Russia in Europe itself with the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and subsequently the further invasion in 2022 – keep succeeding each other without really getting any definitive resolution.

Even if not all, many of these crises can be said to be postimperial. Like all crises, at heart they are, as Harvey notes, essential for capitalism to re-invent itself. An important difference to the crises of the twentieth century though, is that by now they issue and circulate in a world that is postimperial no matter how much the former imperial nations whether European, the USA or Russia, might

be in denial about it. The postimperial condition of these contemporary crises manifests itself primarily in two ways: one, certain crises actually reflect the fact that some formerly imperial nations instead of seeking ways to adjust to their new reality, slide into modes of deep nostalgia, for the imagined halcyon days of their now lost grandeur. This nostalgia expresses itself in various ways, but its self-delusional nature invariably exacts a steep price, be it the economic havoc wreaked by Brexit on the United Kingdom itself, or the high number of own casualties Russia keeps registering since it invaded Ukraine. The other can be said to issue directly as a consequence of imperial and colonial interventions. The actual migration crisis already forced radical changes in the mechanisms and self-identity of most European nations and the USA. “Fortress Europe” or the infamous wall on the Mexican border are but symptoms of a deeper crisis in which the most developed parts of the world essentially abandon their duty of hospitality and thus threaten a basic understanding of what it means to be human.

It was Kant too who defined hospitality as a right, the right of every human being to be received amicably when arriving at a foreign place, to not be treated as an enemy. Such a right was never absolute, and Kant clearly delineates its limitations so that any nation has both the duty to treat any arriving foreigner with the respect due to them by virtue of them being human and preserves the right to refuse hospitality if it feels threatened by the foreigner. Kant was neither naïve nor estranged from reality. As much as he boldly set out a vision for what humanity should be like based on principles of justice, he had no doubts about how people actually behaved in reality and what colonialism entailed: “Let us look now, for the sake of comparison, at the inhospitable behaviour of the civilised nations, especially the commercial states of our continent. The injustice which they exhibit on visiting foreign lands and races – this being equivalent in their eyes to conquest – is such as to fill us with horror” (139). Injustice (*Ungerechtigkeit*), indeed, is a recurring, perhaps even a key, preoccupation of Kant in this “philosophical sketch” especially as he sees it not as an odd, random, or contingent, problem, but rather as a systemic, even defining, characteristic of the most advanced states in their treatment of others and general denial of a common humanity, or as he says, those “nations who make a great ado about their piety, and who, while they are quite ready to commit injustice, would like, in their orthodoxy, to be considered among the elect” (142). When will we finally learn to be contemporaries of Kant?

2 Haunted legacies

Damon Galgut opens his novel *The Promise* (2021), for which he received the Booker Prize, with a seemingly puzzling, and displaced epigraph. He quotes Federico Fellini: “This morning I met a woman with a golden nose. She was riding in a Cadillac with a monkey in her arms. Her driver stopped and she asked me, ‘Are you Fellini?’ With this metallic voice she continued, ‘Why is it that in your movies, there is not even one normal person?’” Before explaining why I want to focus on this opening, I want to bring yet another seemingly displaced book opening into play, Jacques Derrida’s dedication in his *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1994). In this, as would soon become clear, seminal study, based on a lecture given in 1993 at the University of California Riverside, Derrida works his notion of “hauntology,” drawing liberally on Marx as well as on Shakespeare among many other sources. What interests me now though – besides the importance given to haunting and mourning – is how the book is dedicated to the memory of Chris Hani, the political activist against Apartheid, leader of the South African Communist Party and Chief of Staff of the paramilitary wing of the African National Congress, who was assassinated on 10 April 1993. Derrida is careful not to simply invoke Hani’s name for one of his complex linguistic plays (“*one should never speak of the assassination of a man as a figure*,” xiv). Still, he does employ the proper name as if it were also a metonymy:

One name for another, a part for the whole: the historic violence of Apartheid can always be treated as a metonymy. In its past as well as in its present. By diverse paths (condensation, displacement, expression, or representation), one can always decipher through its singularity so many other kinds of violence going on in the world. At once part, cause, effect, example, what is happening there translates what takes place here, always here, wherever one is and wherever one looks, closest to home. Infinite responsibility, therefore, no rest allowed for any form of good conscience (xiv).

