



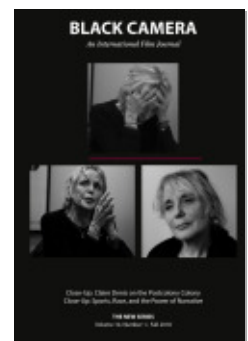
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Postcolony's Colonial Registers in Claire Denis's *Chocolat*
and *White Material*

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Close-Up: On the Colony's Postcolony Encounter in Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and *White Material*

Postcolony's Colonial Registers in Claire Denis's
Chocolat and *White Material*

Michael T. Martin with Eileen Julien¹

The cinema should be human and be part of people's lives; it should focus on ordinary existences in sometimes extraordinary situations and places. That is what really motivates me.

—CLAIRE DENIS, 2010



Figure 1. Claire Denis, Jon Vickers (left), and Michael Martin (center). Courtesy of the BFC/A.

*Much has been written that I hope not to reiterate in the conversation that follows with Ms. Claire Denis, auteur filmmaker of extraordinary insight on all manner of lived experience of the postcolonial subject [fig. 1]. Less considered by audiences and critics alike is the correspondence between *Chocolat* (1988) and *White Material* (2009). Such*

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correspondence occurs to me, not because they share a relational temporality of place and circumstance, or even the autobiographical, which Denis has denied. Instead, this correspondence is because the films foreground a relationship and shared encounter in the intersection, specificities, and determinations between two historical formations,² and the central characters are emblematic of archetypes, however nuanced and differentiated, by that encounter.

Michael T. Martin: *Ms. Denis, I would like to begin this conversation with several questions that will help our readers and me to understand your POV.*

Claire Denis: May I say one thing about what was written about me? I never read Internet responses about my films. I think there is something strange about reading things that describe my work. Whether I agree or disagree with the views expressed, I think it's a confusing process. I think it's better to go through life interested in what's coming next. What has done in my own past can't be undone. I think it's a morbid way of living. So, today, tomorrow, next week, I will be back in the editing room. I already shudder to think of all that lies ahead, but that's what matters to me. What happened before is past and gone, not because I'm a philosophical person, but because I'm a fragile person. I hate to look back. Except for history. I like history and other peoples' past. But to look back on my steps, no. This is not a matter of being humble or too proud—it's really a fear.

MTM: *Most of us carry baggage. In my own case, baggage that I can't unload.*

CD: This is serious—but unloading what you carry inside is different from turning back, which is unhelpful; it's loading on more. I don't think of it as baggage, in the sense that it's heavy. It's in me and I don't give it a second thought.

MTM: *It's there.*

CD: It's there forever. And it's not something I carry like a badge of honor, or pain, or an emotion.

MTM: *It's a fact.*

CD: Yes! Maybe to consider the future is a sort of flight, running away from myself, but at least it's alive, it's a direction, it's what I think of when I go to bed and what will await me the next day.

Eileen Julien: *Speaking of the future, this brings to mind, France, who years later as an adult, returns in *Chocolat* to Africa. Is she looking back or forward? Is her need to push herself into the next phase of her life or to reconsider and recover the past?*

CD: When France returns it is partly a flashback of my own experience to a place I've lived or am discovering, it's a Proustian experience: the smell of the earth, a man, the perfume of a woman, food, its taste, the sensation the rainy season evokes in me—things like that create emotions. In spite of this, it was never my intention to go back to a place to reconsider my past in this film. In fact, I would never have done what France does in *Chocolat*. While I was shooting in Cameroon, where I spent part of my childhood, I was surprised that people there still knew my parents. I remember the houses from my childhood, some that we lived in were still there even in Yaoundé. Many other houses were demolished, but there remained this tiny one with two mango trees, and I thought, "Oh my God! Why is it still preserved?" It was as if the house was expecting me to return.

MTM: *It was waiting for you.*

CD: That was a terrifying experience and it happened in Djibouti, too; houses there were waiting for me, although I was not looking for them.

MTM: *Later, we are going to revisit the importance of returning to the place(s) of our childhood. But as a clearing exercise, let's move quickly through several questions for background and context that will frame the discussion of Chocolat and White Material.*

CD: I will do my best.

MTM: *While your films record human experience and encounters between people, they rarely, if ever, interpret them. What is the purpose of this mode of storytelling?*

CD: This mode of storytelling is not a strategy. It came to me as soon as I started writing scripts. I was always interested in artists, writers, poets, and filmmakers who did not show [their] psychological biases. [William] Faulkner's approach to writing became a model for experiencing tragedy and destiny without imposing judgment. The characters in his novels decide whether they are guilty or not—and not the writer. To this day, Faulkner is my companion.

