

# Manthia Diawara's Strategic Ruminations on Migration and the Conundrums of Cinematic Autoethnography

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## Abstract

Manthia Diawara's films often situate his autobiographical presentation within an ethnosurround linking francophone West African cultural histories to issues of diasporic subjectivity in Europe and North America. In *Rouch in Reverse* (1995) Diawara focuses on the films of French anthropologist Jean Rouch to interrogate claims about ethnographic "knowledge" of West African cultures. Making Rouch the informant and Paris the locale of investigation, the film "reverses" ethnographic practice by situating immigrants as expert authorities and inverting conventions of representation, linking Diawara as "scientist" to his strategic ruminations on colonialism, patriarchy, and the limits of an ethnographic paradigm. Two decades later, in *An Opera of the World* (2017), Diawara repurposes footage from a "Sahel opera" to explore the plight of African and Syrian migrants risking precarious sea crossings. He intercuts these narrative segments with both archival footage of earlier refugee efforts and interviews with film critics and migration scholars to create a montage of cinematic "opera" voicing issues of asylum. In these films, Diawara's self-representation as a mobile subject both authorizes him and interrogates conventional representations of Africans and other migrants by creating an innovatively counter-ethnographic mode of film.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; ethnographic film; subjective documentary film; migration and diaspora; opera on film.

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Manthia Diawara, “the man in the black hat,” grew up in Mali, studied in France and the US, and lives predominantly in New York. He is an acclaimed independent filmmaker and memoirist, as well as professor of Comparative Literature and Cinema Studies at New York University, the editor of the journal *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*, and a leading critic and scholar of African cinema. His work takes the form of personal essays within a transpersonal, socio-political context and is both creative and scholarly, cinematic and written, theoretical and cultural. For over four decades he has been situated between Africa and the United States, the French and English languages (as well as Mandinka and other African languages), and, more broadly, the global South and North, as a public artist-intellectual in ways rarely seen in American universities.

Unlike such well-known Francophone African intellectuals and writers in the academy as Souleymane Bachir Diagne and Alain Mabanckou, however, Diawara is critical of both “Afro-pessimism” and views that essentialize a traditional Africa; rather, he regards Africa’s engagement with modernity as a central issue. His “heroes” (with qualification) include such provocative figures as Sekou Touré, the former president-dictator of Guinea who was one of a few heads of West African nations to end cooperation with France after colonialism; and the self-exiled Richard Wright of 1950s Paris writing *Black Power*. Diawara is pre-eminently an autobiographical writer, embedding intellectual questions within his personal past and bringing a personal voice to bear on issues of neo-colonialism, racism, pan-African nationalism, and migration. But he practices the autobiographical with a difference, situating himself invariably as a diasporic African engaging with histories of harm in the political and cultural oppression of Black people. While American scholars might be tempted to characterize Diawara’s memoirs and films as “personal criticism,” this category would be reductive both of his deep and informed commitment to the profound questions invoked by “Africa” and of his self-representation as simultaneously a personal inquirer, a collectivized African subject, and a theorist engaging Western discourses around race, patriarchy, and colonization in the current—purportedly postcolonial—moment.

Diawara’s films offer a compelling vantage point from which to think about the focus of this issue of *Cinergie* on migration and autoethnographic cinema. As a diasporic subject, his experience across cultures and locations affords him a nuanced position for reflecting on issues of *métissage* and hybridization central to theorizing postcoloniality. And the form of his work, at the nexus of film essay and autoethnographic memoir, is a textured example of a method that might be called “strategic rumination” on the possibilities of pan-African formations in our times. While this short essay cannot do justice to the rich diversity of Diawara’s cinematic and autobiographical work, I juxtapose an early and a recent film in order to think about two things: the sites and scope of his interventions into ethnographic film; and the possibilities his model affords for imagining an autoethnographic cinema adequate to representing the “I/eye” of migratory subjects in situations of precarity. My focus is on Diawara’s central engagement with the important issue of whether cinematic counter-ethnography, as a hybrid genre of collectivized life narrative, can productively represent the movement of migrants from the global South by employing its counter-discursive potential to narrate their stories persuasively and non-stereotypically.

I begin by returning to Diawara’s second film, *Rouch in Reverse* (58 mins., 1995; henceforth called *Rouch*), in which he strategically proposes terms and method for reversing ethnographic relations and standpoints between French and francophone African subjects. I then jump forward to his most recent film, *An Opera for the World* (70 mins., 2017; henceforth called *Opera*), to consider how the tactics and critique developed in *Rouch* inform these “strategic ruminations” on the plight of migrants between global South and North. Situating himself in his films not as an autobiographical center but an avatar positioned between worlds, Diawara is both a cosmopolitan located in the Western centers of New York and Paris and fluent in the media of opera, film, and memoir, and an emergent diasporic subject grounded and steeped in West African cultural practices.

## 1 Introduction: A Model of Cinematic Autoethnography

Before proceeding, let me first contextualize my understanding of autoethnography, a concept I have discussed in more detail elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Autoethnography is both a productive lens and a charged notion that has quite different histories in the US in the humanities and the qualitative social sciences.

