

## Confinement, Care, and Commodification in Mati Diop's *In My Room*

Brittany Murray

*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Murray, Brittany. "Confinement, Care, and Commodification in Mati Diop's *In My Room*." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 24.1 (2022): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.4281>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 0 times as of 08/15/22.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 24 Issue 1 (March 2022) Article 6**

**Brittany Murray,**

**"Confinement, Care, and Commodification in Mati Diop's *In My Room*"**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/6>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 24.1 (2022)**

Special Issue: ***Periodizing the Present: The 2020s, The Longue Durée, and Contemporary Culture.***

**Ed. Treasa De Loughry and Brittany Murray**

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol24/iss1/>>

---

**Abstract:** In her article, "Confinement, Care, and Commodification in Mati Diop's *In My Room*," Brittany Murray discusses a short film released in 2020 by the French and Senegalese director, Mati Diop. Shot in the artist's studio in a Parisian banlieue during mandatory Covid-19 confinement, the film tackles the issues of grief, isolation, and care. The article shows how the film represents these issues, particularly urgent during the pandemic and yet belonging to longstanding concerns about care work and reproductive labor. To mediate between present crisis and a larger historical framework, the article demonstrates how the film's formal attributes make a claim to artistic autonomy. Finally, the article shows how the film might point to opportunities for collective action meant to construct alternatives to the ongoing crises of capitalism.

**Brittany MURRAY**

### **Confinement, Care, and Commodification in Mati Diop's *In My Room***

The multiple crises that converge on the Covid-19 pandemic seem to demand that art directly address our most urgent needs—comfort, documentation, political expression. These immediate concerns shape Mati Diop's short film, *In My Room*. Shot in the French and Senegalese director's Parisian studio during mandatory confinement, the film was released in September 2020. The film captures the work of caring for the ill and grieving the dead, all politicized concerns, particularly after the pandemic laid bare the unequal distribution of care and risk.

Certain elements in the film, however, cannot be explained straight away by pressing, extra-textual needs. The camera lingers, for instance, upon a glass coffee table twinkling in the sunlight (Figure 1), an image that possesses aesthetic value, without immediately legible political significance. My aim is to read historical movement through those additional elements. Though the film represents the crisis of the pandemic, I argue that it also jolts viewers out of the shock of their present, in order to think about longer historical tendencies. From the vantage point of the pandemic, I argue, Diop's film nevertheless signals room for collective agency and alternatives to ongoing capitalist crisis.

The article begins with an attentive reading of *In My Room*, investigating how Diop's film claims status as an art object while also reflecting on its unusual status as a commercial object financed by a couture fashion house. The next section then situates the film within recent debates about the autonomy of art, drawing especially on Nicholas Brown's definition of art as a "self-legislating artifact," a definition that relies on aesthetic form (31). This section offers a critique of and complement to Brown's notion of the autonomy of art, arguing that the art object might register emergent social and political forms through content, with the particular focus here being on care and reproductive labor. The essay concludes with a return to considering the role of light in Diop's film, like the twinkles on the glass coffee table in the image below, reading against the grain of Roland Barthes' distinction between studium and punctum in order to imagine how Diop's film captures emergent political forms.



Figure 1: Mati Diop, *In My Room* (2020)

### **Art and Commerce in Diop's Film**

*In My Room* begins with Diop lifting blinds. One by one, she reveals a bank of five windows in her studio. Her camera explores what is visible outside—a curtain blowing through an open window, sunrise, sunset, and neighbors in nearby high-rises. The camera also records life inside Diop's studio. By day, the filmmaker checks emails and washes windows. By night, she dances in the mirror, stares into the fridge, texts, and lip-synchs opera. While those indoor shots capture long stretches of quarantine-induced boredom, the window adds the drama and mystery of other peoples' lives. Window casements often remain in the shot, framing the intrigue visible through the window itself. The visible frames, as I argue later, allow the film to reflect upon the role of art.

The soundtrack complicates this visual documentation of pandemic life, adding a set of concerns related, but not reducible to, Covid-19. Over the soundtrack, one hears audio recordings of the artist's late grandmother, Maji, who passed away before the pandemic. In the recordings, Maji protests as she is increasingly confined due to failing health. Though Maji's confinement happened earlier, her frustration at the sense of isolation may resonate with viewers who, like the younger Diop, are under mandatory confinement. The recordings testify to the challenges posed both to the aging person and to

her caretakers; one hears painful negotiations as the granddaughter persuades her grandmother to accept in-home care. One also hears delicate conversations, between Diop, her grandmother, and a professional caregiver, who Maji does not always treat with gratitude or respect. These challenging conversations testify to the work of care, presented as a site of physical and emotional, waged and unwaged, labor.

