

REVIEW

Review of Alice Diop's *Saint Omer*

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In his magnum opus, *Postwar*, the late British historian Tony Judt argues that the French colonial project was distinctive because it was founded upon the assumption that France was a “trans-oceanic continuum, a place in which the civic and cultural attributes of Frenchness were open to all.” In other words, the intellectual and moral justification for empire-building was that colonial subjects could become fully French, could become full partakers of the culture that produced such luminaries as Descartes, Voltaire, and Napoleon.¹

In her first feature, *Saint Omer*, Alice Diop references this unique aspect of France’s civilizing mission by gesturing to its inconsistencies. *Saint Omer* tells the story of Laurence Coly, a Senegalese woman living in France who takes her fifteen-month-old daughter to the coast and leaves her to drown. Coly, an aspiring philosopher whose eloquence is frequently noted in news accounts of the trial, is, at first glance, a perfect example of the process that Judt describes: she is a citizen of a former French colony who acquires the “cultural attributes of Frenchness.”

And yet, even as she upholds her end of the bargain, it remains clear that the French people with whom she interacts do not see her as French. Rather, they see her as a Senegalese woman whose fluency in the French language is something of a curiosity – her apparent Frenchness is a sort of party trick that does nothing to mitigate her essential otherness. Perhaps the clearest instance of this stance comes when one of Coly’s former professors, testifying at her trial, says that it is strange that someone like Coly, a Black woman from Senegal, would be interested in the philosophy of Wittgenstein, a white man from Austria. The irony, of course, is that the universality of European culture is precisely the point of French colonialism; French colonialism was supposedly necessary because dead white men like Wittgenstein were to be intellectual exemplars to all, regardless of nationality or ethnicity.

For much of her trial, Coly’s non-Frenchness is used to make sense of her infanticide. Whispers of sorcery give way to the prosecuting attorney’s accusations of Coly being a cunning monster, moving in with her older French lover not for love but for money. It falls to Coly’s own attorney, in a show-stopping closing statement that Diop captures via a series of close-ups of the various women in the courtroom, to make the essential point that Diop’s horrifying choice was a product of her postpartum depression. In the end, Diop seems to say, neither Coly’s Senegalese nationality nor her tortured relationship with the metropole are germane; what matters is her status as a human and a mother. More to the point, Diop uses the prosecuting attorney to make the case that the way to correctly read Laurence Coly is as a loving mother who made a terrible mistake.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Dr. Sara Phenix (BYU French & Italian), for her ideas in helping me frame this film as a commentary on the French colonial project.