MTM: *Bodily gestures resonate, as well as illuminate the narratives of your films. Why the emphasis on the visual and unspoken, the carnal, aural and sensual? Is this emphasis a matter of aesthetic choice or does it avail certain interior registers that would otherwise be lost in the spoken or written text?*

CD: The problem with the written text, dialogue and the spoken word is that they have a sort of tenor that casts a strange light on a situation. Certain directors can write dialogue so that it displaces what the image is showing. I'm able to transmit something that can be said with the least amount of



Figure 2. Visual language. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

words possible. When I listen to the great dialogues of sharp writers, it feels as though they are shining a new light on the situation, almost like the effect evoked by subtitles, and I can immediately understand what is going on.

MTM: *Visually* [fig. 2]?

CD: To simply utter words is boring to me.

MTM: *Your films involve encounters in the metropole—Europe [France] and in the “periphery,” for the most part in Africa—and are marked by racial, gendered and transnational registers. Are distinctions between the two locations blurred, as the postcolonial subject migrates to and from each site?*

CD: Yes, of course. It took years for French people to recognize and acknowledge that the *banlieues* (the suburbs) were slowly becoming ghettos. The profound ignorance of the situation—the French made it seem as if being French and open to “liberty, fraternity, and equality,” would prevent us from being blind to problems that were slowly aggregating in and around France’s cities.

MTM: *Eileen teaches a course on Black Paris here at Indiana University.*

EJ: I was actually thinking of it as you asked the question. I teach a course on the nineteenth century when Afro-Creoles from Louisiana fled racism and headed to France which claimed to be a country of liberty, possibility,

and opportunity for African Americans. What followed later was the exodus of writers and artists, Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Claude McKay, and many black musicians who migrated to Paris. More recently, in a very interesting article, "But I Ain't African, I'm American," the author asserts that the African American presence enabled the French racism towards people coming from former French colonies.³ So, it isn't so much a question of the suburbs as being a peripheral space because this phenomenon happened more recently with youth arriving, for example, from Algeria, Mali and Senegal.

CD: And from Nigeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The suburbs were built after the Second World War and seemed like ideal places to raise children, as they had schools and gardens nearby, and the first supermarkets were located there. During my parents' generation, I believe it was better to live there in the fresh air—to be a suburbanite—and work in Paris. Little by little, the suburban space became less desirable and limiting. Would people stay or move to a better place? The subways did not extend to those areas and they became remote, and the people who could afford it, left. The people who remained could not afford to leave, or who were obliged to stay because they worked at the nearby factories. In the end, while it was not intentional or by design, it happened. The Paris Noir that Eileen refers to was a mix of Caribbean and African immigrants from the former colonies. Many of those immigrants from the Caribbean have a superiority complex because they have French passports and this has created a very strong tension between the two groups during the 1960s.

EJ: Yes, it's a part of the tension between those who are technically French citizens and the Africans who are from the former colonies, but not citizens.

MTM: *We'll come back to that in a moment. I read somewhere that you said, and I quote here, you "are a daughter of Africa." What claims does this distinction privilege you to make?*

CD: Often, I was told that I was *une fille d'Afrique* ["a daughter of Africa"], *La camerounaise* ["The Cameroonian woman"], and I always refused those titles. I knew, even when I started walking, that I was French and never romanticized the idea. My parents were young and modern. They never told me I was "a daughter of Africa." Maybe that's why I felt privileged, owing something for that kind of luck and opportunity to be raised in Africa instead of France; and why I could be more open. For example, I grew up in mostly Muslim countries and my father was Catholic. We lived in small places with no churches, so my friends were of other religions.

MTM: *Are you no less displaced as the protagonists are in your films?*

CD: I felt displaced as a child, but it was sort of a family tradition. My father was born in Bangkok to French parents. At nineteen, my grandfather escaped from the trenches of WWI. Later, an alcoholic, he started a business in Bangkok while my grandmother was born in Istanbul by her mother who had run away.

MTM: *Speaking of diasporas!*

CD: Yes! And when my French grandmother passed away, my mother was raised by her father who was a French speaking Brazilian from Belém.⁴

MTM: *Whom you adored and who was terribly handsome.*

CD: Yes, but all of my Brazilian relatives are adorable and terribly handsome! They were displaced, but not in a sad or tragic way. While my friends vacationed at their grandmothers' homes or wherever, my father drove his car for us to see France, since we had no belongings or family home. This was our family's story and I had a certain pride about that. I remember my parents as young people who were happy to have no possessions and happy to be traveling all the time. They were not bourgeois.

MTM: *They were nomadic.*

CD: I wouldn't characterize them as nomadic because being nomadic is to belong to a culture. They were "un-nomadic" nomads.

EJ: *They were in between places.*

CD: Yes, between spaces. I've encountered real nomads: Tuareg people in Djibouti. Nomads come from an old civilization that is going to disappear.⁵ But, no, my parents were not nomads.