What Galgut reminds us of in *The Promise* is that responsibility is infinite and that “*no rest [is] allowed for any form of good conscience*.” As such, my reference to Derrida’s book could be explained also along the line that what Derrida was recognizing, one year before Apartheid finally was abolished, was that its legacies would remain haunting for a long, very long time. Indeed, they still are haunting, and rightly so, in spite of all the success and failures of all the efforts to engage with the past in South Africa on a national, public level. Then, there is the further point that Derrida also calls attention to and that is the extreme violence past and present of a postcolonial society such as South Africa is never just about that society but also always implies many others on either side of the colonial-imperial

divide, and that any notion of evading or forgetting about responsibility, is but a simplistic, though harmful, form of denial.

The Promise unfolds as a succession of family funerals, starting with Rachel after a long period of illness, then her widower Manie, from a snake bite as he performed a stunt at his snake farm, then Anton, their son, who had deserted from the Army after having killed an innocent civilian, and finally Astrid, one of her two daughters, who having failed to receive absolution from her confessor, gets killed in the midst of a hijacking. The other daughter, Amor, in the end is the only direct member of the Swart family left alive, besides Anton's widow and Astrid's husband and two children. Similarly, the promise – initially made by Manie to his dying wife that he would give Salome, their black servant, the small house she lived in at the edge of their property – is deferred for some three decades. Amor, who had witnessed the initial promise her father made to her dying mother, keeps insisting with her family that the promise be fulfilled, but neither her father nor her siblings after he died, have any intention of upholding the promise. It is not difficult to see this failure to keep a simple promise made to a dying wife or mother, as yet another allegory of the nation, even though it has nothing to do with nationalism. Or rather, it does but not in the sense normally attributed to it as ideology.

The lives and actions of the various members of the Swart family all relate in one or more ways to South Africa's postcolonial condition. Their haunted legacies cannot be separated. Apartheid and other remains of colonialism linger on and there is no escaping them, even if one tries to move far away as Amor did by going to London and having nothing to do with the farm or the family until being recalled by yet another death. Likewise, Anton's desertion and his living on the fringes of society for years before accepting his inheritance and trying to carry on only to end up taking his own life. Now, I have no intention to rehash the old controversy stirred by Fredric Jameson's essay on "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986), where he advanced the notion of "national allegory." Even though I very much agree with Neil Lazarus (2011), that, all criticism of Jameson aside – and much of it had always rested on shaky ground – "if Jameson had not postulated his 'national allegory' hypothesis, we would have had to invent it" (107). In the case of *The Promise* the allegorizing, though certainly overdetermined, should neither be seen as unique nor as stemming out of South Africa's particular location, be it in geographical or conceptual, developmental terms. Its semi-peripheral condition necessarily makes for a more acute sense of the fundamental injustice on which the nation's foundation itself rests. But I would maintain that all postcolonial and postimperial societies, whether they happen to be now at the core or the periphery of the world-system (Wallerstein 2004), partake of a similar haunted legacy.

A consummate writer, Galgut, in *The Promise*, combines form and content so that one cannot extricate one from the other. The political impact of the narrative will not escape any reader, even those less familiar with the context of South African history; but its form, the sequence of funerals, as well as the shift in perspective that goes with each chapter, named for each of the deceased in turn, Ma (Rachel), Pa (Manie), Astrid, Anton, “one name for another” has a peculiar, melancholic intensity to it that slashes through any threats of nostalgia. The novel opens with Amor realizing from her aunt’s message that her mother has died and her inability to believe it: “The moment the metal box speaks her name, Amor knows it’s happened [. . .] But when the words are said to her aloud, she doesn’t believe them” (3). The “metal box speaking her name” stands in direct relation to the novel’s epigraph, where the woman with a golden nose asks Fellini, in her ‘metallic voice’ why there are no normal people in his films. The irony of course is inescapable, just as the question of what is and is not normal informs the whole novel. In an interview, Galgut best expressed it when he comments:

The Promise is also an overused title. It’s been used numerous times in numerous disciplines. It was the part of the book that arrived last. I had been working under a completely different title of Dark Love, which was an abstract allusion, too abstract I think, as it turned out, to Amor Swart. But I wanted to tie it in with a parallel sense that if one loves South Africa it has to be a dark kind of love (Galgut in Coovadia 2021).