1. See my discussions of the concept in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* and the journal *Life Writing*.

Within literary studies, autoethnography emerged as a theoretical term around 1990 in books by Françoise Lionnet and Mary Louise Pratt (Lionnet 1989; Pratt 1992). Both scholars analyzed a range of colonial and postcolonial first-person narratives situated at multiple cultural boundaries between metropolitan and local languages, oral and written modes of storytelling, individual and collective modes of self-presentation, and national and indigenous identities. Pratt employed a revisionist method to historicize autoethnography in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, describing autoethnographic acts as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms” (Pratt 1992: 7). That is, indigenous subjects who take up writing both collaborate with and appropriate a colonizer’s discursive models as they “transculturates” them into indigenous idioms. These subjects thus construct texts that are heterogeneous for both writer and reader, directed to the writer’s own social group *and* to a metropolitan audience. Pratt’s notion of autoethnography emphasizes “how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other,” interlocked and interacting despite histories of radically unequal power relations (7). As a mode of counter-narrative that engages and interrogates western discourses of truth and identity, autoethnographic texts are situated in a “contact zone” that is at once geographic, linguistic, and cultural (6).

Similarly, in *Postcolonial Representations*, Lionnet discusses Fernando Ortiz’ use of transculturation to explore “the assimilation of Afro-Cuban culture *into* Hispanic culture,” emphasizing the dialectical movement writers make between cultures in their métissage or braiding of disparate discourses without privileging one over the other (Lionnet 1994: 12n). She asserts, drawing on Cuban poet Nancy Morejón, that in this process of exchange “a circulation of practices” creates a constant interweaving of symbolic forms and empirical activities among the different interacting cultures,” while binary oppositions such as “colonizer” and “colonized” are subsumed into the new formations of “a third way” of métissage (11-12). For Lionnet, autoethnography is a dynamic process of reciprocity in which subgroups perform operations on language in order to better represent their regional cultural realities as neither “other” nor local. In this view, subjectivity is irreducibly pluralistic, transnational, and transactional, as it oscillates between voicing and writing autobiography. For example, as Lionnet earlier explored in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Lionnet 1989), such heterogeneous texts as Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road*, with its “an-archic” style, and the francophone autobiographical narratives of Maryse Condé can be read as autoethnographic.

Within the qualitative social sciences, autoethnography is deployed variously by different theorists to different ends. Anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay has laid helpful groundwork, noting that it can signal either “the ethnography of one’s own group” or “autobiographical writing that has ethnographic interest” (Reed-Danahay 1997: 2). She, however, resists making a definitive statement about autoethnography and focuses on intersections that blend various genres and voices, regarding the autoethnographer as “a boundary-crosser” with “a dual identity” or, at times, “multiple, shifting identities” (3). For the collection of essays Reed-Danahay edited, it is defined as “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text” that can be performed by anthropologists, non-ethnographers, or life writers (9).

Another vein of qualitative social science has both expanded and domesticated the concept of autoethnography in ways that seem to dilute its geopolitical efficacy by downplaying the transnational aspect of exchanges in contexts of cultural displacement or exile. For example, while the concept has been a key term in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, it is associated particularly with the work of Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, who analyze the social settings of personal interactions outside cultural contact zones with fraught transnational histories (Ellis, Bochner: 2000). The strategy of Ellis, in particular, of embedding interactions in the everyday details of differently positioned subjects’ lives at times can be self-indulgent and insufficiently attentive to the larger ethnos and its geopolitical freight. Her definition of autoethnography, for example, as “an autobiographical genre . . . that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” in ways that blur distinctions between them (739), “working the spaces between subjectivity and objectivity, passion and intellect, and autobiography and culture (761), is too broad to be a helpful methodological tool.<sup>2</sup> Such a concept of autoethnography may be focused on the self-reflexive, but it is insufficiently reflective, analytically.<sup>3</sup> For these reasons, I have relied on cultural and literary framings of autoethnography

2. See, for example, the list of “Sixty Genres of Life Narrative” defined by Smith and Watson (253-93).

3. In introducing a section on “Methods of Collecting and Analyzing Empirical Materials,” Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln observe that autoethnography, as a mode of making truth claims in autobiographical discourse, is related to genres such as the

in theorizing this essay.

Pertinently, both Lionnet and Pratt articulate new subjectivities emerging in postcolonial contexts that do not simply reproduce the individualized "I" of Western autobiography, but also critique its singularity and resituate it within explicitly socio-political contexts. While the narrative strategies in such processes of dissident self-representation were at times subsumed in the trope of "talking back," the means and modes of autoethnography extend beyond that inverted mirroring, what Homi Bhabha characterized as a kind of parodic mimicry, to new hybridized forms of subjectivity—and at times creolization—that ask readers and viewers to revise their own practices for engaging the subjects of autobiographical discourse.

