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‘L’amour se dit dans un regard’? Immigration, visibility and representation in Marguerite Duras’s *Les Mains négatives* and Alice Diop’s *Nous*

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ABSTRACT
Marguerite Duras’s *Les Mains négatives* (1979) is a short film which interrogates the exclusion and marginalisation of immigrants in postcolonial French society by highlighting the hidden labour of Black sanitation workers in Paris. Alice Diop has described *Les Mains négatives* as ‘the entire subtext’ for her film *Nous* (2020), a documentary about people living in the suburbs of Paris. At once documents of social reality and experimental meditations on representation and filmmaking, both films examine the entanglements of viewing relations and social exclusion, and interrogate the moving image’s capacity to remedy the ‘invisibility’ of certain lives. This article brings the two films together in order to probe the ethical and political stakes of their strategies of representation, drawing on recent criticism at the intersections of postcolonial theory, and film and visual culture scholarship. This critical lens highlights the political force of the films’ experimental form. Yet bringing the two films into dialogue also allows productive frictions to emerge, exposing in particular the challenging aspects of the representation of Black subjects in *Les Mains négatives*, which stand uneasily alongside the film’s message of inclusion and recognition.

RÉSUMÉ

After the Second World War, during the period of economic growth known as les Trente Glorieuses, men and women from Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean were recruited to provide a new labour force in France (Germain 2016; Vergès 2019). By 1975, France’s Black population, most of whom lived in the Paris region, was the largest in Europe (Germain 2016, xxvi). Many came from France’s ex-colonies: newly independent or departmentalised countries and territories. Yet in this period of decolonisation, Félix F. Germain suggests that ‘Paris continued to be a colonial metropolis’ where the treatment of immigrants of colour revealed the persistence of colonial ideologies and hierarchies (2016, xix–xx). Alongside overt individual and institutional racism—the refusal of service in restaurants, exclusion from certain jobs—Germain points to the role of the racialising gaze as a vector of (post) colonial social relations. His description of the intimidating white gaze in immigrant testimony (Germain 2016, xvii) strikingly echoes Frantz Fanon’s account of racialisation as a violent visual regime, in which the Black subject is ‘sur-déterminé de l’extérieur’, ‘l’esclave de [son] apparaître’ (Fanon [1952] 2015, 93).

Fanon and Germain describe the brutal visual othering experienced by Black people in periods of colonialism and immediately following decolonisation—and Mame-Fatou Niang demonstrates that the external overdetermination of racialisation persists in the contemporary. She writes that Black people in France—citizens and non-citizens alike— are ‘appréhendés par le signe extérieur que constitue la couleur de leur peau’, via a racialising look which simultaneously empties out the specificity and multiplicity of individual identity, and constructs Blackness as a visual sign of perceived racial essence (Niang 2019, 218). Thus, she states, ‘L’expérience des Noirs en France est avant tout une histoire de perceptions, de regards et de représentations’ (Niang 2019, 218). This essentialising regime of racialised looking, Niang (2019, 218) argues, must be viewed in the context of histories of image-making and visual representation. Yet if the gaze is an instrument of racialisation, and if visual media have historically been mobilised to produce and perpetuate racist epistemologies, Niang contends that visual representations—and specifically cinema—also have the power to enact a ‘décolonisation des imaginaires’.

This article examines two films—made forty years apart—which represent Black immigrant experience in Paris, and which highlight connections between representation, visibility and inclusion: Marguerite Duras’s Les Mains négatives (1979), a short film which documents the hidden labour of Black immigrants in Paris, and Alice Diop’s Nous (2020), a documentary about often-unrepresented residents of the Parisian suburbs. These works offer different temporal perspectives on the experiences of post-war Black immigrants in France. The films also offer differing spatial perspectives: Duras highlights the non-encounter between immigrant workers and white commuters in central Paris, while Diop focuses on the peripheries of the city. At the same time, the films share key thematic
interests. Diop has spoken about the influence of Duras’s work on her own filmmaking, she refers to Les Mains négatives as a rich source of inspiration for Nous (Cardamenis 2022; Diop n.d.; Quinlan 2022). Like Les Mains négatives, Nous represents the lives of immigrants, including Ismael Soumaïla Sissoko (a Malian mechanic), and Diop’s parents, who emigrated from Senegal in the 1960s. Both Duras and Diop evoke film’s ability to capture traces of reality, to index and preserve the present. In their attentiveness to the possibilities of cinema, as well as to the political stakes of (in)visibility, the two films invite a consideration of what it means to represent those who often fall outside mainstream representation. Thus, while their narrative strategies diverge, both films are attentive to the unequal distribution of visibility, and to the ways in which people of colour in particular are marginalised and excluded via social and representational hierarchies. Duras and Diop use cinematic form to contest these regimes of visibility and inclusion, capturing invisibilised and unrepresented lives—what Diop terms in Nous the ‘petites vies’ whose ‘traces’ her cinema seeks to capture and preserve. With and alongside these visual traces, Diop and Duras also explore cinema’s potential to represent via sound, developing complex networks of association via the interactions of image and voice. Taken together, the films provide a powerful reflection on questions of representation, visibility, the gaze, and the political possibilities of experimental documentary form for contesting marginalisation—both social and representational.

Examining how issues of visibility, representation and audibility are approached in Les Mains négatives and Nous reveals the films’ political interventions, as they work to expose and contest social and representational exclusion. Bringing the two films together allows us to trace genealogies of postcolonial identity, and to perceive the ways in which the afterlives of the colonial persist in the present. Exploring dialogues between the films brings a cinematic genealogy into view, illuminating their shared political force. However, a contemporary lens also exposes the risks and blind spots embedded in Duras’s formal approaches and her political strategies. Thus, as I will suggest in the second half of this article, a close analysis of the film in light of recent critical reflections on visual representation, race and the postcolonial reveals challenging aspects of the representation of Black subjects in Les Mains négatives which unsettle the film’s message of inclusion and recognition.