Loss and betrayal are the two constant poles of the narrative. Besides going together – betrayal in itself always implies loss – each stands out in contrast to the other, thus helping better define their various forms. There is the initial, fundamental, betrayal when Manie breaks his promise to Rachel, followed by the successive betrayals when at every renewed opportunity, Astrid and Anton refuse to honor their father’s promise to their mother. But there is of course the larger betrayal if one can call it that of colonialism, the imposed oppression of the people of South Africa by Europeans. Amor, as sole witness of the promise, remains steadfast in asking for it to be honored until when all of her immediate relatives have died, she can deliver it. Yet, that too turns out to be no deliverance at all, not from the haunted legacies of South Africa. Before turning to that I think something else must still be considered. The price Amor has to pay for her isolated decision to stay true to her mother’s last wish is exile. Only by removing herself and moving to London can Amor have sufficient distance between her and the rest of the family, the farm, and South Africa. At the same time, she also renounces her inheritance as we learn close to the end, or rather, does not claim it. The money that is due to her after the father’s death keeps being deposited into her account although she does not touch it. Instead, at the end of the narrative, Amor gifts it to Salome and her son Lukas, after she has also presented Salome with the

deed to her house, something Lukas dismisses as “nothing,” in reference to the house and as a “tiny amount,” even though he has no idea of how much it is (286–287).

Of all the moments in the novel, the two concluding scenes come closest, arguably, to exposing the problematics of belonging, the vagaries of justice, as well as the sheer impossibility of anyone winning at all in a broken society. In the first, we see Amor at Salome’s house, handing her the deed, whilst explaining that there is also a previous claim on the property that could end up denying her the house again. In the second we have Amor on the verge of leaving for London for good, scattering Anton’s ashes from the roof of their house. In between, the walk from one house to another, that lets her reflect on herself and her life in that place, from when she was struck by lightning under a dead tree, to who she is now, the only one left alive of her family. These two moments, or three if we were to count the walk in between them, are in actuality just one. In the first part, Amor is coming to terms with one reality, that of Salome and Lukas. In the second, Amor deals or tries to deal once and for all, with the reality of her own family. In the walk, she looks back at herself as a child when the distance between the two realities might have appeared to her much smaller, even if not quite inexistent, in spite of the fact that everything then looked much larger to the child she was. Amor both knows that she belongs in South Africa and that she cannot stay. The lightning that struck and almost killed her, not only left her with a visible reminder, a scar, but with another kind of memory, the loss of one toe, so that belonging and loss, belonging and barely escaping death are indelibly engraved upon her own body. In that walk between the two houses – houses that no longer belong to her as she has given Salome the deed to hers, and also abdicated any claim to her childhood home in favor of Désirée, her now widowed sister-in-law – Amor goes back to the spot where she had been fulminated. That moment, as we learn, was a “[l]ong-ago event, forever receding, but somehow also sealed inside, nearby, and reachable as the scar on her foot, or her missing small toe, which is starting to throb. Always does, when she thinks about dying” (289). And so, she must run, run away from the tree, from the past too: “Be on your way, Amor, that lightning is coming back for you. Unfinished business, best left that way” (290).

By finally giving Salome the deed to her house Amor thought she finally was fulfilling the broken promise, not only doing right by Salome but also to her deceased mother. What she did not count on, could not count on, was Lukas’ reaction, his refusal to see in her ‘gift’ a final upholding of justice, a sort of closure of ‘unfinished business.’ In part, that failure of seeing on Amor’s part may be due to her own privileged position, which prevents her from quite understanding the reality of black people in South Africa whether before or after Apartheid. But it

also is, and in great measure, due to how she had seen herself belonging in a way that always had included Salome and Lukas, Salome who took care of her as a child just as she took care of her mother when she was dying, who indeed had been born on the same day as her mother, just on different places. In this Amor represents all too painfully the dilemma confronting white South Africans who do feel African and who would have nothing to do with Apartheid. Lukas, however, does not hesitate in letting Amor catch a glimpse of reality from a different, his, perspective:

It is nothing, Lukas says. Smiling again, in that cold, furious way. It's what you don't need anymore, what you don't mind throwing away. Your leftovers. That's what you are giving my mother, thirty years too late. As good as nothing.

It's not like that, Amor says.

It is like that. And still you don't understand, it's not yours to give. It already belongs to us. This house, but also the house where you live, and the land it's standing on. Ours! Not yours to give out as a favour when you're finished with it. Everything you have, white lady, is already mine, I don't have to ask (286).