Given this diversity of views on what constitutes autoethnography and the rarity of its application to documentary film, I argue that Diawara's work, incorporating multiple media, voices, and critical discourses, can helpfully be conceptualized as an ongoing project in autoethnographic representation—more precisely, in both engaging and interrogating its terms. As we will see, his "auto" is driven in part by explicitly countering established protocols within the discourse of anthropology and the medium of French ethnographic film. I now turn to how Diawara's films counter the norms and practices of ethnography in creating a new mode of cultural exchange that reworks—and seeks to reverse—the "othering" of ethnographic film.

## 2 The Terms and Practice of Counterethnography in *Rouch in Reverse*

Diawara's subjective documentary film, *Rouch in Reverse*, critiques the practice of the foremost French cinematic ethnographer, Jean Rouch, and ethnography in colonial West Africa more generally, by bringing an explicitly counter-ethnographic lens to bear. In the film Diawara describes his method as "reverse anthropology." Ethnographic cinema, Diawara observes, functioned historically as a technology that, while claiming to preserve traditional African cultures by appropriating them on film, destroyed many of them. In contrast "reverse anthropology" aims to be a tactic for creating a space of dialogue neither mimetic of European discourses nor dismissive of the cultural legacy of ethnography; rather, it seeks to enable Africans to become subjects and speakers of their own histories.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere in the film he states, "Rouch has played such a key role in the representation of Africans on film, I wanted to pass through Rouch in order to render visible new African voices and images: the ones that defy stereotype and primitivism." For Diawara, then, "reverse anthropology" connotes a process of inversion through immersion. What might it mean to "pass through Rouch" as a method of composing a film?

While *Rouch* received some attention when it was first released in 1995, critical commentary focused on the figure of Rouch as a magnet, rather than Diawara's achievement in interrogating and "reversing" the mode of ethnographic film. Eminent anthropologist Michael M. J. Fischer read the film in relation to critiques of ethnography and saw it largely as a biography of Rouch. Historian Christopher Gray situated it as a biography in the subgenre of Europeans active in colonial Africa by reading it against a biography of Albert Schweitzer. Africanist literary scholar Kenneth W. Harrow applied a postcolonial lens informed by Homi Bhabha's concept of a third or interstitial space where the inscription of identity exceeds "the frame of the image" as a "discursive strategy of the moment of interrogation," though he criticized the absence of an explicit discussion of gendered relations in it<sup>5</sup> (Harrow 1999: 3, citing Bhabha 1994: 49-50). Oddly, none of them placed *Rouch* within the emergent practice of African counter-ethnographic narration in film and literature.

Surely, generations of West African-based filmmaking, including Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* and Ousmane Sembene's later films, such as *Ceddo* and *Mooladé*, are informed by practices that both reference and "shoot back" to representations of African ritual and social life from the position of an insider-outsider. West African filmmakers of a later generation often incorporate autoethnographic critiques along the lines that Di-

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*testimonio* and the first-person life history, which inevitably confront issues about verification and validity. (636-7). Such issues of course haunt subjective truth claims throughout the field, though the speculative and modest character of Diawara's persona works well to allay them.

4. *Rouch* is described in these terms in the *Library of African Cinema* catalog, 1998, 17.

5. Yet mid-twentieth century ethnographic film was largely dominated by men, with the notable exception of Maya Deren's remarkable films on Haiti.

awara traces. For example, Abderrahmane Sissako, in *Life on Earth* (1998), both documents and tells stories of how rural everyday life is textured in a rapidly technologizing world at the Mali-Mauritania border; in such later films as *Bamako* and *Timbuktu*, representations of everyday life are central to his powerful critiques of authoritarian politics. Ethnographic cinema, by contrast, Diawara notes, functioned historically as a technology that, in preserving and appropriating traditional African cultures on film, also destroyed many of them. In a voiceover Diawara observes that cinematic representations of traditional Africa are caught in the larger paradox of how Africa was captured on film as surely as in political colonization. Although French anthropologists justified ethnographic films as a means of preserving threatened cultures, he observes, the introduction of European investigators and technology turned people into self-conscious "natives" who then watched their own images and practices in cinematic mirrors and saw their locales turned into international tourism destinations, contributing to their disintegration. Thus, the image and the discourse of Africa are already inscribed by Europeans as a primitivized space upon which power was exercised in the forms of patriarchal domination, colonialism, and racism. And these political operations were exercised equally in the sphere of culture by the operations of knowledge in producing Africans as the savage others of European representation.

Diawara sets up his interrogation of ethnographic film by focusing in *Rouch* on conversations with eminent French ethnographer Jean Rouch, the best-known filmmaker of the French anthropological school established by Marcel Griaule. Rouch made nearly forty subjective documentary films, from the Nineteen Forties to the Seventies, on the rituals and beliefs of peoples in the francophone colonies of West Africa prior to independence. He is best known for such short ethnographic films as the famed *Les maîtres fous* (*The Mad Masters* 1953-4) and *Moi, un Noir* (in English, *Treichville*, 1957). Indeed, *Les maîtres fous* remains controversial for its depiction of a spirit possession ritual of the Hauka in which several men, in a state of trance, sacrificed and then ate dogs, with thick white saliva dripping suggestively from their mouths. Historically the film's sensationalistic footage has driven debates about the "primitivism" of Africans and the question of the filmmaker's ethnographic ethics in "going native." Rouch's significance, in Paul Stoller's view, is in grounding ethnographic film in multiple "lower" senses as a means not so much to "document exotic alterity" as to portray a kind of "Artaudian shock" that articulates "how the powerless are able to resist, albeit only theatrically, the racism and terror of those who dominate them" (Stoller 1995: 130). The visceral scenes in Rouch's films, Stoller asserts, should be viewed as efforts to free the representation of Africans from the regime of visibility and textuality that Western anthropology imposed on them.<sup>6</sup> Diawara, however, resists this defense of ethnographic film as a mode of liberatory participant observation. While he includes in *Rouch* the notorious scene of dog sacrifice, perhaps the most fetishized in West African ethnographic film, he arguably does so to underscore the sensationalizing of the ritual as emblematic of African "difference."