**Les Mains négatives: contesting invisibilisation**

*Les Mains négatives* is a short film composed of tracking shots of Parisian streets at dawn, sparsely peopled by Black workers who clean the city before sunrise. The film represents a key engagement with questions of race in Duras’s cinematic work: it is a rare moment in which people of colour are represented on-screen. The film uses non-staged footage to capture social realities: tracking shots, filmed from a moving vehicle between 6.15 a.m. and 7.45 a.m., show the Black street cleaners clearing refuse and sweeping the streets. As day breaks, white commuters begin to appear on the streets. By capturing the hidden lives and labour of immigrant workers, the film addresses the social, spatial, and temporal divisions of the city, which separate its inhabitants across race and class lines. These binaries are also staged via the film’s visual language: as Renate Günther (2002, 89) writes, ‘night and darkness, representing the excluded “other” side of French colonial and post-colonial history, fade into daylight as the white Parisians emerge in the streets and shops that have been cleaned for them by the invisible workforce’. As the title of the film
suggests, the workers mark a ‘negative’ trace on the world through their cleaning and refuse collection, and their work thus remains unrecognised by those who do not witness it. Thus Günther (2002, 90) states that ‘the image of the negative hands [...] becomes a metaphor for the devaluation and invisibility of the manual labour carried out by immigrants’. Invisible labour has been theorised as an intersectional issue in fields of sociology and cultural studies (Cherry, Poster, and Crain 2016; Vergès 2019). Françoise Vergès (2019, 122–123) highlights the ways in which the invisibilisation of certain forms of work constructs and reproduces gendered and racialised social hierarchies:

C’est un des principes fondamentaux du nettoyage : il doit rester invisible. Par cette invisibilisation, la personne chargée du nettoyage disparaît non seulement de l’écran social, mais la violence et le mépris à l’encontre de son travail se voient légitimés.

By filming immigrant workers, Duras seeks to highlight and make visible their often-obscured lives and labour, contesting their invisibilisation and returning them to the ‘social screen’.

Voiceover narration, spoken by Duras, offers a poetic reflection on loneliness and the desire for communication: she describes a prehistoric man who cries out in his solitude, and leaves cave paintings—handprints—as traces of his presence. Moving from third- to first-person narration, Duras states, ‘je suis celui qui appelait qui criait il y a trente mille ans’. In this way, although she is not necessarily identified with the speaking ‘je,’ Duras establishes a subtle association between herself and the prehistoric man, between the man’s handprints, and her own act of cinematic creation. In both cases, the question of indexicality (a sign’s claim to referentiality; an image’s capacity to preserve or attest to the presence of its subject) is evoked, and indexical image-making is presented as a means of marking human presence and opposing invisibility.

If filmmaking is configured as a means of exposing exclusion, Duras suggests that it can also be complicit in perpetuating dominant regimes of visibility and invisibility. In a shot halfway through the film, street workers are captured next to a refuse truck, outside the Paramount Opéra cinema (Figure 1). By juxtaposing the workers’ hidden labour and the cinema, Duras evokes the complicity of cinematic modes of representation in reproducing

Figure 1. Refuse workers in front of the Paramount Opéra cinema in Les Mains négatives (Marguerite Duras, 1979).
social visibility and exclusion. The bare white bodies of two lovers on a film poster mirror the two Black workers who are engaged in refuse collection on the street below: a stark opposition of highly visible images of white desirability and eroticism, and the obscured sight of immigrant labour. Like many of Duras’s films, Les Mains négatives positions itself in resistance to dominant modes of cinematic production, and here this challenge is presented overtly, as the cinema becomes the backdrop against which invisible immigrant labour (and Duras’s filmmaking) takes place. The shot gives visual form to the title’s self-reflexive allusion to visual media’s capacity to make visible or keep hidden, ‘undeveloped’, and to the film’s opposition of image and negative, visible and invisible, white and Black, day and night. Here, the labour of avant-garde filmmaking—palpable in the zooms and cuts of Duras’s documentary footage—is positioned as a third term mediating the twin poles of visibility (mainstream cinema) and invisibility (immigrant work). James S. Williams (1997, 129) terms this ‘a tribute to Duras’s own hands, the authorial and not so negative hands of cinematic montage’.7

Describing filming the footage used in Les Mains négatives, Duras (1980, 75) states, ‘on n’a rencontré que des Noirs, quelques femmes de ménage portugaises du côté de l’Opéra’. She presents the representation of Black immigrant workers as the film’s guiding principle, stating:

je crois que ces gens, ces Noirs, appellent autant à être aimés, à être reconnus comme des êtres vivants qu’au commencement du monde. C’est à ce stade-là que ce que j’appelle l’amour se dit dans un regard, dans une parole, peut-être aussi dans une caméra. (Duras 2001, 179)

Duras seeks to respond to this perceived call for recognition via cinematic representation: a gesture which she configures as an act of love. The camera is presented here as a way of actively marking recognition, as well as a means of communicating love. Duras foregrounds image-making in her presentation of the film, optimistically configuring the camera as a means of remedying exclusion from regimes of visibility. However, as I will suggest later in this article, Duras’s strategies of representation may also be viewed in a more critical light.

Les Mains négatives highlights the presence of Black immigrants in Paris in the 1970s—and Nous offers a contemporary perspective on that generation of immigrants and their children, while also representing migration in the present. Turning now to Nous, I will explore how Diop allows us to perceive the persistence of forms of exclusion in the contemporary, while also capturing traces of lives and communities via tender, tangible, and reciprocal filmic encounters.