MTM: *One other query before we turn to *Chocolat* and *White Material*. In an interview with Darren Hughes in 2009, you said of *35 Shots of Rum* (2008) that you "wanted to make it very clear to the audience that they [black protagonists] do not live like clandestines [illegals]. They have a real life, they are settled, they are French."⁶ Can one be at once black, French, and integrated in French society?*

CD: When African countries gained independence in the 1960s, there were also strong anticolonial movements in the Caribbean—under French rule; this happened in places like Guadeloupe and Martinique. In order to diffuse the conflict, privileges extended to French citizens were extended to some of these former colonies in order to stop them from demanding independence and to pressure them into remaining loyal. For example, they would

get certain privileges like jobs and housing, and extended annual vacations to return to the islands where they were born.

EJ: *But that was for the fonctionnaires [civil servants].*

CD: Yes, those who came to Paris were *fonctionnaires* or became them. Today, many Caribbean people living in France work in hospitals, the post office, as train conductors. . . . They are now the second, third generation, the first having arrived in the 60s. When they are compared to clandestine Africans, they freak out [take offense] because they don't want to be associated in that way with Africans.

This is why I chose Alex the father for the train scene in *35 Shots of Rum*. He could have been a nurse in a hospital or ambulance driver, or a postal worker and head of a department. But train conducting has always been a vocation I liked because it has a sort of aristocratic attitude, you know! Conductors are always alone—all day and night. They drive alone and that is a very solitary experience. This is not a group activity. You're alone driving and responsible for a lot of people. It's an almost hypnotic experience.

MTM: *Why Cameroon for the setting of Chocolat? Why the Cameroonian band for Man No Run (1989)? And why, nearly twenty years later, revisit Cameroon in White Material?*

CD: It was not supposed to be like that. Regarding *Man No Run*, I met the band when I was on location scouting and preparing for *Chocolat*, which I shot in Cameroon because I knew from my own experience that it's one of the most beautiful places in Africa. Every landscape in Africa you can find in Cameroon. It's also a very narrow and long country, from Chad to the equator, with very different climates. There, too, are lakes and a chain of volcanoes. I said to myself, "I owe a lot to Cameroon—let's go!" Then, I met this group Les Têtes Brûlées ["Hot Heads"] when I was editing *Chocolat*.⁷ They were coming to France for their first tour abroad, so I got financing to produce a 60-minute documentary about them. It was a fantastic experience. This story has a sad ending though because the principal singer and composer, Zanzibar, committed suicide just after shooting the film.

Cameroon in *White Material* came by chance. Isabelle Huppert wanted me to adapt Doris Lessing's novel, *Grass is Singing* (1950). I told her that, while I liked the novel and admired Doris Lessing, I didn't have the nerve to adapt the story because it wasn't appropriate for southern Africa of today. The Ivory Coast came to mind because it was on the verge of civil war and

it was France's *l'enfant chéri* ("darling"). French people were there making a living from growing coffee and cacao. When the violence broke out, many left and returned to France impoverished. On television, I saw this old man on the roof of his house. He was shouting out to the French soldiers who were there in a helicopter to evacuate him. He screamed "Fuck you! I'm not going to leave! I have no other way to make a living."

MTM: Yes.

CD: In my childhood, my parents viewed the coffee plantation owners as the worst type of white people because they had no ethics and were only interested in making money. I suggested to Isabelle that we make a film that looks at a [white] woman of today who manages a coffee plantation in disrepair, who financially is not well off, and who decides to remain in the country as erupts a civil war. I selected Ghana for the shooting because it's neighbor to Ivory Coast and grows a lot of coffee and cacao.

I went to Accra with the novelist, Marie Ndiaye.⁸ In Ghana, we visited plantations because I wanted her to understand what it was like to live on a plantation. When you live on a plantation, you don't go next door to buy your bread or call for aspirin because you're far from everything; it's a hard life. We experienced that together and went back to her residence near Bordeaux to work together on the script. Later, I returned to Accra and it was there that I realized the plantations were abandoned and in a bad state and that the coffee beans grown there were ordinary—"coffee Robusta." I knew Kenya had Arabica coffee plantations because it grows in the mountains. Arabica needs cold weather in the night, hot in the day, otherwise it won't grow. I also realized that the budget for the production in Kenya was going to be problematic and, then, decided to film in Cameroon in a place west, and near Nigeria, called the Noun Valley. It's a beautiful place: volcanoes and small mountains where Arabica grows. The coffee trees first planted there by German farmers in the early twentieth-century when Cameroon was under German rule. We found two plantations that were in good shape to shoot, which explains why I selected Cameroon. I thought, "Oh my God, it's condemned."

MTM: Cameroon?

CD: Yes, but I enjoyed it very much! In the twenty years since *Chocolat*, I realized that Cameroon was a sort of paradise. But when filming *White Material*, it no longer was the paradise I had known because you have petrol, you have oil, you have everything and yet....

MTM: It's condemned?

CD: Yes.