If the soundtrack records difficult moments, it also testifies to beautiful ones. Maji recalls sorrowful moments from the German occupation of Paris, and yet amid these somber reflections, she suggests that cinema partially alleviated the sadness. To this end, she also recollects the sound of her own mother, a dramatic soprano, singing. In the voice recordings overlaid on the soundtrack, Maji plans to visit the opera or the theater while she still can; in the images, granddaughter Mati sits at her desk, looking out at the setting sun while stuck indoors. Art, and especially live performing art, feels especially valuable because one is not necessarily guaranteed access. Within this matrix, then, of confinement and the labor of care, the film offers a seemingly sentimental argument for the value of art.

To complicate matters, though, this defense of art was financed by a couture fashion house. Miu Miu, a subsidiary of Prada, funded the film as part of its "Women's Tales" series. Diop's film is the twentieth entry in the series, which features shorts by women filmmakers. Past contributors include Agnès Varda, Haifaa Al-Mansour, Miranda July, and Ava DuVernay (see "Miu Miu Women's Tales"). The series straddles the line between art cinema and marketing campaigns. To meet the demands of commerce, the film releases are timed to coincide with the brand's seasonal collections. To signal an aspiration to art, winter collection films, such as Diop's, premiere at the Venice International Film Festival. The unusual conditions of *In My Room's* production and distribution provide an opportunity to explore how it is possible to claim unique status for the art object without blushing about its role within commodity culture.



Figure 2: Mati Diop, *In My Room* (2020)

The film suggests a complicated interplay between artistic autonomy and financial obligation. Miu Miu appears to grant artists contributing to the film series complete liberty, with one caveat—they must feature the brand's clothes. Fulfilling her duty, Diop shows three gowns hanging from a doorframe, the light from a nearby window refracting off the chunky gems sewn across the chest of each dress. In another scene, one which feels climactic within the structure of the film, the artist theatrically lip-synchs to opera wearing a magnificent black gown. The crystals sewn across the bodice glimmer with her movements. She stands near a window, where the crystals set against the black fabric of the dress echo the lit windows of neighboring apartment towers at night. Her song of choice, from *la Traviata*, recalls a recording earlier in the film when she discussed the redemptive qualities of her great-grandmother's singing voice. The scene stitches together *In My Room's* themes: the value of art, the filmmaker's grief, and the film's position in commodity culture, as evidenced by the obligatory designer gown.

The tension between art and commerce is heightened by the film's context, in that the pandemic had a paradoxical effect on the perceived value of art. On the one hand, the pandemic threatened the funding of projects, the livelihood of practitioners, and the financial wellbeing of artistic institutions. In France, the predicament of *intermittants du spectacle*, a special status designating temporary culture workers in the performing arts, drew particular attention. By the end of April 2020, an open letter with almost 200 signatories, addressed to President Macron, was published in *Le Monde*, demanding financial relief for culture workers ("Monsieur le Président"). Among the signatories were French cinema's most recognizable artists: Omar Sy, Jean Dujardin, Léa Seydoux, and Diop herself.

On the other hand, the virtues of art, and especially the performing arts, were extolled as a mechanism of resilience or escape from the hardships of lockdown and social distancing measures. The

OECD, for instance, impressed by the "increasingly documented psychosomatic effects" of art, recognized "a new opportunity to capitalise on the role of arts and culture in the prevention and treatment of illness across the lifespan, contributing to solutions for health and welfare systems" (Travkina and Sacco).

Though all of those effects may be positive, one might be wary of valorizing art exclusively on those terms. As Mark Banks writes, the renewed emphasis on art for therapeutic or escapist purposes leaves little room for culture valued on its own terms. My reading of *In My Room* explores this question, interrogating the relationship between artistic labor and care work, asking whether art can, or should, claim to be autonomous from the urgent commercial and social demands of its context. Amid anxiety about the purpose of art and the livelihood of its practitioners, one might ask whether art should satisfy anything more than the external demands placed upon it, whether those demands are defined by the marketplace or by social need.

### Art as a Commodity and a Self-Legislated Artifact

Yet, as Nick Brown has recently argued, the fact that all art is now a commodity, subsumed by the external logic of the market, does not mean that it ceases to be art (34). In fact, one strategy that Brown explores for momentarily suspending market logic is for the work of art, through form, to establish a minimal space for reflection on its own status as a commodity (26). By that definition, is *In My Room* a work of art? As the designer dresses testify, the film's composition is directly subject to the external demands of the market. The question is whether the film asserts an independent orientation toward those demands.