**Nous: filmic traces**

Like Duras, Diop expresses a belief in cinema’s capacity to represent the unrepresented. Nous presents a series of vignettes featuring people of different ages and backgrounds—including members of Diop’s own family—who are geographically linked by the RER B overground train which connects several Parisian suburbs. The film brings autobiographical sequences and scenes with people of colour in the banlieue into contact with other episodes of life in the Paris metropolitan area: white royalist Catholics attending a service in memory of Louis XVI; an outing with
the Rallye de Fontainebleau, a group of white hunters. Like Les Mains négatives, Nous approaches the question of identity and community by focusing on the ways in which space and time are organised along racial lines—however, Diop’s film also probes and destabilises these rigid spatial divisions in a range of ways.

Nous presents cinema as a means of recording, conserving, and representing traces of life. It configures filmic representation as a form of witnessing, and film viewing as an ethical encounter with other lives. At the same time, Diop also subtly figures the cinematic gaze in more critical terms—an idea which is introduced via the film’s opening sequence, in which a family group (who later appear with the Fontainebleau hunt) attempt to spot a deer. In the cuts from shots of the family watching, to point-of-view shots from their perspective, Diop evokes associations between looking and violence, visibility and vulnerability. Meanwhile, the sustained point-of-view shots implicate the viewer in this probing look, as we attempt to make out movement at the edge of the field. Diop describes this sequence as ‘the key to the entire film’ (Cardamenis 2022). In its thematisation of predatory looking, the scene evokes self-reflexive concerns about the gaze and spectatorship. In a film concerned with issues of race and representation, this scene of overdetermined looking seems to establish the white gaze as threatening and violent. However, Diop complicates this reading: as a cipher for what follows, she describes the encounter staged in this scene as ‘a confrontation between two worlds’ which is ‘both violent and gentle’ (Cardamenis 2022). Thus, her film, she states, ‘is trying to put aside this border and this fear of getting to know each other’ (Cardamenis 2022). It does so by exploring cinema’s capacity to foster non-totalising viewing relations and to establish modes of representation which remain attentive to the risks of certain forms of looking.

One of the film’s final sequences features a dialogue between Diop and the writer Pierre Bergounioux, in which they reflect on the historical relationship between representation and power. The sequence asks us to consider how the exclusion of certain social groups from the literary canon buttresses regimes of visibility and inclusion. Diop and Bergounioux also give pointed accounts of cinema’s role in contesting these representational norms and social constructions. Diop states that her filmmaking practice is driven by an ‘obsession de […] donner une trace, une existence, de conserver […] l’existence des petites vies qui sans quoi auraient disparu si je ne les avais pas filmées’. The exchange configures representation as an aesthetic and a political concern, and frames digital cinema—due to comparatively low production costs—as a means of democratising representational practices.

The scene stages a clear articulation of the film’s political impetus, echoing Duras’s vision of cinematic representation as a gesture of recognition and inclusion. However, as we have seen, from the film’s opening scene Diop also highlights the potential slippage from observation to predation, thereby problematising visibility as a straightforward solution to marginalisation. That scene is subtly recalled here as Bergounioux describes life on the margins of representation, ‘aux lisières’, echoing the family’s description of the stag ‘à la lisière’ of the forest. In remaining sensitive to the risks of visibility and to the violence associated with asymmetrical viewing relations, Nous configures looking in terms of ethical responsibility as well as advancing representation as a political strategy. This complex figuring of representation and visibility is captured in the film’s thinking of the cinematic trace as both a visual record and a vestigial imprint.
We witness an example of the camera’s capacity to capture the presence of a life in sequences featuring Diop’s parents: her mother Rokhaya and her father Ousmane. These images have a particular emotional resonance: Diop’s voiceover narration informs us, in each case, that the sequences were shot soon before her parents’ deaths. In eighteen minutes of Hi8 home movie footage which Diop has found, she says, her mother appears only briefly. They are the only filmed images which remain of her. The shaky footage captures scenes of family life; as we enter the kitchen, Rokhaya quickly leaves the room, reappearing shortly before there is a cut to static. For a few seconds, she is visible on-screen, smiling hesitantly, watching her daughters as they film her. In her analysis of *For One More Hour with You* (Alina Marazzi 2002)—a documentary about the director’s mother, ‘pieced together from rare, completely beautiful footage’—Emma Wilson (2015, 8) considers how cinema might stage an ethical encounter with an absent and beloved other. She suggests that ‘the material fragility of the footage itself, its haziness, evanescence’ draws our attention to ‘all we can’t see and feel in the image, its illusion and fragility’ (Wilson 2015, 11). In this way, *For One More Hour with You* evokes the presence of the filmmaker’s mother, yet it ‘remains hesitant about [the] accessibility and transparency’ of its subject (Wilson 2015, 11). Reading these images through Laura U. Marks, Wilson (2015, 11) argues that they evoke a cinematic melancholia, a lingering, open-ended mournful engagement. The home movie tapes in *Nous* have the same elegiac fragility. The second short clip is an ‘archive de Noël’. Via the voiceover, Diop states that she had imagined what this footage might show: her mother talking and laughing. As the camera moves awkwardly over a dinner scene, surveying guests at a Christmas table, Diop tells us that ‘rien de cela n’existe’: her mother is not present in the footage. The fuzzy, low-resolution images are accompanied by Diop’s voice: she tells us that these images show the last Christmas before her mother’s death. Rokhaya’s unexpected absence from the sequences anticipates her death. Yet, like Marazzi, Diop refuses to ‘consign […] her to absence’ (Wilson 2015, 8). Over a cut from one filmed fragment to another, Diop states, ‘Je piste les traces de ma mère. Je me désole de sa présence fugace’. Presenting herself as a stalker looking for tracks, Diop again allows the issues of looking that are staged in the film’s ‘key’ opening scene to resonate, taking on a further, personal dimension. As in Marazzi’s film, the desire to look and make a visual record here reflects ‘a wish to cherish and be present with these images’ and their subject while remaining ‘hesitant about accessibility and transparency’ (Wilson 2015, 11).