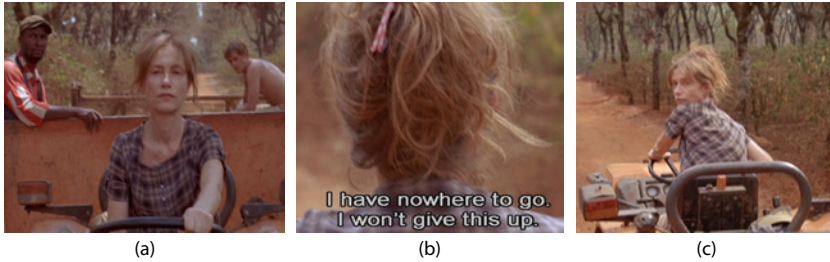


Figure 3. Maria on tractor. Screen grabs from *White Material*.



Figure 4. (a) Protée as houseboy; (b) Protée as laborer; (c) Protée as au pair. Screen grabs from *Chocolat*.

MTM: *Okay! Such backstories on the two films are very useful and I've learned something about the habitat of Arabica coffee. Let's move to Chocolat and White Material.*

CD: *Yes.*

Arguably, the films cohere along two organizing correspondences: The first is of France, as empire in Chocolat, and France, the nation in decline, less consequential in world affairs, and no longer able to maintain and defend its empire in White Material.

And the second correspondence is France, the young woman in Chocolat, returning to Africa perhaps to recover her past while Maria [Vial], who manages the plantation in White Material, determines not to lose her stake and privilege in Africa in the wake of independence and during civil war. I recall the particular scene when Maria driving the tractor in desperation utters "I have nowhere to go. I won't give this up" [fig. 3b].

MTM: *Let's unpack these correspondences beginning with Chocolat. You've said in interviews that the film "is essentially a white view of the Other." How then are we to understand your own otherness in the claim, you are "a daughter of Africa"?*



Figure 5. Aimée and Protée. Screen grabs from *Chocolat*.

CD: I did not pretend before I filmed and completed *Chocolat* that I was making an African film. When invited to African film festivals, I would decline and say, “Look, I’m French.” And, while the main character, Protée, is a servant, although not a slave, I don’t use him to represent the viewpoint of an African [figs. 4a, 4b, and 4c]. There are books [and African filmmakers] who do that authentically.

For example, there is the famous Cameroonian novel *Une vie de boy* [*House Boy*] by Ferdinand Oyono.⁹ I wanted to make clear that when I say “daughter,” I mean that by growing up in Africa I have a debt to return something to it.¹⁰ I wanted my first film to be shot in Africa because Cameroon was where I experienced the strongest impressions of my childhood. “A daughter of Africa” is either the result of a bad translation or my bad English because, it sounds like the title of a B movie, like “Daughter of Africa!” with apes jumping from tree to tree! Where I grew up, for a year I was the only white child in the school. When I was three, I didn’t have a brother or a sister and, when this Norwegian Presbyterian family arrived in Cameroon, suddenly I saw what I had never seen in my life, six blonde kids. It was amazing for me.

MTM: *As an adult, France returns to Africa, presumably to recover and make sense of her childhood. One reading of the scene near the end of Chocolat, when she encounters [William] Parker and invites him for a drink is that of seduction. Is France, unfettered by circumstance and taboos, now able to assert her own sexuality and desire (unlike her mother whose transgressive sexual pursuit of Protée, who stirred but rejected her advances during France’s childhood [fig. 5])? Is there a distinction here that transracial, sexual encounters pivot on something more than societal norms under conditions of postcoloniality?*

CD: Although it was confusing to me in childhood, I understood that it was not easy to be a white woman married to a black man like Marie Ndiaye’s parents were. In French, they called these couples by a very bad word, *les dominoes* [“dominos”]. Of course, for white men this was never a problem, they could have affairs with black women with impunity. But I grew up as a woman who believed that I could have sex with someone I liked. When I was a child, if a white woman was in a relationship with a black man, it was



Figure 6. Protée humiliated and anguished. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

daring. You had to face glaring eyes, but it was not dangerous as it would have been in places like South Africa or Mississippi.

EJ: *As a child, could France have known of these things and did she know that her mother reached out to Protée, or is there some omniscient camera revealing history that she herself doesn't have full access to?*

CD: When we were writing the script, I decided with Jean-Pol [Jean-Pol Fargeau, co-producer] that the child was like a gimmick in order to create flashbacks. I never intended the film to be from the point of view of the child. The main character was Protée, his suffering and humiliation [fig. 6]. The child was there, and to a certain extent, complicit. In my own life, even as a child with Cameroonian friends, I knew, without having anyone explain it to me, that I was a little French girl. When independence came, my father was working in Cameroon or Mali, but my origin [nationality] was always French. There was no way to deny that and I always thought we were somehow guilty. My father manifested guilt in hyperactivity—he could speak seven languages and was a perfectionist, and wanted us to be able to be close to the culture in which we were living in, but it doesn't . . .

MTM: *Work that way?*

CD: No, it does. When I came back to Cameroon to film *Chocolat*, the Minister of Culture opened the door and gave me permission to shoot in a



Figure 7. Aimée distraught. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

certain place. A big Fulbe¹¹ guy approached me and said “I’ve been waiting three hours in the corridor” and then took me in his arms and asked “How is Papa?” I looked at him—he was my age—and said “Papa’s doing well!” He replied by asking, “Is Papa going to come?” and I said, “Yes.” Later I asked him why he called my father “Papa”? He told me that my father had written his name on the birth registry, so that made him his father too. So, in a way my father succeeded, but he could not completely make a gentle world from a situation that is so unfair.