Figure 1. *Rouch in Reverse*. Closeup of Rouch and Diawara — Manthia Diawara — Courtesy of Third World Newsreel

In engaging with what he calls "reverse anthropology," then, Diawara adapts and inverts ethnographic techniques of the interviewer-informant relationship to both celebrate the mode of subjective documentary and untether it from Western origins. Diawara's filmic technique uses a dense montage of images and words to point up how Rouch staged his African subjects as exotic objects of a voyeuristic European technology. In its organization *Rouch* is associative, like an essay in the classic Montaignean sense of "testing" or "assaying"

6. Stoller states the presupposition against which he will argue in *Embodying Colonial Memories* about the traditional dominance of sight among the humanities and social sciences thus: "Throughout the history of anthropology, ethnographers have been participant *observers* who *reflect* on their visual experiences and then write *texts* that *represent* the Other's *pattern* of kinship exchange or religion" (15). Earlier, Pratt has characterized this figure as the "seeing-man" (7).

a proposition; but it is also dialectical in its Brechtian emphasis on asking viewers to confront the limits and blind spots of given ideological positions.

There are several components to *Rouch*. Diawara composed and narrated it as a filmic pastiche: clips out of context from film archives, photo stills of world events around the breakup of French West Africa, scraps of footage from Rouch's films, montages at odd angles that contrast Rouch and himself as cinematographers, and juxtapositions of Rouch's "then" West African villages to African "now" neocolonial spaces fractured by the technologization of rural life. Diawara's conversations with Rouch about his decades of work in West Africa play against a background of clips from Rouch's films that often contrasts his "ethnic location" in contemporary multicultural Paris with his earlier position of privilege in rural traditional sites among his informants.

Diawara's method is multifaceted. The interview he conducts with Rouch, in segments throughout the film, situates Rouch as the informant, the object of the camera's scrutiny, while Diawara, the interrogator, identifies himself as a "scientist." Diawara notes that he is also a character, literally the director within the film, who establishes the authority of his own perspective by conducting interviews with several West and North African francophone residents in Paris, metropolitan subjects who are juxtaposed to Rouch in segments of his interviews. While clips from Rouch's ethnographic films presented Africans as primitive savages, the ongoing interviews Diawara conducts with five differently situated "metropolitan" speakers who are Parisians of African origin comments on their sense of alienation even in serving as expert informants. Diawara also explores the play of cultural authority in various locations, as he locates Rouch in his "native" settings—the Musée de l'Homme (the anthropological museum of Paris), the cinémathèque, Rouch's apartment on the Blvd. Montparnasse, and the streets and sites of contemporary Paris, contrasting chic boulevards with gritty suburbs of expatriate Africans.

Diawara's rapid montage of images and discourses thus inverts techniques of ethnographic film. Consider, for example, a section midway through the film, where Rouch and Diawara begin a conversation about Sekou Touré's rebellion against France in 1959, and what a different outcome might have meant. Then, the film cuts to a segment of Diawara's ongoing interview with the five expatriate African subjects. Then, Diawara, as voiceover narrator, muses, in the name of a collective African subject, on whether modern rationality can ever recover African stories and the history of African identities. Then, it moves to a clip from the influential Rouch film *Moi, un Noir (Treichville)* and Diawara's reflection on its significance. Employing counter-ethnographic tactics in these segments, Diawara's interspersed voiceover commentary reverses the "illustrative" tenor of ethnographic film to point up the constructed nature of the informant-investigator relationship.

Throughout *Rouch*, Diawara's extensive use of voiceovers both mimics the "objective" anthropologist's narration of ethnographic film and serves as a gently ironic counterpoint to the film clips narrated in Rouch's authoritative voice. The voiceovers also introduce an autobiographical dimension into the film, which Diawara calls a "rite of passage for myself." In positioning himself as an African artist-expatriate, he acknowledges the legacy of French colonial culture as a double bind: it instructed him while objectifying and oppressing the Africans with whom he identifies. An accomplishment of the film is emphasizing both the Rouch's achievements and the imperial blind spots that he shared with anthropologists such as Griaule. As a mode of *cinéma vérité*, *Rouch* both imitates and critiques the inescapable ethnocentric bias of classic ethnographic documentary that inevitably exoticizes its subjects. In reversing the terms and methodology of Rouch's ethnographic process, Diawara reveals a faultline of power relations: historical relations of domination and subordination cannot be undone simply by a reverse mimeticism grounded in a critique of patriarchy, colonialism, and racism. Rather, Diawara works to structure the film as a dialectical engagement that will have potential to generate a third space or dynamic in-between.