I argue that Diop does mark such an orientation through form. By reading *In My Room* alongside Chantal Akerman's oeuvre, I will show how Diop's aesthetic vocabulary might indicate this independence. A sensitivity to duration, for one, places *In My Room* in dialogue with Akerman's films. The way Diop passes the slow time of confinement on screen—shuffling around the apartment, washing windows, and answering emails—invokes the famously slow passage of a housewife's time in *Jeanne Dielman*—preparing soup, washing dishes, and making beds. At a certain moment in the film, Diop's camera fixes upon a curtain that has slipped through a neighbor's open window, its length caught by the wind, whipping against the exterior wall. The fluttering, the wind, and the duration of the shot reminds the viewer of the tree twisting in the wind in Akerman's *No Home Movie*. The thematic resonance between the two images is compelling; Diop's curtain and Akerman's tree weather their circumstances, like the daughters, mothers, and grandmothers in both films.



Figure 3: on the left Mati Diop, *In My Room* (2020)

Figure 4: on the right Chantal Akerman, *No Home Movie* (2015)

On their own, these formal qualities may not insulate a film from market demands. Though some filmmaking traditions, like those exemplified by Akerman's and Diop's work, may have initially developed in opposition to market values, one could easily argue that the very attributes that once distinguished art or experimental films can be calibrated to flatter a niche audience, like any other cultural commodity. In fact, these references might make a film all the more suitable as a marketing instrument to Miu Miu customers who wish to see themselves as hip and informed. Within these complicated coordinates, the question is whether a film might manage to "anticipat[e] its own reification," and whether it marks the predicament of art at this particular stage of capitalism, "via the formal embedding of the contradiction between the [artwork's] own commodity status and its aim to produce an ideologically distantiated understanding of totality" (Deckard 372). In other words, the point is not to expect the film to achieve some definitive (and probably impossible) break from the market, but rather to determine whether the film asserts its autonomy through critical representation of its own status as a commodity.

I argue that the film does succeed at establishing a critical distance from market demands, and that *In My Room* uses form to scaffold a claim to artistic autonomy. Diop's curtain and Akerman's tree are *clefs de lecture*; they guide viewers, indicating the particular rules that qualify each object as "a self-legislating artifact," a proper work of art by Brown's definition (31). Important to this definition is that the work of art take up its "contingent material substrate," and transform or respond to it in a way that is "legible as being un contingently assumed" (Brown 31). Art must, in other words, turn the incidental into the intentional. The curtain and the tree function as the sign of that transformation in their respective films. They are found objects, items that just so happened to be available and visible to the filmmaker, transformed by the camera into elements of a work of art.

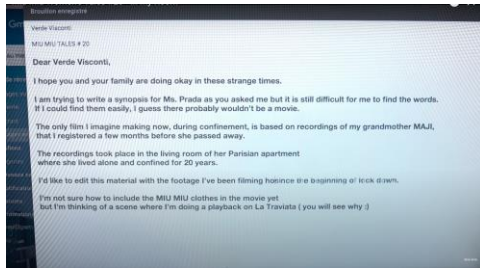
There are other examples of this transfiguration in Akerman's and Diop's films. Frames, for example, play an important role for both filmmakers. Window frames, the visible edges of a laptop screen—these serve as reminders of the minimal mediation it takes to transform the found objects of everyday life into the intentional objects of art. When Akerman films a Skype session with her mother in *No Home Movie*, the Skype window is framed by the visible edge of the laptop screen; sitting beside the laptop are sunglasses, a pack of cigarettes, and a yellow notepad. The visible frames remind the viewer of the transformation of the ordinary circumstances of life into the elected, *intended* elements of art. This evidence of artistic intention, the signal that the disparate elements of the work now belong to an artistic whole, is crucial to the film's claim to artistic autonomy. "The moment of true volition," as Adorno wrote, is mediated through form ("Commitment" 89). The curtain and the tree, the windows and laptop screens, are left behind like breadcrumbs in Akerman's film. They remind the viewer of this process, where the artist takes up her contingent circumstances, and through the mediation of form, transforms them into chosen and necessary portions of the whole. Akerman starts with what she has, in other words, and then artistically labors to do it *on purpose*.



Figure 5: Chantal Akerman, *No Home Movie* (2015)

Diop deploys a very similar technique to thematize the transformation of contingency into autonomy. *In My Room* evokes this transformation every time the camera shows a window frame, either the one Diop looks out of, or the ones that frame her neighbors as she looks in. Each frame signifies this transformation of unelected circumstances—the restrictions imposed by the confinement, the limitations of what she can see out of her own window, the serendipity of whatever her neighbors happen to be doing when she looks—into art.