EJ: *What’s striking in the film is that Marc, the colonial governor [and France’s father], appears far more comfortable in this setting than the mother, Aimée, who is profoundly disturbed by it. She has much more difficulty negotiating the racial dynamics, her own anxiety and anger about where she is, while she seems to comprehend the complexity of the situation, which is manifest by her body language, face, and what she herself does [fig. 7].*

CD: Of course. And the difference between them is gender [fig. 8]. I’m thinking of Doris Lessing’s novel, the *Grass is Singing*.¹² The mother is the one who breaks down. Women stayed home in the domestic world and experienced the ambiguity of their situation and of being the “Madame la maîtresse.” My mother grew up having to do her chores, cooking and washing her own clothes. Suddenly, at twenty-three, she had to learn how be served and accept that someone else did the washing and cooking—and gardening



Figure 8. Aimée, France, Marc, and the governor. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

and ironing. She freaked out, you know. Even to this day, my mother, who is still alive, would tell amazing stories of being free and not having to conform to any role in the French occupation [of Africa]. It's hard to be free of that because women are represented as suffering in such circumstances like that.

MTM: *Let's return to Parker, who in the literature about *Chocolat*, is curiously and conspicuously absent, save the two decisive interventions he makes near the close of the film. The first occurs when he—an African American himself—reminds France that he, like her, is an intruder displaced, and displacing, which begs the question by what measure, does one belong to a community [fig. 9]?*

CD: Maybe he's not an intruder!

MTM: *But Parker's presence signals that he is an outsider and marginalized. Recall when he says to France "Brother here [Africa], brother there [US]. Yeah. I really stayed an American. They [Africans] don't give a shit about guys like me here. Here I'm nothing."*

CD: Yes, even his skin color . . .

MTM: *Doesn't appear to matter to the Africans that he's black—African American.*

CD: But isn't that the story of Liberia. I'm an avid reader of Chester Himes. I remember one of his most humorous books features a story where this guy is raising money to send black New Yorkers to Africa. But it's a fraud, it's a joke. When I was in Senegal, you always recognized the American tourists at the airport.



Figure 9. Parker in car with France. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

MTM: *Immediately.*

CD: Immediately, all the Senegalese guys who were carrying their luggage, greeted them with “Brother and sister,” and of course it didn’t work.

MTM: *That’s the case traveling all over the world.*

CD: I think the big difference between them is that when France returns, she’s like a sentimental tourist who expects nothing. The character of Parker is from a real person who, after serving in the Vietnam War, moved to Europe before going to Senegal where he married a Senegalese woman. He had expected to gain his second wind in life by moving to Africa, instead of returning to America. When *Chocolat* was released, I spoke about the guy that Parker’s character is based on. He was featured on *60 Minutes* and had considered returning to his family in Virginia but instead move to Switzerland. I think he was afraid to return to America.

MTM: *In Parker, are you saying that race—same race—is illusory and no guarantor of belonging?*

CD: No, but history can create very distinct situations and diasporas for black people. There were maroons in Suriname, in Guyana, in Jamaica. There are African Americans from the south living in the northern part of the United States. I mean there are different and varied ways to be black and the funny thing is that, genetically speaking, there is no one race, which has been the case for a long time.

MTM: *And by calling attention to Parker's race are you suggesting that gender, religion, and nationality are also problematic?*

CD: I don't know. I remember once I was in New Orleans doing location scouting for Jim Jarmusch's movie *Down by Law* [1986]. I was driving a car, looking at streets, taking still photographs. I parked my car and realized I was alone on the street. It was morning and suddenly these black guys came out of a bar and asked "Do you know where you are?" I said "Yes, the Ninth Ward." They asked "Don't you have prejudices?" I freaked out because "prejudice" has a different meaning in French than English—meaning that you have already decided you are against something either you like it or not. In America, "prejudice" is a situation, a racial situation or point of view. But I was not aware of that, so I repeated "Prejudices? Of course not!" Couldn't I be there just to take photographs? And they said "Go on, go!" with a certain brutality. It took me a day or two to understand what had happened.

MTM: *You didn't have a clue.*

CD: No! If they had asked me "Are you a racist?" or "Are you crazy," then I would have understood.

EJ: *Because that is exactly what they meant, "Aren't you racist? You're afraid of us, aren't you? Don't you know it's dangerous?"*

CD: Yes, but they said "prejudice." If they had asked, "are you afraid of us?" I would have said either "Yes, I'm terribly afraid," or "No. Why should I be afraid?"