But, despite his work to create a new mode of counter-ethnographic film capable of escaping those constraints by reversing their premises, *Rouch* is at times overwhelmed by the figure at its center, Rouch himself. Diawara implicitly acknowledges, in the course of the film, that reversing the terms and methods of ethnography may be a mirror operation to turn the tables on the genre that is undercut by subjective factors not accounted for in the paradigm of ethnographic investigation. First, the film creates both Rouch and Diawara as characters who are historically situated within larger cultural networks and socially coded as national subjects in ways each has internalized; they are ideologically interpellated even as Diawara's narrating "I" critiques their polarized positions. Second, the history of ethnographic film in francophone Africa, like Hollywood film, has literally left

its traces all over the landscape; there is no "pure" West African cinema "outside" it. Third, Diawara recognizes that he himself was shaped and schooled as a filmmaker by viewing Rouch's films in the Seventies. Fourth and finally, in the interview process, Diawara comes to feel both admiration and sympathy for the elder filmmaker, with his tattered collars and tatty apartment. He characterizes Rouch ironically as "a big child playing" who has displaced his lifelong childhood innocence onto the "Africa" his films construct. At the film's end, Diawara gives the final word to Rouch, who concedes disarmingly, "Very often I learned more from Africa than Africa learned from me. It is difficult to enter inside a culture which is not your own." While Rouch seems to remain somewhat dismissive of the neophyte filmmaker Diawara as a cinematic "scientist," he also imprints the power of his own work and personality on his investigator.

If these subjectivizing factors to some extent pressure Diawara's film toward becoming a project in participatory ethnography, they also suggest the limits of "reversal" or mimetic inversion as a means of exercising critique in a film essay. Diawara, positioned as both filmmaker and subject, reads himself into the film through reflective voiceovers that subvert the "reversal" of ethnographic filmmaking by focusing on the machinery of ethnography itself. During the tour of Paris Rouch leads him on, Diawara acknowledges that, while he has been subjected to the colonial and racist practices of the French empire, he has also been formed as its subject. The legacy of his French education is inescapably as much emancipatory as oppressive. In the film's attempt at "reverse ethnography," its engagement with Rouch shuttles uneasily between power relations and partnership in the filmmaking project. When, at its end, Rouch confides, "I learned more from Africa than it from me," Diawara counters by confessing that practicing reverse ethnography has taught him about his own privilege as an intellectual, unlike the Africans in Rouch's films, who are historically in the position of objectified informants.

In his reflection on his own privilege as an intellectual, a user of technology, and a circulator of images, Diawara is, in a sense, both authorized by, and resistant to, the authority of Rouch's films as an anxious legacy that has overwritten Africa. To undermine the terms of film ethnography, he must first interrogate them—and observe what he has inescapably learned from them. In playing "Rouch" to Rouch, Diawara notes, in an autobiographical aside, how he feels like Rouch in flying from New York to Paris for the interview, and concludes with the admission that his growing liking for Rouch undermines his investigative detachment. In a sense the project of reverse ethnography is doubly doomed to failure: on the personal level because of the impossibility of complete transference, given both Rouch's accomplishments and his charm; on the collective level because Africans have not only internalized ethnographic views of themselves, but also experienced the recoding of their cultural spaces by French filmic representations and the intermixing of their languages and cultures, even as social positioning for many in such metropolitan spaces as Paris remains marginal, driven by pervasive racism. But if this project in reverse ethnography is in a sense impossible, it is nonetheless productive of a vocabulary of images and tropes for re-Africanizing the "French" spaces of Paris as sites of ongoing migration and transculturation.

While a concise definition of autoethnographic film might be "the study by the objects of ethnographic investigation of their former investigators," in *Rouch* Diawara extends the process into the methods, languages, and consequences of cinematic representation in an effort to redress the politics of domination exercised throughout the francophone African empire. Yet it becomes apparent that such a method relies on an oppositional logic of binary reversal that Diawara's avatar, as its central character, seeks to resist being caught in. Rather, in the narrating "I"'s voiceovers, he discusses the limits of understanding structural "reversal" as a simple inversion of the complex inequities of colonial domination. To speak as an African representing Africans on the screen, Diawara observes, he must confront and contest distorting stereotypes through a critique that borrows their methods even while aiming to turn them on their collective head. Interested not in valorizing a pre-conquest Africa but in placing representations of Africans within the discourse of modernity, Diawara faces a challenge: How to deploy the sophisticated technology and systems of classification used by Western sciences while also directing them to Western institutions that fixed Africans as sub-human objects of the surveyor's gaze? Ultimately, how might cinematic representation articulate the terms of an as-yet unrealized African modernity in dialogue with its own history and the peoples of the African diaspora throughout the world? While Diawara's reworking of "reverse anthropology" seeks to create a space of dialogue that is neither mimetic of Europeans nor dismissive of the cultural legacy of ethnography, the project of enabling Africans to not just appropriate images but become agents—the speakers and subjects of their own history—continues to confront challenges that emerge, not least around current practices of restricting immigration.