Images of Diop’s father Ousmane (shot at a later date by Diop) also suggest a desire to linger with and re-vision ordinary moments with him: stirring tea, carrying shopping, looking over old documents, and riding the RER. And Diop extends this vision of filmed images as a treasured, tangible record to other, less personal sequences. Thus, while these fleeting shots of Diop’s mother and father are charged with particular significance, Diop imbues each sequence with import and affective weight via her self-reflexive contemplation of the medium’s potential to mark human traces. Diop films Black lives in the present day in ways which echo the intimate quotidian scenes of camcorder footage: children playing; teenage girls gossiping; young adults in deck-chairs listening to music. These sequences challenge mainstream cinematic and media representations of the *banlieue* as a space of violence and criminality. By indexing tangible moments of joy and togetherness, Diop contests the historical exclusion of such affects from mainstream cinematic representations of the *banlieue*, constructing
a counternarrative which challenges dominant, discriminatory visions of French immigrant communities. These shots are also a means for Diop to cherish these lives and be present with them.

As I will suggest below, in her attention to her subjects’ interiority and social connections, Diop’s approach differs from Duras’s. However, the films share a desire to make invisibilised work visible, presenting cinematic witnessing as a response to the societal masking of this labour. Several sequences in Nous accompany N’deye Sighane Diop, a nurse (and the director’s sister), as she visits elderly patients at their homes in working-class suburban areas. Diop’s observational camera takes in the different forms of gendered and racialised caring labour performed by her sister: comforting her patients or asking about their lives, fetching water, and organising medication. The sequences also point to the failings of a wider system in which ageing working-class lives are not adequately supported. We hear one patient’s neighbour reporting that the elderly woman can be heard banging on the wall, begging for help, when she is left alone. The camera moves over photographs displayed in the patient’s home, revealing that she is white. Diop states that this was a way to offer a more diverse view of the banlieues, which are represented in the mainstream media via images of young, criminalised men of colour (Cardamenis 2022). A series of sequences with Diop’s sister and her patients (both Black and white) are positioned at the middle of the film, like a fulcrum connecting the film’s diverse vignettes. In this way, as well as challenging monolithic views of the banlieues, the scenes establish the heightened risk of neglect and suffering in old age as a shared horizon for those living on the margins. This attentiveness comes alongside the film’s particular focus on the vulnerability and exposure of racialised and immigrant subjects. Indeed, these images of elderly women remind the viewer of the absence of such images of Diop’s mother in old age, given her premature death.

Exposure and vulnerability are also highlighted in scenes with Ismael Soumaila Sissoko, a mechanic from Mali, and with Diop’s father Ousmane. Where Duras indexes social stratification by capturing individuals from a distance, Diop privileges sustained and close encounters with her subjects. Karl Schoonover (2012, 70) notes that cinema has the capacity to register otherwise unmarked forms of labour, providing a means of attending to the temporality and embodied experience of labour in a manner that is unique to film. In the sequences with Sissoko before and during his workday, Diop exploits these possibilities, lingering on Sissoko’s hands and face as she captures his minute gestures and expressions. Writing about Diop’s documentary Vers la tendresse (2016), Abigail E. Celis (2022, 430) suggests that images of hands highlight the fragility of bodies. Diop’s close-ups on hands in Nous figure fragility by registering the physical traces of work, such as the texture of oil on dry and wrinkled skin as Sissoko spreads grease onto a car part with unprotected hands. The images anticipate later close-up shots of Diop’s father’s hands, while we hear him describing his experiences of work following his arrival in France in 1966. Ousmane’s uncomfortable movements and wrinkled skin bring visual focus to the decades of manual labour he economically evokes, fleshing out his diplomatic description of a professional life comprising many jobs, but during which he has ‘jamais chômé’. For Martin O’Shaughnessy (2012, 161) documentary film can bear witness to the experience of labour via visual attention to the worker, whose ‘filmed body bears the traces of its previous experiences and thus allows us to note the marks of labor, its wear and tear, and the passage of time’. In
Nous, close-up images of the body’s vulnerability and the markings of labour—both physical and affective—are a means of bearing witness, of contesting invisibilisation, and of giving visual form to unvoiced realities.

Tactile, proximal framing is also a means of contesting dominant visual regimes. Celis (2022, 429) suggests that, in Vers la tendresse, a cinematic ethics of ‘adjacency’ allows Diop to displace sight as an epistemic framework which presents ‘racial identity as seen object’. In Nous, Diop also refuses to reify Blackness, by focusing on the body as a site of individual, embodied experience rather than as a racial signifier. In doing so, she probes her subjects’ own relationships to looking and being looked at. In shots of Sissoko as he drinks coffee before work, he looks weary, close to tears. Diop lingers in close-up on his tired, red eyes. Sissoko glances directly at the camera and then away, his gaze shifting and moving (Figure 2). Again, the sequence is echoed in later shots of Diop’s father, which show him looking away from the camera, eyes darting awkwardly, before later looking directly at the camera. Showing the men’s discomfort in front of the camera may be viewed as a means of evoking the impact of years of visual othering and external determination (as described by Fanon and Niang). Yet by including shots of the men looking directly at the camera, Diop moves beyond merely recording their discomfort. By including moments in which they return the camera’s gaze, she presents Sissoko and her father as aware, consenting, viewing subjects, captured in their own acts of contemplation and observation which reflect and meet her own directorial look. This close, reciprocal engagement with individual lives is a central concern of Diop’s ethical filmmaking. Turning now to Les Mains négatives, we will see how Duras demonstrates an inverse approach to representing migrant lives, and in doing so raises challenging questions about consent and objectification, agency and audibility.