The frames mark contingency and artistic intention in a general way, but Diop's film, in fact, addresses these themes in more specific terms. Under capitalism, after all, the contingent material substrate is not just anything; necessity is mediated, specifically, through the logic of the commodity. In a scene in which the filmmaker composes an email, Diop uses the formal device of the visible frame to address the specifically capitalist substrate of her film. Her gmail inbox is visible around the edges of a smaller open window in which she is writing a new message. The message is addressed to Verde Visconti, PR director for Miu Miu and its parent company, Prada, and it is about the topic of the proposed film. "The only film I imagine making now during confinement," Diop writes, the click of her keyboard audible, "is based on recordings of my grandmother MAJI, that I registered a few months before she passed away ... I'm not sure how to include the MIU MIU clothes in the movie yet, but I'm thinking ..." The visible frame, the inbox, the new-message window, the sound of typing, all seem to serve a purpose in Diop's film, a purpose analogous to the Skype conversation scene in *No Home Movie*. In other words, Diop shows the process of converting the film's material conditions of possibility—as she pitches the idea and corresponds with financiers—into the chosen, meaning-making material of a work of art. Moreover, *In My Room*'s contingent circumstances are confronted directly as those of the commodity.



Figures 6 and 7:  
windows, Mati  
Diop, *In My Room*  
(2020)

These circumstances are inflected by the intersection of race and gender. The question of artistic autonomy is further complicated, in the case of Mati Diop, by the dilemma that faces racialized women filmmakers in France. As the activist and filmmaker, Amandine Gay, indicates, these directors face disproportionate barriers when they seek funding for their projects (159-160). Even when racialized filmmakers do overcome the financial hurdle, they must then confront the challenge of being pigeonholed. Successful filmmakers like Gay and Alice Diop have nevertheless highlighted the pressure to conform to a narrow set of topics, and stereotyped approaches, to issues like immigration or the *banlieue* (Gay 162-163; Diop 220-222). These pressures provide context for understanding the significance of projects like *In My Room*; through her partnership with Miu Miu, Mati Diop tackles the problem of securing funding while testing the artistic license to define her own approach to themes like kinship, care, and urban space.

### Hegemonic, Residual, Emergent

Up to this point, I have approached the film through Brown's definition of artistic autonomy, in which an art object must take up its contingent circumstances to form an uncontingent whole. Now, I also want to explore the limitations of this definition. For one, it presupposes the real subsumption of the work of art to capitalism, an historically specific situation. The product of a partial revolution, in Brown's formulation, the autonomous work of art registers disappointment with unfulfilled ideals: "Born in their unemphatic alterity to the bourgeois order from the ashes of revolutionary desire," works of art register conflict, as the political promises of freedom and equality chafe sorely against economic constraints and inequities. Autonomous art is, for Brown, particular to "societies where judgments unfold between the state and the market" (28). Though many capitalist societies meet this condition, including the France of the 2020s in which Diop filmed her piece, those conditions are not universal.

Properly historicized, there is plenty of room for exceptions. Brown acknowledges that art serves an entirely different purpose when a viable alternative to capitalism presents itself:

During genuinely revolutionary moments within modern history—moments when alternatives to the state and to the market were felt to be inchoate in changing social relations and emerging counter institutions—culture could flourish without the conceptual armature of the self-legislating work. (28)

He suggests that this exceptional situation has "little practical significance today" (29). I am not so easily convinced. Perhaps this exceptional situation *does apply* at present. We might be positioned at just such a moment of upheaval. If we remember Raymond Williams' injunction to think of any epoch as one crisscrossed by dominant, residual, and emergent forces, then it stands to reason that the exceptional situation, the genuinely revolutionary moment, exists as a strain, however faintly, even within capitalist society.

In a capitalist society, in other words, it follows that a work of art might be expected to register a capitalist hegemony and emerging alternatives. This can be true even of those works of art that seem most embedded in commodity logic. Emilio Sauri, for instance, has suggested, that at certain geographical nodes in the world-system, a contemporary novel's apparent responsiveness to the market, and its distance from older ideals of literary purity, indicate "not the triumph of capitalism, but its crisis" (402). Every work speaks in two (or more) voices, responding to different possibilities in its own historical present. Distinguishing between these voices is the work of the critic, and it is delicate and error-prone work. Williams warns that it is "exceptionally difficult," in the moment, to distinguish between those elements that are "emergent in the strict sense"—that is to say, genuinely alternative or oppositional—and those elements that are "merely novel" forms of hegemonic capitalist culture (123). We should expect, then, any identification of emergent strains in the work of art to be met with argument and ambiguity.

The way forward can only be a cautious critical judgment in the present, prone to later revision. As Williams also warns, emergent strains are susceptible to appropriation by the dominant culture: "to the degree that it emerges, and especially to the degree that it is oppositional rather than alternative, the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins" (124). Because emergent culture develops unevenly and incompletely, and because it is prone to incorporation, it is likely to look different in retrospect. Years later, the genuinely emergent may look like a "merely novel" form of capitalism precisely because it was incorporated.

If dominant, residual, and emergent forces crisscross a work, then the critic must discern their patterns. Responding to capitalist society, the work of art might speak in the language of artistic autonomy, using form to distance itself from market logic in order to reflect on its status within that very market. Diop's film, as we have just observed, acknowledges its position within commodity culture; it then establishes its own formal rules. At the same time, however, an art object might respond differently to an emergent strain. Sensitive to incipient alternatives and shifting social relations, art could shed the armor of autonomy; it could be, in other words, heteronomous, directly responsive to social, economic, or political conditions outside the work of art. The task of interpretation, then, is to understand the work of art's self-legislating aesthetic rules. *And then*, the task of interpretation is to separate out, discern, and defend the art object's appeal to an emerging alternative society.