### 3 Diawara's *An Opera of the World* and the Stakes of Counterethnographic Film

In his memoir *In Search of Africa* (Diawara 1998), and the subsequent film based on it, Diawara imported much of his counter-ethnographic critique into crafting a cross-cultural mode of narration that entwines the discourse of the Sartrean "situation" and a critique of male African-American autobiography with a personal quest-story of his return to Africa in search of his childhood friend Sidimé Laye. Innovatively autoethnographic, the narrative embeds the question of what an African coming of age would mean in not just personal but also generational, historical, cultural, and political contexts, and applied those vectors to imagining a pan-African subjectivity at their intersection. Diawara, by this time a professor at a prestigious university, narrates a tale of his generation—the first post-Independence Malian youth—through a sophisticated comparative lens. The memoir is at once a journey tale, an autoethnography of pre- and post-colonial West Africa, a manifesto to rethink modernity through a lens critical of the abuses of colonialism and racism, and a theoretical statement interrogating identity politics as practiced in the US. Diawara employed the terms of his own life narrative to carve out a mobile, questioning stance for situating a postcolonial pan-African subject outside the familiar binary of universalism and particularism. While I cannot here expand on this intriguing memoir-cinematic project, it is a crucial step in Diawara's evolution as a filmmaker.

Rather, I turn to his most recent film, *An Opera of the World* (henceforth called *Opera*), first shown at Documenta 14, which both develops a method and is "strategic rumination" in the form of a film essay about the plight of African and Middle Eastern migrants and modes of their cultural representation. While attempts by refugees to cross the seas from such perilous locations as Libya are numerous and persistent, the dangers are real. For example, in summer 2019, migration scholar Eleanor Paynter notes that "While arrival numbers have decreased, the rate of death remains high: currently, [more than one in ten] ([https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?migrant\\_route%5B%5D=1376](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/region/mediterranean?migrant_route%5B%5D=1376)) migrants attempting the crossing (from Libya to Italy) dies." (Paynter 2019). The recent work of artists such as Ai Weiwei, with his installations of life jackets and clothing, and filmmakers such as Gianfranco Rosi, in *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*, 2016) and Moussa Touré in *The Boat* (*La Pirogue*, 2013), have eloquently documented how precarious the status of African and Middle Eastern refugees is. *Opera* finds innovative ways through multiple media to embed their predicament as both a moment in ongoing historical struggles of exodus and relocation and a cultural voicing of distress from characters who speak for the migrants.

Several critics have observed that *Opera* is composed as a pastiche of many short segments interweaving locations and modes of discourse across the Africa-Europe oceanic divide, tracing the paths migrants themselves take. Typical of his films, *Opera* juxtaposes several kinds of visual images—from films, newsreels, photographs, and graphics—with discursive commentary drawn from interviews, performances, and Diawara's own autobiographical musings in voiceovers. These overlays create a complex, textured presentation of the immigration crisis that challenges the casual and stereotypic ways in which migrants have been represented—at times as an anonymous mass; as vulnerable victims without agency; or as lazy or menacing young men—none of which characterize the boat people in *Opera*. But by drawing on a counter-ethnographic method of setting several discourses and styles of popular imagery against one another, his film "tests" the validity of such stereotypes and elicits multiple views of migration.

*Opera* centers on the 2008 performance in Bamako, Mali, of *Bintou Were, a Sahel Opera* (2007) based on traditional Griot and oral song forms of West Africa, that was initially envisioned and funded by Prince Claus of the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently presented in Paris and other European cities, it is a powerful and moving enactment of the dilemma of poor people, called "plebeians" by Diawara, who seek to escape the violence of war and desperate poverty in many countries of the global South by migrating to European shores.<sup>8</sup> In the short segments of it that Diawara presents, *Opera*'s central confrontation is between a young woman, Bintou Were,

7. *Opera* was developed by Zé Manel Fortes, with libretto by Chadian playwright Koulsy Lamko.

8. Diawara's film notes observe: "[The opera] depicts 'young people in a village with no job prospects, drought, a failing harvest and a human smuggler who offers them the dream of a better life across the barbed wire that marks the border of North Africa and the Spanish enclave of Melilla' (from the libretto by Koulsy Lamko)." His original intention in the film was "to remake this work ... [and] freely interpret the themes in my film."





Figure 2. *An Opera of the World*. Shot of Diawara standing on cliff — Manthia Diawara – Courtesy of Third World Newsreel

a spokesperson for the group of migrants who is pregnant after being raped, and the smuggler Diallo, whom she challenges after he repeatedly demands large sums of money to transport them by sea to southern Europe. Initially, the smuggler succeeds in squeezing money out of the migrants; but, as Bintou grows ever poorer and more pregnant, things come to a head. She has the baby, refuses to pay the smuggler, and persuades him to value the good of the group by helping the migrants make a successful journey. Before the idealized “happy ending” of the opera as they expect to land, when Bintou courageously sings her resistance to exploitation and Islamic patriarchy, jabs are launched by various cast members at corrupt smugglers and the inequities of the world for poor Africans who lack opportunities both at home and abroad. *Opera*, then, adapts and repurposes a Western cultural form by incorporating African songs and scenes into its plea to understand the dilemma of migrants from the Sahel and elsewhere and to rediscover the shared values of humanitarian community.