![Figure 2. Ismael Soumâla Sissoko in Nous (Alice Diop, 2020).](image-url)
Negative hands, eloquent bodies

Both Duras and Diop foreground cinema’s capacity to capture traces of presence in order to contest the erasure of invisibilised lives from the social screen. Diop remedies her subjects’ absence from canons of representation by presenting visual and sensory records of their lives and relationalities, via sustained encounters which privilege close framing. In this sense, the visual strategies of Nous and Les Mains négatives diverge. Shooting from inside a moving vehicle, Duras emphasises distance in her representations of Black subjects, and eschews the tactile proximity observed in Nous. In spite of its meta-cinematic attention to issues of visibility and representation, through its formal structure Les Mains négatives establishes a clear division between the mobile, active viewing position of the camera, and the immobile, passive, viewed workers. As such, the film risks remaining complicit in a visual regime predicated on binary divisions governed by the very racist logics it seeks to critique.

In one sequence, the tracking shot slows in order to capture a group of men sweeping the pavement at the corner of two streets. The camera lingers on the group, who are barely discernible in the darkness; the sticks of their brooms reflect the light, so that it is the instruments of their labour which make the men visible, metonymically signalling their socioeconomic status. The workers are bent over their brooms, looking down at the street, apparently unaware of the immortalisation of their labour via its capture on film. (Duras’s (1980, 2001) commentary on the filming of Les Mains négatives makes no mention of seeking consent from the individuals included.) Focused on their work, and unable to return the viewer’s gaze, the workers’ faces are obscured. Here, once again, the men are captured in front of a cinema (in this case the Grand Rex). Film posters—including a French poster for the Hollywood crime thriller Point Blank (John Boorman 1967)—provide the backdrop to the men’s labour. In this way, as in the shot of workers outside the Paramount Opéra, Duras points to systems of representation, subtly evoking the entanglements of capital and visibility. However, in spite of this self-referential awareness, the moment feels uncomfortably voyeuristic, as the camera’s halt here presents the viewer with a stilled spectacle of racial and class difference. The moment reflects Williams’s (1997, 129) suggestion that the film presents the Black men as an ‘undifferentiated’ mass of ‘objectified’ Others. While presenting the men as an ‘anonymous group, deprived of their individual identities’ may be a deliberate strategy for highlighting their social exclusion (Günther 2002, 90), the mise en scène maintains a rigid division between viewing subject and visual object which risks slipping into what Jonathan Beller (2017, 102) terms a visual ‘metrics of domination’: a colonial visual encounter in which sight becomes a ‘regime of [white] subjectification and [Black] objectification’. Beller notes that ‘the processes of racist and colonial visuality have been translated into the photographic apparatus’, which captures and makes legible the visible surface of the body (Beller 2017, 104), transforming it into to a legible surface, a signifier of racial essence (109). This view of racialisation as a visual and epistemic process analogous to photography—which has also been advanced by Cassandra Jackson (2011) and Alessandra Raengo (2013)—brings critical contours to Duras’s conceptualisation of the camera as a neutral apparatus for communicating recognition and love, and of visual representation as a response to exclusion from social and cinematic screens.

Beller, Jackson and Raengo return us to the historical entanglements between regimes of racialisation and visual representation—connections which Niang also highlights in her
study of race and representation in France. Niang (2019, 218) writes that it is necessary to view contemporary racialising representational tropes as ‘les survivances’ of historical colonial regimes of image-making—from the *mise en scène* of nineteenth-century French ‘spectacles ethnologiques’ which serve to ‘valider l’existence d’un gouffre insondable entre observé et observateur’ (218), to the presentation of racial stereotypes in contemporary French film (227). In her analysis of *Vers la tendresse*, Celis (2022, 420) points to cinema’s capacity to construct such a gulf between ‘Blackness as a visual object and […] Whiteness as a viewing position’, and highlights Diop’s undoing of these positions. Where Diop engages the cinematic image in order to present alternative and reciprocal ways of looking in both *Vers la tendresse* and *Nous*, Duras arguably replicates an asymmetrical and abyssal relation between viewing subject and viewed object. Fatimah Tobing Rony (1992, 264) describes how ethnographic photography evacuates subjectivity, rendering Black subjects ‘nameless and faceless’ and presenting the Black body as signifier or ‘datum’. Likewise, she writes that in Félix-Louis Regnault’s early colonial films in West Africa, ‘bodies often are rendered as shadows’, and individuals ‘are often filmed in such a way that they are turned into ciphers, their faces indistinct’ (Tobing Rony 1992, 278–9). These descriptions echo Williams’s (1997, 130) suggestion that in *Les Mains négatives*, ‘the black men are reduced to a mere signifier—“black”’. They also resonate with Duras’s visual form: in the sequence of the street sweepers, the workers appear as silhouettes in the darkness, their faces obscured and downturned. The framing of the men recalls the ‘clearly marked’ divide ‘between observer and observed’ typical of ethnographic photography (Tobing Rony 1992, 264). Here, and throughout, the Black subject is unable to return the camera’s look, and remains a visual object of its probing gaze. As such, although Duras thinks critically about cinema’s role in conditions of visibility, the film fails to imagine Black subjects as viewing subjects.