Perhaps all art must have this heteronomous, hopeful element. Without it, the conceptual shield that protects art from capitalism would only isolate it from emerging alternatives. An insistence on autonomy risks sequestering the work of art, not only from the worst of commodity culture but also from the best chance at opposition. Skeptical of evaluating a work of art's anti-capitalist politics and artistic bona fides through form alone, Myka Tucker-Abramson asks: "can we determine 'what side' art is on without grappling with questions of history, context, and commitment?". The response to that compelling question could be that those very elements are the medium through which the work of art speaks (or fails to speak) to the emergent. The same proposition could be phrased temporally. Art registers newness first in content, and only later in form, an uncontroversial suggestion for anyone who agrees with Adorno's famous dictum that aesthetic form is sedimented content (*Aesthetic Theory* 5). New and untested social possibilities would first be registered in the work's content; the form, by contrast, reflects (or responds to via negation) social relations that have had time to settle, congeal, and become hegemonic.

### Care, Reproductive Labor, and Art

Which new and untested social possibilities, then, does Diop register in the content of *In My Room*? Which social, economic, and political conditions might the film address directly? To answer these questions, we must return to the issues of artistic labor, reproductive labor and care work. A defense of the autonomy of art must be reframed to respond to the forms of unwaged (or under-waged) labor that result from a strained economic system, one further stressed by the Covid-19 pandemic and other converging crises. One such form might be "de-commodified labor," to borrow Leigh Claire La Berge's term for artists who do not or cannot earn a sufficient wage for their work. (De-commodified work is not to be confused with work that was never intended to be commodified, or work in a world where people do not require wages). Since the 1970s, "labor's share of value has been decimated," through a process of financialization, neoliberalization, and/or the dissolution of welfare-state protections, and this "economic fluctuation has transformed art's philosophical claims to nonvalue" (La Berge 16). The increasing unlikelihood that one will earn a wage for artistic labor, La Berge argues, poses a real problem for older conceptions of the aesthetic, which claimed that art asserts autonomy by suspending or repressing its status as a commodity, and the waged labor that gives commodities value. Now, when the artist still needs a wage but nobody will pay her, the role of the aesthetic must be rethought.

This new conception of the aesthetic becomes clearer through another kind of unwaged work. This other kind of work includes the cleaning, caring, cooking and errand-running that Diop depicts in the recorded interactions with her grandmother and in the images of neighbors filmed through the window. Older conceptions of art's autonomy, according to Kerstin Stakemeier and Marina Vishmidt, assume the repression or suspension of labor. For an object to be "art," it must appear to "transcend" labor (think of the myth of "genius"), including, and perhaps especially, the gendered, racialized, repressed, and abjected kind of work often gathered under the rubric of "reproductive labor." This repression of labor affords art a particular ideological role within capitalism; as Stakemeier and Vishmidt observe: "Art is mimetic of capital in a very specific way: art mimetically assumes the role of the automatic subject of value" (55). Art, in other words, models the utopia that capitalists already think they live in, where



capital valorizes itself without the intervention of labor (though in reality, of course, capital is wholly dependent on labor).

Rather than repress such labor, they suggest, art should disclose it. Art should, by this logic, represent the "negativity, waste and uselessness of reproductive labour" in order to allegorize the "vulnerability of the social whole" (Vishmidt 3). Vishmidt's account provides a way to interpret Diop's direct representation of unwaged reproductive work as something other than affirmative. (It would be a problem to moralize care, particularly when it obligates the most vulnerable among us to prop up capitalism. It would be worse still to re-entrench the belief that care comes "naturally" to gendered and racialized care-workers). Finally, this account demonstrates how direct representation of care could somehow be ideologically subversive, by refusing to mimic or model the ideology that capital is a self-valorizing subject.

Refusing to naturalize reproductive labor, and particularly refusing to naturalize capitalism's distribution of care, does not mean that representations cannot be tender. Vishmidt's aesthetic of negativity, waste, and uselessness can be an effective de-naturalizing mode, but surely other aesthetics—for instance gentleness or compassion—can still possess this powerful negativity, as long as this aesthetic de-naturalizes capitalist relations. *In My Room* suggests, as I will demonstrate below, affective ambivalence about care, and yet, I will argue, the representations of reproductive labor allow emerging possibilities to surface. Diop's camera trains on her neighbors, Parisians passing their mandatory confinement washing dishes or cleaning curtains. Over the soundtrack, the filmmaker listens to her grandmother's stories, makes plans with Maji for outings, or negotiates home healthcare for her aging relative. Those scenes present the possibilities of care, an existing practice, however strained under capitalism, and a promise, perhaps, that another social relation is possible.