What jolts Amor the most in this, is the way Lukas refers to her as 'white lady.' But when she reminds him of that, he makes a dismissive gesture, "throwing her name away" (286). In a sense of course Lukas is right. His assertiveness shatters any complacency one might have for the plight of colonists there or anywhere else. However, by reducing Amor to her race and gender, by denying her a name he goes beyond ascertaining his just claim for equality, for in doing so he would rewrite the past, and deny her singularity as a human being, something that Amor sets straight by invoking memory:

I have a name. You used to know it. I told you about the house that day I met you on the koppie. Do you remember?

He shrugs.

I often think about that day. My mother died that morning. I saw you and I told you about the house. We were just children walking around. You knew my name then (286).

Amor realizes that even by always having stood up for justice and refusing to compromise herself by profiting from the family's material means, she cannot atone for the past. That no matter how much she belongs to that land, such a belonging will always be tainted, and her but indeed a Dark Love as already inscribed in her name, Amor Swart. Or as Galgut also puts it, "[t]he dead are gone, the dead are always with us" (290).

3 Life and death

The Promise excels at confronting readers with the bitter realization that even when individuals are ready to reject injustice and try to amend for it, it might not be enough, especially as it barely dents the system, which even in its postimperial, or neo-colonial phase, remains basically unaltered. Its conclusion is realistic inasmuch as sometimes the only possible way of dealing with the traumatic past, after all else has failed, is to accept, as Amor does, that there are no winners, only loss, however unequally distributed it might still be. But now I want to turn to two other examples, two films, which, in spite of their significant differences, both take a different approach to the crisis that threatens a community either individually or collectively. Both Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (*Atlantics* 2019) and Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles' *Bacurau* (2019) thus not only confront viewers with the problematics of survival in a postcolonial society, but also show how individuals and communities can resist the often-mortal threats posed by the system and those who still occupy positions of power based on race, class, and gender.

Both films have been very favorably received. In spite of originating from Senegal and Brazil, respectively, have enjoyed wide exposure through streaming platforms such as Netflix and MUBI. That is, even though they can be termed as products from the periphery or the semi-periphery, they still have found their way to audiences at the core of the world-system. Obviously, there are advantages and disadvantages to this. Reaching a wider audience does not mean compromising the directors' visions necessarily and, at least in the case of these two films, it is rather at the level of publicity that one senses how the films get pitched differently for different audiences. Both *Atlantique* and *Bacurau* portray active resistance to neo-colonial forces, yet core audiences get directed to either the romance component in one, or the seeming weirdness and genre-bending of the other. Yet, even in its trailer, *Atlantique* reminds viewers that 'Every love story is a ghost story,' and the supposed weirdness in *Bacurau*, with its motley crew of characters and roads where one may find an overturned truck spilling its load of coffins is more 'real' than some viewers might like to take. In other words, what may appear as 'fantasy' in these films, is much more rooted in the actual societal conditions of both films, be it the desperate need to try to reach Europe from Dakar on small, precarious, little boats, or the need to fight against the domination of both powerful and wealthy foreigners or those from more affluent regions of Brazil.

I want to suggest that *Bacurau* and *Atlantique* perform postimperial inversions. What I mean by this is rather simple. In *The Promise* we already get a bit of this as, in spite of the varied points of view deployed, it is Amor with whom readers identify most. As such the fundamental injustice at the core of society though

not abolished is challenged through her refusal to benefit from the privilege she enjoys by virtue of her birth and race. In both films though, such a challenge is much stronger. In *Atlantique*, even though the group of young men who had been deprived of their wages at the beginning of the film, die attempting to cross the ocean to Spain, in the end, they come back in the form of *Djinn* who, by possessing the lovers they had left behind, manage to avenge themselves. And in *Bacurau*, the people of the eponymous village manage to repel the attack of the foreigners who had thought they would be easy prey, using those guns that were kept in the village's museum that reflected on its violent past. In both thus, we can see a kind of justice being enacted. As fantastical as such justice may appear, it certainly can be empowering for the national or regional audiences the films primarily address, just as it can serve as a chilling warning to those in the audience whose profile might better align with the oppressors.