In his film notes, Diawara discusses his intention: “I attempt to create the effect of a creolised opera about our contemporary human condition by selecting and re-editing sequences and scenes from the Sahel opera, with images of long lines of refugees, and arias from Western operas and traditional African songs, which may remind the spectator of biblical and other recounted exoduses.” Central to his textured rumination on migrancy, he observes, is Édouard Glissant’s concept of “Chaos-Opera” which Diawara glosses as “an encounter between words, music and dance” that seeks to “make sense” of human migrations that give birth to new cultures by breaking down boundaries across time and space (film notes, 1). For Glissant, the notion of chaos is redefined as that which “opens onto a new phenomenon: Relation, or totality in evolution, whose order is continually in flux and whose disorder one can imagine forever” (Glissant 1997:133). Chaos-opera thus becomes a way of making connections among human migrations by refusing traditional hierarchies and histories; the opera, both as conceived and in Diawara’s version, is a product of migration and hybridization. One of his goals, Diawara states, is “to build a meeting point between the genre of opera and the medium of film and see what new meanings emerge out of that porosity of borders, transgression of frontiers between Africa and the rest of the world. I wanted to ask if film can be the new opera medium par excellence: because of the easy access the masses have to it, and because it is the perfect vessel for carrying several contradictory emotions at the same time” (film note, 2). He asserts that his combination in *Opera* of the “classical” mode of opera, usually

performed in “sacred” spaces, and the “profane” mode of film aims to put the outsized emotions of opera on the screen and fuse sacred and popular songs with images from Africa, Europe, and Asia in ways that both level and invert the Western hierarchy of forms.

For Diawara, *Opera* is an occasion both to depict the travails of a particular group of African migrants in a flimsy pirogue, vexed by religious oppression as much as smugglers, and to situate the production in multiple contexts that comment, in Brechtian fashion, on its representational strategies. The interspersed newsreel and archival footage, blended with his voiceover commentaries, juxtapose efforts by recent migrants to land on Greek and Italian shores to the struggles of other groups, such as European Jewish refugees fleeing persecution at the outbreak of World War II (who appealed in vain for shelter at various European and American ports), and Syrian migrants who confront walls built that effectively foreclose asylum for them.<sup>9</sup>

Similar to his technique in *Rouch*, in *Opera* Diawara mixes several kinds of cultural artifacts. His footage from various archives on asylum seekers is juxtaposed to interviews with experts, whom he calls “prompters,” discussing the importance of migrations throughout history for creating dynamic new cultures. Intriguingly, he has suggested that these figures in his film are not exactly informants but “characters” in his rumination about the plight of migrants.<sup>10</sup> Yet they speak as “real” characters of several sorts. 1) There is a roundtable with opera and film directors and critics, notably the renowned German director Alexander Kluge, whose films and essays in recent decades have focused on the phenomenon of opera and its stories, and cultural critic Richard Sennett. They explore opera as “a fixed form with mobile elements” and discuss issues in filming it for a mass audience (Flaherty Seminar). 2) A panel of experts, some of them expatriate Africans in France and including journalist and activist for refugees, Agnès Matrahji, volunteer a spectrum of opinions on how best to respond to the plight of asylum seekers. 3) These points of view are juxtaposed to interview segments with Senegalese-French novelist Fatou Diome and French cultural critic Nicole Lapierre on the long, not always comparable, histories of migration in both African and European contexts and the current struggles of migrants in the West. From these varied perspectives *Opera* weaves a polyphony of voices that resonates as a kind of spoken opera.

As a rich set of contexts for reflecting multidiscursively on the challenging situation of migrants, *Opera*'s juxtapositions are contrasted to yet another perspective, the meta-situation of its director-narrator Diawara. In his recurring montage of images and texts, Diawara positions himself as ethnically identified with the Africans in the *Bintou Were* opera and humbly seeking advice from experts who offer frameworks for his project. In his remarks after the film screening, he noted that, although he now enjoys considerable privilege, on first arriving in New York as a student he worked as a restaurant dishwasher. Repeatedly, the film cuts to the figure of a man, clearly Diawara himself, in a newsboy cap and loose shirt, standing on a cliff over an expanse of water on the shores of Greece, a gesture to the ongoing migrations. (Surely his dress is a tribute to Ousmane Sembene, the world-renowned Senegalese filmmaker and novelist, who often wore—and was photographed in—a fisherman's cap and jeans jacket over his caftan, referencing his early experience as a dockworker.<sup>11</sup>) This space of transit separating departure from arrival surrounds the solitary figure looking out, his back to the viewer, with no boat or visible rescue in sight.