Care appears in many different guises in the film, sometimes represented explicitly, sometimes only implied. Viewers hear Mati and paid care workers, for instance, perform emotional labor; this type of care work is evident in conversations in which they must break the bad news of Maji's restricted mobility with compassion, and when they must meet Maji's understandable protests with patience. Viewers also hear Mati and Maji perform what Evelyn Nakano Glenn describes as "kin work" or "community mothering" (5), when they transmit intergenerational knowledge about the family—when Maji, for instance, shares memories about Paris under German Occupation, or about her own mother's singing voice. Furthermore, direct physical care and services are provided by paid care workers, Nabila and Aminata, who are both invoked in the recordings. Altogether, Diop's film registers, however directly or indirectly, many recognized forms of care work: emotional labor, kin labor, direct physical care and services, and care of physical surroundings.

Though Diop's film is often tender, care is nevertheless presented as work. Consider, for example, a recorded conversation between a reluctant Maji and the person in charge of a live-in care association. Maji brings light hostility to the interaction, while the designated guardian answers firmly. When Maji diminishes her interlocuter's professional and personal capacities, the guardian replies, dodging the implicit insult, "I chose this profession." The designated guardian's carefully calibrated affect is a kind of labor, absorbing the shock of Maji's aggression (understandable in Maji's situation, but nevertheless a professional challenge for the guardian). By including this scene in the film, Diop eschews sentimentality. The voices on the soundtrack are caring, but they are also—emphatically—working.

Diop's concerns are timely, as the Covid-19 pandemic brought particular attention to care work. Even as paid care workers, including medical staff and those in eldercare facilities, played a particularly vital role, the pandemic also exposed the dangers and vulnerabilities of working conditions in these roles. Moreover, the pandemic exposed the uneven distribution of essential work and the potentially lethal risk posed by such work, as a disproportionate share of waged care work was performed by poor, racialized, and immigrant women. Though data on race is difficult to collect in France, it is possible to make inferences. The data demonstrates that foreign women are significantly more likely to perform waged care work than women born in France (Morel 22). Data also shows that foreign-born French nationals or residents were much more likely to die from Covid-19 than their French-born counterparts, with Asian and African groups especially affected (Papon and Robert-Bobée). Reading between the lines, it seems clear that the very workers who do most of the care were exposed to the worst effects of Covid-19.

Even those households that relied less than others on waged care work were squeezed by social distancing and pandemic-related confinements. In households where adults combined waged work with unwaged eldercare and childcare duties, responsibility for this latter was placed disproportionately upon women. Data from before the pandemic suggests that women were already doing a disproportionate share of unwaged care work, and data suggests that women also performed a disproportionate amount of childcare and homeschooling during mandatory confinement (Roy; Albouy and Legleye). Thus, the

pandemic has brought renewed attention to care work, even as it has exposed (at least for those who could afford to not know before) the contradictions and inequities of care under capitalism.

Despite increased attention to the issue, the contradictions of care are not new, particularly not for those who have been shouldering the bulk of the work. A tradition of scholarship and activism documents the ongoing crises of care. Recently, Kate Doyle Griffiths has argued how a new wave of "women's, queer, and class-struggle organizing" has revived, and also complicated, a longer tradition of "class consciousness rooted in an underlying crisis of social reproduction" (2). As Griffiths explains, this tradition is advanced not just through continuity, but also through productive confrontation, such as those points of contention that distinguish, for example, the autonomous feminist tradition of the 1970s, calls for decommodification or collaborative commons, and finally, Marxian Social Reproduction Theory. Together, these analyses elaborate an ongoing effort to understand and organize around the problem of care under capitalism.

For the purposes of my argument, it is important to note that the disagreement can enrich cultural analysis. There is a sharp debate about whether care points to emerging anti-capitalist alternatives, to regressive forms of social relations under capitalism, or to a new mutation of the same old capitalism. On the one hand, care has stirred utopian imaginations. Some of these demands focus on recognizing care work through wages, the goal that mobilized the Wages for Housework movements of the 1970s (Federici; Dalla Costa). More recently, Sarah Jaffe has argued for remuneration as a transitional demand; if the state must pay for reproductive labor, the thinking goes, it would have to reduce demand or collectivize such labor. Waged care work anchors the twinned call for a low-carbon economy and increased recognition for care work (Isser). On the other hand, many are skeptical about the utopian potential of care; as Griffiths has argued, the recent return of unwaged or poorly waged care work may represent a phase of capitalist hyper-exploitation. At present, care occupies a razer's edge—between utopian possibilities and the threat of appropriation, or intensification of capitalism.