As noted, cinema has been theorised as a particularly suitable medium for capturing work as endurance and exertion, both psychological and embodied (and Diop mobilises these possibilities in her sustained and close-up encounters with Sissoko). However, the fleeting and distant scenes of work in *Les Mains négatives* do not present the workers in ways which bring attention to the affective and embodied impact of labour, as the camera glides briefly over them and away. Further, given the absence of filmic features associated with interiority (such as the facial close-up, or direct speech), the logic of making visible, ostensibly predicated on highlighting the lives and presence of marginalised workers, risks framing the workers as visual *signs* of marginality, rather than as subjects experiencing exclusion or racialised labour. Like the individuals photographed and filmed by Regnault, the workers are ‘Emptied of history, their bodies […] *racialized*’ (Tobing Rony 1992, 281). In this way, *Les Mains négatives* demonstrates how a strategy of making visible may easily slip into a colonial regime of looking in which the Black body is perceived as a viewed object, a signifier of racial essence.

Duras’s commentary on the film exemplifies this vision of the Black body as a signifying spectacle. In the extract quoted above, when Duras (1980, 75) describes shooting *Les Mains négatives*, she identifies the men by their skin colour alone, stating ‘on n’a rencontré que des Noirs’. For Duras, the sight of the racialised subject appears to reveal an inner truth: as quoted above, she states, ‘je crois que ces gens, ces Noirs, appellent autant à être aimés, à être reconnus comme des êtres vivants qu’au commencement du monde’ (Duras 2001, 179). As Duras extrapolates, we are left to wonder on what basis this judgement is
made. Is it, to adopt Raengo’s phrasing (2013, 49), the subjects’ ‘sheer blackness’? Is their ‘blackness the writing pad?’ Duras presents the Black workers as mute yet eloquent bodies, whose very presence bespeaks a longing for recognition and connection. This presentation of the Black body as a legible index of anguish resonates strikingly with Jackson’s account of how photography can reproduce structures of domination by ‘offering the observer the power to view and interpret the [Black] body’, perpetuating the belief that Black bodies are ‘viewable, legible bodies’ whose “‘mute testimony’ […] overrides the ‘verbose testimony’ they are not permitted to voice’ (Jackson 2011, 34–5).

Indeed, the question of voice in Les Mains négatives is fraught. The men’s voices are not heard in the film: as noted, the mute image is overlaid by Duras’s own vocal track, which describes a prehistoric man calling out in his loneliness. As I have argued, there is a thematic connection between the early man’s image-making, and Duras’s own act of creation. In addition, as Günther (2002, 89) suggests, the film also draws attention to an ‘implicit correspondence’ between the prehistoric man and the Black workers on-screen: the voiceover structuring exclusion and the ‘desire to communicate’ is a means of articulating the call for recognition which Duras observes in her visual encounter with the workers. For Günther (2002, 90), the resonances between image and soundtrack thus highlight a shared invisibility and absence from recorded history. Williams (1997, 126) views this association more critically, asking how ‘Duras presume[s] both to identify lovingly with the captured object of the gaze […] and at the same time to speak in its place’. Through the interweaving of sound and image, the film seems to figure the unrealised desire for connection as part of a transhistorical human condition (Günther 2002, 93)—thus echoing Duras’s wider vision of the self-other relation as an anguished impossibility, an ‘unbridgeable gap’ (McMahon 2012, 97). In this way, Duras folds the workers into the affective plane of impossible desire which marks her conceptualisation of human experience and relationality. Yet there is a dual risk of abstraction and aestheticisation here: the extreme historical scale and the poetic narrative of universal suffering overwrite the reality of marginalisation. As such, Duras appears ‘almost to wish away the history of racism’ (Williams 1997, 127), and risks ‘disregarding the history of colonialism’ (Günther 2002, 93).

Perhaps most significantly, the men’s own experiences of racism and exclusion are not articulated in the film: figured via the film’s thematisation of non-communication and its poetics of impossibility, they are only palpable as an absence. Niang connects the question of audibility to that of racial exclusion, stating that

To be Black within the European modernist project is to live on the fringes of the narrative, to exist in the dead angles, in the silence. […] I was constantly surrounded by the silences of history, but behind those veils, behind those silences, there’s no void. There’s something hidden. (Pierrot 2021)

Les Mains négatives shines a light on society’s ‘dead angles’, bringing Black immigrants to representation—though, as I have suggested, it does so in ways which risk bolstering racialised asymmetries. In auditory terms, the film arguably allows the silences of history, the silencing of Black voices to persist. Thus, while Les Mains négatives critically exposes the veiling of Black lives and labour, the testimonies of the workers are present only as ‘noisy silences’—Niang’s term for the unheard but tangible presences which hover in the lived environment of contemporary France,
acting as reminders ‘of what this environment means in the context of France’s colonial past’ (Pierrot 2021). In place of Black self-expression, the voiceover imposes a universal narrative of affective suffering. What we witness here, to borrow Niang’s formulation, is ‘la mise en évidence de l’impossibilité pour les minorités d’être architectes de leurs propres histoires’ (Niang 2019, 251). It is these stories which Diop brings into focus, through an attentiveness to the voices of her documentary subjects, and through a commitment to registering the echoing silences of France’s history.

**Articulating testimony, memory, and collectivity**

Many of the sequences in *Nous* feature the voices of Diop’s documentary subjects. Like *Les Mains négatives, Nous* seeks to make unrepresented lives visible—and Diop’s film also makes her subjects directly audible, by conducting interviews or staging more indirect listening encounters which provide insights into their emotional lives, memories, and histories, as well as their relationships with those around them: familial, social and professional. In the second sequence with Sissoko, as Diop silently films him at work, he receives a call from his mother. The dialogue acts as a form of indirect testimony: Sissoko tells his mother ‘They’re mean to us, when we’ve only come here to work. [...] We don’t like it when they’re mean to us. [...] I can’t stay here.’ The phone call prompts Sissoko to speak directly to Diop, who is behind the camera, thus disrupting the sequence’s observational mode. By including the ensuing exchange, Diop presents cinema as a medium of communication as well as a visual technology of documentation; she also presents Sissoko as an active participant in his own (self-)representation. From his testimony, we learn that Sissoko has not returned to Mali for over twenty years. The nesting of dialogues (direct and mediated) gives sonic form and brings emotional contours to what the images of Sissoko’s hands and gestures have allowed us to perceive: the marks of labour, the passage of time; the embodied and affective impact of life as a migrant worker. The use of interviews and the recording of voices enables Diop to probe the question of belonging that is ambiguously framed by the film’s title: who is included and who is able to articulate the conditions of inclusion within the national collective? Are multiple positions of belonging possible? Which different conceptions of belonging can cinema index? Can cinematic representation be a gesture of inclusion?