MTM: *Eileen's a native of New Orleans. What's your take on Claire's encounter?*

EJ: I understand exactly what you're saying about the different meanings of the term "prejudice" in French and English. While you should not have been in the Ninth Ward—widely considered a dangerous place to be—those guys assumed that any white woman would be prejudiced. At that time in the morning, they were amazed that you so blithely were roaming the streets in what is a dangerous neighborhood that no [American] white woman would be in alone. Senegalese filmmaker, Jo Gai Ramaka, and I held a film festival for years [post-Hurricane Katrina] in the Ninth Ward. We did it to draw people from the rest of the city there, but hardly ever people came. Most people are afraid of the Ninth Ward.

CD: But I had no knowledge of that, so I was not afraid at all. For me, now hearing the word "prejudice" was like a curtain opening to reveal a new meaning. Suddenly, I understood what I had read in books. At the hotel where we were staying during the shoot, a black hotel worker invited me to celebrate Christmas with her family. The invitation was nice, but you



Figure 10. Parker reads France's hands. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

can invite someone, have a relationship and tap into something that you had no idea of. I became more sophisticated in a way after that experience, which brings me to reflect on when I was working there in New Orleans with Jarmusch. We were filming inside a prison and I remember this policeman who warned me not to have eye contact with the convicts. I told him “Do you think I’m going to look at the prisoners, guys who were sentenced to twenty-years?” Do you think I’m going to look at them?” The only way to respect a convict is not to glare at him. I then also realized that every single man in that penitentiary was black.

EJ: Yes.

MTM: *Okay! Let’s move to the second intervention that, I think is as important as Parker’s estrangement and marginality in Africa. The scene occurs when in Douala, Parker reads France’s palm and says, “Your palm is strange. Can’t see anything. No past, no future.” As he is about to leave, he warns France, “Leave quickly before they eat you up. Bye [fig. 10].” Seemingly uncertain about the motive(s) for return to the places of her childhood, if France is unable to connect with her past, what then her future?*

CD: Parker was speaking about people I’ve met in Africa who believe that if they go to Africa, buy a place there, love African children, love the African landscape, love everything about Africa, then they will understand Africa. When Parker says “Leave quickly before they eat you up,” what he is really saying is “before they make you this kind of white woman.”

MTM: *As in a variant of white material?*



Figure 11. France as an adult. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

CD: Yes, white material. This is the kind of woman you would meet in Africa that believes she is needed because of her kind heart. I could puke when I hear that; it's offensive to believe that your presence can help. For what? Are you a doctor? Are you a dam builder? No, you're a French woman, or a French-Dutch woman, or a Dutch woman who has nothing else to do but pity Africa [fig. 11].

EJ: *And Parker himself is ambivalent about France when he says, "Oh, tourist, huh!" because she takes the bus rather than the taxi, he infers that she wants to "go native." Later, he seems protective, but he harbors a certain mistrust of the Africans who refer to him as "Brother" yet "don't give a shit about guys like me here." So, while he is disparaging of Africans, he seems ambivalent about France, but wanting to protect her.*

CD: Yes, but it's not contempt or scorn. Parker was shocked and surprised that he wasn't welcomed in Africa. But the actual person he portrays was a guide for black American tourists and was terribly offended because there were no other jobs possible for him to do. He wanted to become Senegalese. He wanted the Senegalese passport. His son was Senegalese.

MTM: *The concluding scene in Chocolat is also revealing of this ambiguity in identity and place. In the background, a plane lifts off the runway, while in the foreground three baggage attendants converse as it begins to rain [fig. 12]. What's suggested in this scene, an unchanging landscape where white privilege is signified that will later become problematical in White Material? What are we to infer when*



Figure 12. (a) France in airport; (b) Three attendants in airport. Screen grabs from *Chocolat*.

France departs for Europe and Parker stays, each of them marked by nationality, race and gender?

CD: At the time, I was unclear on how to depict the closing scene. Abdullah Ibrahim, who composed the soundtrack, wanted to play music from the [African] marketplace in a minor key, but I said, “No. Please play it in a major key” because I wanted the film to end in celebration with the coming of the rainy season.

EJ: Yes, in Africa, when the rain comes, it’s a celebration.

MTM: *And life goes on, as if France never existed?*

CD: As for the baggage attendants, who cares about France’s past?! They don’t make a lot of money, but I was amazed by the youth and the feeling of energy that was Cameroon. When I returned twenty years later, however, to shoot *White Material*, I was depressed by the government’s mismanagement of the country. They betrayed Cameroon.

MTM: *Let’s transition to White Material in consideration of the seemingly apocalyptic concluding scene, which suggests I think an affinity with the biblical. Is Maria’s determination to save the crop and failing plantation a metaphor for saving herself [fig. 13]?*

CD: Yes, maybe. I think Maria believes that by resisting it will resolve the difficulties prompted by the civil war. She’s not blind to the changes around her and in the country. And to further dramatize the apocalyptic ending, I wanted the entire plantation to literally explode, but the owner objected, so we didn’t do it.

MTM: *We’re going to get back to that. The scene where the boy soldier casually says to the “Boxer” while referring to the [fluid] lighter as “It’s just white material”*



Figure 13. Maria. Screen grab from *White Material*.