For me, this recurrent shot of Diawara, positioned as a lone figure in a liminal site, is the film's most compelling—and autobiographical—one. His location is “in-between” the various seas that separate the global South of Africa and the Middle East from the shores that migrants seek to reach in southern Italy, Greece, Spain, or, more broadly, the United States and Australia. That liminal space is a site of fluid transit for potential arrivals—and departures—but also a vast, life-threatening abyss. Here, director and voiceover narrator in *Opera* merge. Diawara is not just a disembodied voice but a ruminative character in movement throughout the film, both the maker of *Opera* and an actor who has personally migrated and experienced the constraints of being elsewhere. Because of his autobiographical position, his reflective eye is also an embodied “I,” as they jointly explore the terms and stakes of being situated between cultural worlds.

9. The Flaherty seminar notes observe that “Diawara recalls being connected with an editor while in Athens and how this editor was able to put emotion in the film” by including footage of Syrian migrants attempting to find safe passage by land and sea. He sought to use the opera and the film as a “pretext” and ... “was thinking about walls” throughout the making of the film.

10. Comment by Manthia Diawara during his talk after the screening of *Opera* for the African Literature Association conference session on the film at the Renaissance Hotel, Columbus Ohio, May 18, 2019.

11. See, for example, the images in the biopic *SEMBENE!*

That is, in contrast to other prominent African scholar-artists active in the US and Europe, such as the prolific writer Alain Mabanckou, who focuses on the experience of contemporary Africans and the African diaspora in France, and Achille Mbembe, who situates "Africa" as a Western discursive projection for enacting necropolitics, Diawara is not primarily tied to a western-centered framework and model of critical theory. Rather, by shrewdly grounding his films and written memoirs in an autobiographical discourse of confessional modesty, he filters his arguments through a "politics of the personal." Its effect is to situate his critique not only within his own cultural and visual experience but also that of the larger ethnos or social mix of diasporic Africans, one subset of migrants in our times. Engaging Diawara's films and memoirs autoethnographically as colloquies or conversations spanning oceans and locations becomes a way to acknowledge the breadth and generosity of his work.

Clearly, *Opera* also goes beyond autoethnographic film in its ambition to develop a textured cinematic visual-vocal form that can interweave multiple voices, media, and archival sources with personal rumination. Its address to viewers on a situation of crisis persuades them to move, in the comfort of their chairs, from stereotypical views of "them" to active engagement in re-envisioning and revising the projects of nation states, in this remix and expansion of the limits of cultural genres. In moving viewers not just to empathy but to the kind of liminal identification he embodies, Diawara undercuts the binaries that structure ethnographic interviewing in favor of a multi-sited, multimodal dialogue on the shifting contours of our world.

#### 4 Conclusion: A New Model of Counter-ethnographic Film

The dialogical set-up of *Opera*, with its cross-cutting among myriad kinds of footage and multi-voiced dialogic commentary, situates its interrogation of the treatment of asylum seekers now and throughout the past century as a contrapuntal response to conventional reportage. It frames this moment of "crisis" by developing a complex cinematic mode that uses modes of cultural performance to question ethnographic frameworks which continue to situate migrants as exotic, primitive "others." Indeed, the relationship of Diawara's counter-ethnographic practice to his own autobiographical location at multiple in-betweens is central to his films. The resonances of his voice, both in extensive voiceovers as narrator and in the creation of his persona as an embodied character, position him not only as a reflective observer questioning received certainties but as an interpreter proposing alternative ways to configure the history and relations of global South and global North.

Thus, acknowledging Diawara's position as both the maker and the subject of his films complicates a simple model of autoethnographic film as a collective social story by also countering the terms of ethnography; his projects might best be thought of as counter-ethnographic. Within *Rouch* he presented himself as a young seeker in Paris who has gained access to the master filmmaker of controversial ethnographic documentaries on cultural rituals; if Rouch, in his film, is the quintessential filmmaker-investigator of Africans, Diawara is a tentative investigator-expatriate whose attempt to turn the tables is in tension with his admiration for and indebtedness to the path-breaking work in subjective documentary of the master. Twenty-three years later in *Opera*, his position has crystallized as a memoirist and filmmaker who has carved out a role not only in West African diasporic cultural production but as an international cultural theorist. He is not a "spokesman" but neither is he in any conventional sense a "migrant," and he acknowledges his privilege as a cosmopolitan conversant with both African cultural forms and the Euro-American world of opera, film, literature, and critique. He is in every sense an "in-between" subject. Diawara's refusal of the cultural binarism of some postcolonial discourse—of global North and South, Euro-America and Africa, us and them—enables his films to put multiple vectors into play and probe received certainties. By interrogating how cinematic representation can both display and critique the perpetuation of policies that deny the plight of immigrants and asylum seekers, and the visual images and aural discourses that inform them, Diawara crafts a model of dialectical, counter-ethnographic film that is enlightening for our times.

#### 5 Note

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer whose astute and instructive observations led me to expand the critical framework of this essay by suggesting how Diawara might be situated with respect to other prominent

African-born scholars and artists now teaching in American or French universities. There is assuredly more to be said on this point. And I appreciate the careful reading on issues of migration given my draft by Eleanor Paynter.

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