Like Duras, Diop further investigates questions of inclusion via recourse to broader timescales—though history and memory are approached in different ways in the films. *Nous* presents French urban spaces as sites of memory in counterhegemonic ways, bringing further historical resonances to Niang’s conception of the Parisian environment as being inhabited by noisy silences. A sequence in the Shoah Memorial in Drancy brings the lives of deported Jewish people—and French complicity with the Nazi occupiers—into view. Diop films photographs of young deportees, capturing and reproducing the visual record of these victims of French-Nazi collusion. The sequence also features recordings of deportees’ letters read by actors, their voices adding audible form to the written testimonies. As the camera focuses on the projected images of murdered Jewish children and youths and their letters, the film engages the viewer in a visual and sonic space of commemoration. Here, Diop establishes a subtle link between the commemorative function of audiovisual technologies in the
museum space, and the strategies of her own filmmaking practice—thus suggesting links to other sequences in the film, such as the recorded footage of her mother and father.

As well as re-screening the audiovisual memorial, Diop re-situates the Drancy site via contemporary coordinates. The Shoah Memorial is located on the site of the Drancy internment camp where French Jews were held before being deported to Nazi extermination camps: a space the museum today shares with a council estate. A shot from the window of the museum shows a deportation waggon—now part of the commemorative site—on the ground below, while modern tower blocks rise up in the background. The shot reminds us that low-income housing now stands on and around the site of the former internment camp. Following the sequence inside the museum, a shot outside shows a young man of colour in the foreground—perhaps a local resident—with the deportation waggon visible behind him. Diop states that the sequence gestures to ‘the diversity of the stories and memories’ in France, in response to a government which is ‘blind to this layering of memory’ (Cardamenis 2022). This vision of France’s diverse and layered history resonates with Max Silverman’s (2013) theorisation of palimpsestic memory. Silverman explores the ways in which literary and filmic texts reconfigure histories of fascism and colonialism in a non-linear fashion, fostering connections, substitutions, and transformations through the layering of contexts, as a means of approaching the traumatic memory of anti-Semitism and racism. Silverman (2013, 28) suggests that ‘the poetics of palimpsestic memory can be the basis of a new politics of memory’, as an alternative to the compartmentalisation of national histories, and thus the erasure of causality and connectivity between contexts of white supremacy and genocide. Diop’s juxtaposition of the Shoah Memorial and social housing in the banlieues (which Niang [2019, 1] describes as ‘des aires de confinement’) establishes an implicit connection between the differing uses of this urban space, capturing the ways in which national politics of the past echo through to the present. As such, the film presents showing and listening as responses to national ‘blindness’ and forgetting.

In this way, Diop’s representation of space recalls the juxtaposition of images of contemporary Paris and voiced references to the Holocaust in Duras’s Aurélia Steiner Melbourne (1979)—a short film released in the same year as Les Mains négatives, which, as Brutsche (2020, 411) notes, ‘provokes general reflection on the historical relationship between the city of Paris (and thus the French nation) and the persecution of the Jews’. By contrast, the simultaneously broad and abstract historical scale of Les Mains négatives arguably precludes direct consideration of the layered and interconnected histories of Parisian urban space; the transhistorical narrative of universal human suffering ironically obscures specific resonances between history and the present.

While the sequence at the Shoah Memorial establishes relationality via layering, at other points Diop privileges more dissonant forms of juxtaposition. Like Les Mains négatives, Nous approaches the question of identity and community by representing France’s Black and white inhabitants as often occupying separate spheres—a division evidenced in the cut from Diop’s home video footage of her family, to the white congregation of the Louis XVI memorial service. Diop terms this juxtaposition of scenes ‘antagonistic’, since it highlights the disjuncture between national memorialisation and forgetting (Cardamenis 2022). The camera
lingers on tearful churchgoers who listen as the testament of the last French king is read aloud. Affectively, the scene of sombre and sometimes tearful churchgoers resonates with the mournful tone of the sequences showing Diop’s mother. However, in the apposition of official recorded history and these fragments of home video, inclusion and exclusion from dominant national narratives are writ large.

Moving between traumatic layered and juxtaposed histories and contemporary testimony of marginalisation, allowing the resonances between sequences to build and refract, Nous stages a powerful call to acknowledge a shared past, to recognise the causal links between history and the present, and thereby to critically re-examine existing conditions of belonging and exclusion within the national community. As we have seen, by evoking questions of predation as well as witnessing and connection, Diop positions viewing relations in complex terms, and invites us to develop a critical understanding of visibility as a response to exclusion. In turn, she marshals multisensory cinematic form in order to engage spectators in listening and viewing encounters which give voice to the silenced figures of the nation’s history, as well as to contemporary lives at the margins of mainstream representation.