In their different ways both films show exquisite attention to form. In both, the cinematography is lush even if in one it is the sea separating Africa from Europe that is the focus and on the other the near desert of the Brazilian Northeast hinterlands, the *sertão*. Both of course, sea and *sertão* are simultaneous real and mystical spaces as both signify different forms of desire and both can be and often are deadly. In *Atlantique* the young men who venture across the ocean do not return from their watery grave except as *Djinn* and this is an important element of the film's postimperial reversion. Diop plays with various filmic genres, as her narrative sometimes seems to veer in the direction of romance, at other times includes a detective story element, and in the end assumes, though only partly, characteristics of the horror film. There is a strong irony in that latter, as the zombie trope has customarily been associated with imperialism, colonialism, slavery, and capitalism. As Jennifer Fay succinctly puts it: "[t]he zombie does, of course, have history in the U.S. cultural unconscious that connects it to colonial rule, unpaid slave labor, and the democratic injustices of American empire. The first feature-length zombie film, Victor Halperin's *White Zombie*, premiered in 1932 when the U.S. occupation of Haiti was in its seventeenth year" (2008: 82). Or as Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff argued: "Although they are creatures of the moment, zombies have ghostly forebears who have arisen in periods of social disruption, periods characterized by sharp shifts in control over the fabrication and circulation of value, periods that also serve to illuminate the here and now" (2002: 782–783). A significant departure from the zombie trope in *Atlantique* is that the young men who die at sea return, but not as themselves as undead, but rather in the body of the living women whom they left behind. So, when they rise at night and walk away with the vacant, blind, stare audiences have come to identify with that of zombies, they seek out the builder in charge of the massive tower the young men had been building and for which they had not received their

earned wages. They confront him and make him start digging their graves, the only real, that is, physical labor, he would ever have done. Thus, Diop puts on stage a multi-faceted postimperial inversion as she invests the women of the dispossessed and now dead workers with the agency to exact their form of justice.

Bringing about justice is also the goal of the community in *Bacurau*. The film opens with a scene at a school in which the teacher tries to show the children how to use a map and looks for where Bacurau should be and cannot find it, even when he takes recourse to satellite imaging. This is immediately followed by a shot of a truck on a dusty road approaching and passing a road sign that proclaims not only the name of the village, Bacurau, and how far to go, 17 km, but also includes the following motto: “Se for, vá na paz” (If you go, go in peace). I am focusing on this beginning because it sets the tone for the film as much as it stands in stark contrast to the hyperviolent second part, when the community is forced to actively defend itself or risk being exterminated by the foreigners who had come with the express intent of amusing themselves by obliterating a village from the map. The first thing that must be said is that those foreigners, American and European, but also the couple of southern Brazilians who help them initially before being the first “natives” to be killed, not only ignore but openly go against the basic rule of hospitality as defined by Kant, and which the sign clearly proclaims. The initial contact between the community and the invaders is made when the couple of southerners go to the local store for refreshments in order to place hidden devices to disrupt the village’s access to communication satellites and thus, effectively, make it disappear from the map. Yet, they can only do that because the community welcomes them as passing guests. The other point I want to make is that from the very beginning, Mendonça Filho and Dornelles are already staging a massive postimperial inversion for not only the first thing we come to know about the village is that it has a functioning school with a black teacher, who, against possible audience expectations, is not relying on old dilapidated materials, such as a torn map but rather on state-of-the-art digital technology. So, from the beginning the directors make one point crystal clear there is no room for nostalgia in their vision.

Before moving on from the question of form I still want to note that the use of digital technology is key for both films. In *Bacurau* the use of satellite imaging is not the only digital technology that is crucial. At one point we see the drone being used to spy on the community and it has, rather surprisingly, the shape of a flying saucer as imagined in countless old sci-fi films. If that was meant to terrify the villagers, it has the reverse effect as they clearly recognize it for what it is. Another effect of that UFO-shaped drone of course is to address the audience who can enjoy yet another play on generic conventions, something the film, much more even than *Atlantique*, relentlessly pursues, even if a dominant one might be

the Western, except that Bacurau very much presents a *sertanejo* version that also plays loose with gender stereotypes and, implicitly, with conventional attitudes of metropolitan, urban audiences towards rural backwaters. Technology might be less obvious in *Atlantique*, yet it is equally, if not more, important as the film heavily uses digital imaging for varied purposes, including the depiction of the ghostly tower the workers had been working on and which does not exist in reality. Katrin Pesch has analyzed this at some depth, comparing for instance the image of the tower with the digital plans for one such colossal and monumental building, so as to make clear that though imaginary, the tower of the film is still grounded in reality: “The soon-to-be inaugurated Burj Mejiza, Arabic for miracle tower, is inspired by a luxury solar-powered tower envisioned by former Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade and Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2006” (2022). Furthermore, Pesch argues that the use of digital techniques is a fundamental element of the film’s politics in Diop’s attempt to register the realities of migration and, I would add, thus perform a postimperial inversion:

In Diop’s case, the loss of film’s indexical quality and temporal continuity is not irrelevant because of digital cinema’s perceptual realism, but because she seeks to tell a story of migration that captures a ‘multi-layered conception of space and time’, where the past communes with the present. [. . .] The digital and its epistemological implications are thus well suited for her intervention into contemporary representation of stories of migration. The film’s cinematic realism, then, ‘does not mourn the so-called loss of indexicality of the photographic image’ and temporal discontinuity of digital conversion but rather embraces it.” (2022)

Both films also drive the message that in spite of all their material constraints, the communities they depict enjoy a strong sense of belonging. This is true for the inhabitants of Bacurau even in their whimsical ways, with the public distribution of hallucinogenics or the town hall distribution of food and medical items according to need. Yes, this is in many ways a throwback to a past of alternative communes, but it is not romanticized as much as it is used to highlight both the continuities between the past and the present into the near future where the film’s action, like in *Atlantique*, takes place. And it is to reinforce the notion of resistance based on collectivity to the relentless push towards abject individualism characteristic of neo-liberal societies. In *Atlantique*, the sea is a symbol of desire, loss, and death. The young men, even when they dream of escaping their abject reality never lose the sense of belonging to their community. Speaking to *Vogue India*, Mati Diop affirmed: “I don’t believe there is a migration crisis, but a moral and political crisis. As the daughter of an immigrant, migration is part of my history and identity and so I see it as a complex and existential reality rather than a subject” (Freeman 2019). Diop is of course right, as the notion of crisis applied to the problematics of migration usually tends to serve xenophobic politics

that if anything should remind us all of the fragility of our political institutions and democracies. Here the words of Paul Gilroy, in reference to the catastrophic consequences of Europe's refusal to hold up its duty to hospitality by invoking the supposed threat posed by migrants crossing the sea from Africa, are precisely to the point:

One challenging message from the charnel houses of the twentieth century was that the struggle against fascists and their imitators did not end with the Third Reich. The political use to which the horrors of the black Mediterranean and the black Manche have been put, require us to attend to the resurgence of racist ultranationalism buoyed by an apocalyptic populism and transmitted across a new communicative ecology. This mobilisation is also a product of the psychographic power that has projected charismatic celebrity surrogates (Berlusconi, Salvini, Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro) for the torpor of democratic political culture (2021: 118).

The Promise, set in the present, spans four decades and leaves no room for doubt that the present and, indeed, the future, are marked by the past. Both films here under discussion are set in the near future but they too are indelibly marked by the past. Yet, there is no nostalgia in any of them. In *Bacurau*, if anything what prevails is the deep irony of having the firearms kept in the museum as exhibits of the region's violent past, being put into use again, to fight the American and European invaders, which, again, is a useful inversion and rejection of the myth of invading hordes from the South into the North. There is also no room for magic. Even if *Atlantique* takes recourse to the *Djinn* and plays and reverses the colonial trope of the zombie, it does not fall into irrationality but merely registers that in its context belief in such phenomena is indeed a reality. Throughout this essay, I have been driven by a thought from Theodor Adorno in one of his fragments (124) from *Minima Moralia*: "Extreme injustice becomes a deceptive facsimile of justice, disqualification of equality" (2005 [1951]: 194). This seemingly paradoxical statement comes in the wake of a reflection on the apparent dissolution (and invisibility) of the working class, at least in terms of fictional representations, at mid-twentieth century. Adorno's reflections are prompted by a double sense of catastrophic crisis: on the one hand the destruction of Western civilization and any ethical principles of humanity in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust; on the other, the dissolution of a world order that left a vacuum, an abyss, without any sight of what a new order might be. Firmly into the twenty-first century we might well feel that the abyss has only gotten deeper and darker. Yet, as the novel and two films I have here considered amply demonstrate, the first step to imagine a different future is to grasp the importance of the past.

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