Figure 14. Boxer with child soldiers. Screen grab from *White Material*.

was a powerful way of signifying and branding all things “white” [fig. 14]. Its also a way to frame and simplify the world in counterpoint, creating order in the fluidity of postcoloniality and chaos of the civil war; arguably, to differentiate enemy from ally in the designation “white material.” Its deployment in the narrative and title of the film, there too is an inverse correspondence between with Chocolat which draws attention to the colonial period when black Africans were identified by no less reductive and derogatory designation of “boy” or “nigger.”

CD: Yes. It was also because, as a kid, I knew the power of slang, particularly when referring to white people in pidgin English. In *White Material*, I thought that while only a lighter, it also is an analog for the furniture in the house and the armchair the kid is sitting on. Everything they find when they break into the house is or is made of “white material.” The bathroom and the clothes are things they don’t really need. They need and want guns, maybe a little necklace for the girl, and food of course.



Figure 15. Child soldiers. Screen grabs from *White Material*.



Figure 16. Protée in repressed rage burning hand. Screen grab from *Chocolat*.

MTM: Yes.

CD: The depiction of child soldiers as the cause of violence and the commonplace idea that violence is inherently African are disgusting to me. I could have made the film without children, but I told Marie [Ndiaye] that I wanted the story to be of children living in the forest alone and, while they have Kalashnikov rifles, they are children [fig. 15].

MTM: Another correspondence is the depiction of the black male body in both films. In *Chocolat*, Protée embodies physicality, virility, strength, as well as agency to parse pleasure and dispense pain on others and himself (i.e., when he deliberately burns his hand [fig. 16]).

Such that in the colonial setting violence is repressed and internalized, yet not entirely absent between colonizer and colonized, when reference is made to a houseboy who murdered his master and in the scene when Protée physically resists the [white]guest who pretends to comport as “native” while appropriating the outdoor bathhouse where he is showering [fig. 17].¹³



Figure 17. (a) Protée showers; (b) Protée confronts the “native” white guest. Screen grabs from *Chocolat*.

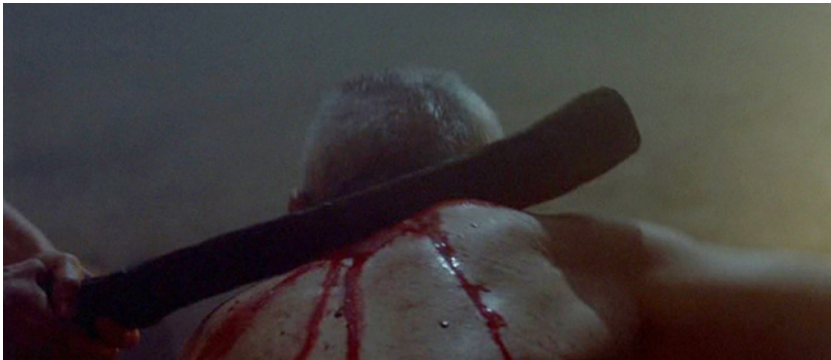


Figure 18. Maria murders her father-in-law. Screen grab from *White Material*.

MTM: *On the other hand, in White Material, the black male body is unrestrained unlike in the colonial period. It can strike violently when provoked or offer solace and protection. It can labor by choice and engage in intimate relations with whites, particularly white female bodies as arguably suggested by the implied sexual liaison between Cherif and Maria.*

That is under conditions of postcoloniality, the black body can seek and obtain pleasure where it was once denied and punished. More importantly, in the new order of power relationships, it can command, expunge and annihilate “white material.” For me what complicates this new dynamic and relationship in White Material is Maria’s seemingly vengeful retaliation against all manner of patriarchy embodied in the white male body that is her [ex-] husband, André, and his father. This is most evident and dramatic in the near closing scene when Maria murders André’s father [fig. 18].

What is signified by this “act”? Does the postcolonial moment enable women—white women—to challenge and transgress patriarchal prohibitions as it does for black men—the mayor, Cherif’s presumed sexual liaison with Maria? In the taking of the father-in-law’s life does it mark the moment of Maria’s liberation and transformation? In the sense that she is striking at the

very patriarchy of the colonial regime that is reproduced and sustained in and by the new order? Is it coincidental that Manuel, her son, is also killed in this moment?

CD: Yes. Her son is also dead, burned alive in the fire. So, I think she wants to destroy patriarchy. I would have loved to film Maria back in France though, as a refugee working in a supermarket, having lost everything, but I was unable to because of time and lack of financing.

MTM: *Given your earlier reference to wanting to literally torch the plantation, does it evoke the biblical in the apocalyptic closing of White Material? And are you suggesting that the postcolonial project is more destructive to the neo-colonized than the colonial was to the native?*

CD: I don't think so, but it's more complex than that. I am thinking of the [African] politicians who arose after independence—some were bright, others brilliant, but like Hamlet, something was rotten. And I think it needs another turn of the wheel.