**Conclusion**

As Les Mains négatives dialogues with stillness and movement, representation and spectacle, it raises troubling questions: about objectification and aestheticisation, about racial epistemologies, and about racialisation as a visual regime. Duras’s footage captures tangible traces of invisibilised lives, providing a record of an unrecognised and unrepresented community. Yet, through the film’s formal structure, and in the absence of representations of interiority, subjectivity, and the affective or embodied impacts of marginalisation and labour, the Black subject in Les Mains négatives is presented as a legible, visual spectacle, a sign of racial difference and exclusion. In order to combat social hierarchies of visibility and invisibility, it is necessary to locate forms of representation which not only reverse invisibility, but which also acknowledge and challenge the asymmetries of power which inhere in image-making and underpin histories of visual representation. Like Duras, Diop traces the conditions of inclusion and exclusion in French society. She attends to the vulnerabilities and hardships to which racialised, working-class, and elderly subjects are exposed. She shows a generation of immigrants who arrived in France in the 1960s and their children, as well as younger communities who reflect the diversity of contemporary France. She also points to contemporary migrant experience as a state of exclusion and precarity. At the same time, she refuses to ontologise social divisions, and instead traces networks of relationality: both between her subjects and their wider social worlds, and between contrasting or resonant scenes in the film. These ‘antagonistic’ encounters are a means to highlight and contest social hierarchies of inclusion—spatial, historical, political—but they are also a means to establish affective resonances between the diverse groups and layered histories which make up the collective ‘nous’.
Notes

1. Previous waves of African and Caribbean immigration took place before the wars, in the contexts of the ‘migrations scolaires’ in the 1920s and the recruitment of colonial troops in World War I and World War II (see Niang 2019, 218).

2. Niang demonstrates that the external determination of Blackness must be viewed in the context of French universalism (see for example Niang 2019, 3–10). For analysis of race and the ‘universalist myth’, with Niang, see Jasmine Cooper, forthcoming.

3. Abigail E. Celis (2022, 419), in her article on Diop’s Vers la tendresse (2016) and Amandine Gay’s Ouvrir La Voix (2017), also highlights this essentialising gaze, writing that, ‘for Afro-French persons, being recognized as “Black” is a process of misrecognition, in which physical attributes impose an identity that supersedes both the interiority of the individual and the complexity of their social and cultural affiliations’.


5. This influence is also made explicit in Diop’s recent film, Saint Omer (2022), in which the protagonist gives a lecture on Duras.

6. See also India Song (Marguerite Duras 1975). For further scholarship on race in Duras’s cinematic work, see Holmlund (1991), McNeece (1996), Pleming (2021).

7. In this way, Duras invites us to reflect on montage as a further cinematic practice of inclusion and exclusion. Indeed, it is striking to note that Les Mains négatives was made from unused footage originally shot for Le Navire Night (Duras 1979).

8. There is also an echo here, in the evocation of the democratising possibilities of digital technologies, of Duras’s own adoption of low-budget approaches to (analogue) filmmaking, which extended to recycling unused footage to make new films (including Les Mains négatives).

9. Diop establishes connections which recall Emmanuel Levinas’s account of ethics as “vision” sans image, dépourvue des vertus objectivantes synoptiques et totalisantes de la vision’ (Levinas 1971, 8). For analysis of Levinasian ethics, film spectatorship, and documentary cinema, see Sarah Cooper (2006) and Libby Saxton (2009) (where Saxton also quotes this line from Levinas (96)).

10. In this sense, Nous diverges from Vers la tendresse, which, as Celis (2022, 427) observes, presents ‘familiar’ images of men in the banlieue which ‘draw […] on the dominant cultural imaginary’s stock images of Black and Beur masculinity’.

11. As noted, Vergès (2019) highlights the invisibilisation of gendered and racialised labour—specifically care and cleaning—in France. She situates the invisible care and cleaning work performed by women of colour today in relation to the recruitment of women from French overseas departments to France 1960s (Vergès 2019, 84–88).

12. Niang (2019, 227) writes of Bande de filles (Céline Sciamma 2014) that ‘La réalisatrice refuse délibérément d’ancrer son histoire dans un contexte sociologique et humain défini, créant des personnages creux dont les comportements erratiques valident une longue liste de stéréotypes. Cet écueil est largement apparent dans le portrait des personnages principaux que sont Marieme, Lady, Fily ou Adjatou, mais aussi dans la peinture grossière des seconds rôles et la caricature de la banlieue’.


14. Many of Duras’s films refuse identification or empty out individual subjectivity—from the robotic gestures of Détruire dit-elle (1969) to the mute on-screen bodies of India Song (1975). What I seek to capture here are the differing political stakes of such formal features in light of histories of racialised image-making and their persistence in the present.

15. Tobing Rony (1992, 281) describes the process of racialisation in cinema as follows: ‘The racialized body in cinema is a construction denying people of color historical agency and psychological complexity. Individuals are read as metonyms for an entire category of people’.
16. See also Crowley (2000, 187) and Hill (1993, 139).
17. I am very grateful to Jasmine Cooper for drawing my attention to this term.
18. In the film, Sissoko speaks to his mother in Bambara, Wolof and Sarakolle. I have quoted the English subtitles here.
20. During the war, the Cité de la Muette, a 1930s housing development in Drancy, was used as an internment camp for Jews prior to deportation. The site was repurposed for residential use after the war; one surviving accommodation block of the original 1930s building, part of the wartime prison camp, is today used for social housing as part of a larger residential estate. Archival images showing the Drancy camp façade of the building bear an eerie resemblance to shots of the social housing block included at the beginning of the sequence in Nous described here.
21. Silverman (1999) has also written about the treatment of the site of Drancy and La Muette in François Maspero’s text Les Passagers du Roissy Express (1990)—a text which Diop describes as an important influence for Nous (Vena 2021). Silverman (1999, 94) writes that ‘Maspero constructs his own architecture, composed of multilayered discourses across time, space and genre, and invites us to ponder on the connections between these layers’.

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