This uncertainty does not weaken the case for care in Diop's film. In fact, uncertainty strengthens the claim that care is an emergent strain. As I argued earlier in the essay, there is no surer sign of the emergent than possibility paired with risk, a genuine alternative that may also be appropriated by capitalism.

## Conclusion

The analysis above explores how the work of art acknowledges its status as a commodity, how it protects its status as art, and perhaps most importantly, how it might signal alternatives to capitalist markets. *In My Room* unites these elements with a vocabulary specific to the Covid-19 pandemic, when awareness of capitalism's ongoing contradictions became widespread and acute. Diop's activities onscreen testify to colliding economic, health, and care crises during the pandemic.

One element of Diop's film, however, remains as yet unexplained—the sparkles. *In My Room* is full of glints, glitters, and flashes. Afternoon sunlight glistens on the surface of a neighboring skyscraper. A window opened at just the right angle reflects daylight, a glowing rectangle that stands out against rows of windows. In another shot, Diop playfully pairs image and sound; while the light shimmers off the crystal on a Miu Miu dress hanging near a window, the filmmaker hums over the soundtrack. Her voice—dun dun dun, dun dun dun—matches the rhythmic blinking of the crystals as the dress rotates ever so slightly in the sunlight. Each point of light has a slightly different effect, but together they constitute a repeated visual trope in the film. By their nature, each flash is both attractive and puzzling; it is the first thing to draw the eye in a composition, and yet a flare is also an interruption of the visual field, a blank spot in the shot.

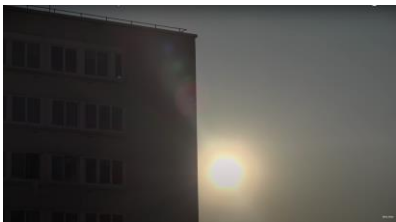


Figure 8: Mati Diop, *In My Room* (2020)

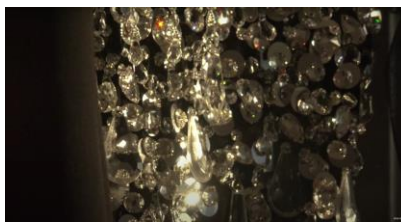


Figure 9: Mati Diop, *In My Room* (2020)

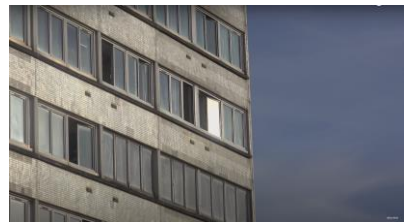


Figure 10: Mati Diop, *In My Room* (2020)

The points of light that punctuate *In My Room* sparkle like so many puncta. "That unexpected flash which sometimes crosses [the] field" of a photograph, the punctum, in the argot of Roland Barthes, marks the personal, the contingent, the unexpected element of a photograph that seizes a single viewer (94). By contrast, the punctum's counterpart, the studium, refers to the content, the social context, and historical background of an image. If the studium of Diop's film includes the pandemic, care work, the history of women's filmmaking, the question of financing the arts, and the obligation to the fashion house financing the film, then the punctum would be something else entirely. Perhaps those little flashes of light stand in for that missing quality, an intimate, unanticipated, and irreplicable connection between viewer and image.

What is the order of priority between studium and punctum? Though Barthes favored the punctum, that does not necessarily have to be our ultimate horizon of critique at present. Suppose the logic of the commodity, mediated through Miu Miu, provides the collective and contingent conditions of *In My Room*. The sparkles, by contrast, would represent the viewer's individual and subjective connection to Diop's film. What we need, still, is a third option, a collective *and* subjective attachment to art. Perhaps the work of art can show us how to mediate between private losses and a shared sense of commitment. This judgment would, of course, be a matter of interpretation and open to debate. Not universal, but collective and contested. The best works of art from 2020 may be the ones that return us to the studium of the pandemic with this new sense of collective judgment. More funding for artists! A more equitable distribution of care work! Quality care for every comrade! Just material support, recognition, and protection for care workers!

### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Art, Society, Aesthetics." *Aesthetic Theory*, edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, 2002.
- . "Commitment." *New Left Review*, vol. I, no. 87-88, Oct. 1974, pp. 75-89.
- Akerman, Chantal, director. *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai Du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. Paradise Films, 1975.
- . *No Home Movie*. Icarus Films, 2015.
- Albouy, Valérie, and Stéphane Legleye. "Conditions de vie pendant le confinement: des écarts selon le niveau de vie et la catégorie socioprofessionnelle." *INSEE Focus*, vol. 197, 19 June 2020, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4513259#titre-bloc-9>. Accessed 24 June 2021.
- Banks, Mark. "The Work of Culture and C-19." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 4, Aug. 2020, pp. 648-54.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. Translated by Richard Howard, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1981.
- Brown, Nicholas. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Deckard, Sharae. "Peripheral Realism, Millennial Capitalism, and Roberto Bolaño's 2666." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 73, no. 3, Sept. 2012, pp. 351-72.
- Dalla Costa, Mariarosa. "Introduction to the Archive of Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework." *Viewpoint Magazine*, 31 Oct. 2015, <https://viewpointmag.com/2015/10/31/introduction-to-the-archive-of-the-feminist-struggle-for-wages-for-housework-donated-by-mariarosa-dalla-costa/>.
- Diop, Alice and Olivier Barlet. "'It Is Up to Us to Work on Our Own Complexes': An Interview with Alice Diop." *Black Camera*, translated by Beti Ellerson, vol. 8, no. 1, 2016, pp. 218-22.
- Diop, Mati, director. *In My Room*. Miu Miu, 2020.
- Federici, Silvia. *Wages Against Housework*. Falling Wall Press, 1975.
- Gay, Amandine. "Césars, Creation, Independence, and Radicality." *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, Jan. 2022.
- Griffiths, Kate Doyle. "Labor Valorization and Social Reproduction: What Is Valuable about the Labor Theory of Value." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2020, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss2/4/>.
- Isser, Mindy. "A Low-Carbon Economy Will Be Built by Nannies, Caregivers and House Cleaners." *In These Times*, 22 Oct. 2019, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/green-new-deal-climate-labor-domestic-workers-nannies-house-cleaners>. Accessed 4 July 2021.
- Jaffe, Sarah. "The Factory in the Family: The Radical Vision of Wages for Housework." *The Nation*, 14 Mar. 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wages-for-houseworks-radical-vision/>.
- La Berge, Leigh Claire. *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Duke UP, 2019.
- "Miu Miu Women's Tales." *PradaGroup*, <https://www.pradagroup.com/content/pradagroup/en/news-media/stories/miu-miu-womens-tales.html>. Accessed 30 Dec. 2021.
- «Monsieur le Président, cet oubli de l'art et de la culture, réparez-le!». *Le Monde*, 30 Apr. 2020, [https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2020/04/30/monsieur-le-president-de-la-republique-cet-oubli-des-millions-de-gens-qui-portent-l-art-et-la-culture-reparez-le\\_6038211\\_3246.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2020/04/30/monsieur-le-president-de-la-republique-cet-oubli-des-millions-de-gens-qui-portent-l-art-et-la-culture-reparez-le_6038211_3246.html).
- Morel, Nathalie. "The Political Economy of Domestic Work in France and Sweden in a European Perspective: LIEPP Working Paper." *HAP Open Science*, 2, Oct. 2012, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00789919/document>.

- Nakano Glenn, Evelyn. *Forced to Care: Coercion and Caregiving in America*. Harvard UP, 2012.
- Papon, Sylvain, and Isabelle Robert-Bobée. "Une Hausse des décès deux fois plus forte pour les personnes nées à l'étranger que pour celles nées en France en mars-avril 2020." *INSEE Focus*, vol. 198, 7 July 2020, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4627049#consluter>. Accessed 24 June 2021.
- Roy, Delphine. "Unpaid Domestic Work: 60 Billion Hours in 2010." *INSEE Première*, vol. 1423, 22 Nov. 2012, <https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/2123971#titre-bloc-7>. Accessed 24 June 2021.
- Sauri, Emilio. "Autonomy After Autonomy, or the Novel Beyond Nation: Roberto Bolaño's 2666." *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, edited by Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 49-66.
- Stakemeier, Kerstin, and Marina Vishmidt. *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis, and Contemporary Art*. Mute Publishing, 2016.
- Travkina, Ekaterine, and Pierluigi Sacco. "Culture Shock: COVID-19 and the Cultural and Creative Sectors." *OECD*, <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/culture-shock-covid-19-and-the-cultural-and-creative-sectors-08da9e0e/>. Accessed 24 June 2021.
- Tucker-Abramson, Myka. "The Minimal Politics of Autonomy." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 22, no. 3, Nov. 2020, <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3914>.
- Vishmidt, Marina. "The Two Reproductions in (Feminist) Art and Theory Since the 1970s." *Third Text*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2017, pp. 49-66.
- Williams, Raymond. "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent." *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford UP, 1977, pp. 121-27.

**Author Profile:** Brittany Murray is Assistant Professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and where she teaches French and Francophone studies and cinema. Murray's scholarly interests include gender, migration, work, and twentieth and twenty-first century culture. Recent publications have appeared or will appear in *French Cultural Studies*, *Short Film Studies*, and *The Comparatist*. She is co-editor of the volume, *Migration, Displacement, and Higher Education: Now What?* (Palgrave 2022) and is currently preparing a periodizing study of 1970s France with the assistance of a UT Humanities Center fellowship. Email: [bmurra13@utk.edu](mailto:bmurra13@utk.edu)