MTM: *I hear that! You conclude the film with an homage “To Marie” and “To the fearless young rascals.”*

CD: It was nod to Marie Ndiaye; when the film was released, she won the Prix Goncourt for her novel, *Trois femmes puissantes* [*Three Strong Women*].

MTM: *And why for the “young rascals”?*

CD: Because it was important to acknowledge the child soldiers who were lost in the bush, wounded and starving. I will never accept any other portrayal of those kids, except in documentary. In fiction, I think it's horrifying to portray children as monsters. In some fiction films, they use actual child soldiers, but I did not take that approach. I worked with the children in a school who were acting.

EJ: *I'm wondering about other films and novels about Africa that you think are illuminating, beautiful?*

CD: Of course, many. I often watch *Touki Bouki* [1973], by Djibril Diop Mambéty. I first saw it when I was thirteen. It was very disturbing and many people could not understand why this talented young African filmmaker was pretending to make such a modernist film? You know, he was not recognized for what he accomplished.

MTM: *You said earlier that you wanted to film the ending of White Material differently and more dramatically. What did you have in mind?*



Figure 19. Coffee plantation burning. Screen grab from *White Material*.

CD: I wanted to show Maria's son burning, the killing of the father, his wife and other son escaping in a bus down the road. And I wanted to see the coffee trees burning.

EJ: *Would that have signaled Maria's end?*

CD: No, but it's a real ending.

EJ: *All sorts of constraints limit an artistic vision—how often is it true that financial restrictions change the sense or meaning of a film?*

CD: What was important to me was already in the film. So, instead of that climax at the end, I altered the film's shape by looping it.

MTM: *I read the burning of the plantation in the moment of crisis as renewal and possibility than stasis and closure [fig. 19].*

CD: Yes. This is probably true, philosophically speaking. But when you lose everything, your possessions, your son, it's not the phoenix that arises. This is why I wanted to film the last scene of France working in the supermarket.

MTM: *Thank you Ms. Denis.*

EJ: *Yes, thank you.*

CD: Thank you.

Notes

1. Special thanks to Indiana University colleagues Eileen Julien, Professor of French and Italian Studies for translating from French to English during the interview and Yalie

Kamara, poet and a graduate student in Creative Writing Program, for transcribing and first edits. And to Jon Vickers, founder and director of IU Cinema for organizing and hosting the Claire Denis film retrospective, as well as the Black Film Center/Archive, [then] the Department of Communication and Culture and [now] Cinema and Media Studies, Media School, and the Department of French and Italian for co-sponsoring the series and campus visit of Claire Denis. This interview with Denis occurred on 11 November 2012 on the occasion of her visit to Indiana University during which seven of her films were screened at IU Cinema in the series “Confronting the Other.”

2. In an interview with *The Guardian* in 2010, Denis asserted, “No, *White Material* is not related to *Chocolat*. There is no connection at all. They are entirely different visions of Africa and the cinema. *Chocolat* is about friendship and family, and maybe sex and longing, and *White Material* is about remaining strong in the face of danger.” See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2010/jul/04/claire-denis-white-material-interview>.

3. See C. H. Didier Gondola, “‘But I Ain’t African’: Black American Exiles and the Construction of Racial Identities in Twentieth-Century France,” in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004), 201–16.

4. Belém, the capital of the Brazilian state of Pará.

5. Tuareg are a Berber speaking ethnic group who inhabit the Sahara from Libya, Algeria, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.

6. Darren Hughes, “Dancing Reveals So Much: An Interview with Claire Denis,” *Senses of Cinema*, 50 (2009): 3.

7. Les Têtes Brulées are a famous Cameroonian pop group who gained notoriety in the 1980s for their costumes and adaptation of bikutsi, a traditional Cameroonian musical genre.

8. Marie Ndiaye, who co-wrote the script with Denis for *White Material* is a writer and playwright of French and Senegalese descent who has authored seven novels, beginning with *Quant au riche avenir* (1985). Later for *Trois femmes puissantes* (*Three Strong Women*) she won the Prix Goncourt in 2009 and was longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize for *Ladivine* in 2016.

9. Ferdinand Oyono, *House Boy* (Paris: René Julliard, 1956; English translation: Heinemann, 1966).

10. In referring to herself “a daughter of Africa, see Chris Drake, “Desire is Violence,” *Sight and Sound* 10, no. 7 (2000): 16.

11. Primarily a Muslim people, the Fulbe (aka Fula, Fulany, Fulani) reside in the Sahel and west Africa.

12. Doris Lessing, *The Grass is Singing* (1950); author’s first novel set on a farm in South Africa under colonial rule.

13. Consider Protée’s violent, yet deliberately restrained, comportment against the [white] man who intrudes upon his space as a “moment” in which the black body—the colonized and slave—almost viscerally, indeed reflexively, resists the presumption and privilege of the colonizer and master, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* [*Peau noire, masques blancs*] (New York: Grove Press, 1952).