

## Foreign Bodies, Community and Trauma in the Films of Claire Denis: *Beau Travail* (1999), *35 Rhums* (2008) and *White Material* (2009)

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... if my films have a common link, maybe it's being a foreigner – it's common for people who are born abroad – they don't know so well where they belong. It's not the kind of thing you find in literature, music or photography – being from abroad makes you look different.

– Claire Denis [\[1\]](#)

Having grown up in Africa as the daughter of a French civil servant, French writer/director Claire Denis was positioned as an outsider. Whereas this status was clearly marked by her skin colour in early life, returning to France as a teenager also presented challenges in terms of foreignness and identification – despite it being the country where she was born, and of which she is a citizen. Douglas Morrey posits that ‘in the filmmaking of Claire Denis, the body is the limit between sense and world. The body is always other – the means by which the other appears to me but also by which I am revealed to myself, as other’. [\[2\]](#) This statement has resonance not just for the director's choice of themes, but also for her stylistic choices: the use of cinematography, sound and editing to explore the intersections of foreign bodies. Martine Beugnet makes the point that Denis' ‘perception of the Other is always complex and ambiguous’, and is ‘that which spurs curiosity and creates desire’. [\[3\]](#) As such, rather than reinforcing binary oppositions that seek to stigmatise, the director is subtle in her questioning of the effects of dominant cultures in multicultural contexts. Foreign bodies are presented, not so much with the intention of defining difference, but as a means of accessing other worlds, and questioning one's perception of self. Denis offers us tales of characters with complex and/or traumatic cultural and personal back stories, exploring the French postcolonial landscape, be it in Paris or an African setting.

This article seeks to examine the concept of foreignness, as articulated across the films *White Material* (2009) and *Beau Travail* (*Good Work*, 1999) – both of which explore conflict in African settings – and in the urban Parisian drama *35 Rhums* (*35 Shots of Rum*, 2008). The Oxford Dictionary defines *foreign* as an adjective meaning ‘strange or unfamiliar’, that includes elements that are ‘of, from, in, or characteristic of

a country or language other than one's own'. The noun *foreignness* can be used to identify the feeling associated with these elements; both words derive their meaning from the Latin *foris*, meaning 'outside'. In terms of the human race, I define foreignness as the name given to the characteristics that make a person appear strange or unfamiliar: physical factors, such as gender, skin or eye colour, or behavioural differences drawn from 'other' cultural norms, social and/or language traditions. As a pronoun, 'other' can be defined as 'that which is distinct from, different from, or opposite to something or oneself'. I believe the concepts of 'foreignness' and 'the other' underpin Denis' work as a writer/director and that her presentations of them are complex.

Writing on the representation of humans identified as 'white' in his ground-breaking text of the same name, Richard Dyer makes the point that 'to represent people is to represent bodies'. [4] Taking a cue from this author, I analyse the portrayal of bodies in the three chosen films. I will refer to Dyer's key work on the representation of whiteness and to the work of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, who, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* 'try to address overlapping multiplicities of identity and affiliation' rather than 'recreat[e] neat binarisms' such as black/white or male/female. [5] Following on from Dyer's work, Gwendolyn Foster makes the point that 'the cinema has been remarkably successful at imposing whiteness as a cultural norm, even as it exposes the inherent instability of such arguably artificial binaries as male/female, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, classed/not classed'. [6] By examining Denis' portrayal of bodies from a variety of different cultural backgrounds, I will argue that, in films such as *Beau Travail*, *35 Rhums* and *White Material*, Denis has moved away from the cinematic representation described by Foster. Finally, I will approach the complex topic of otherness and postcoloniality by looking at the specific area of trauma and the body, with reference to the theories of Ann Kaplan and Ban Wang, and exploring questions of a psychological nature: specifically, how bodies contain and transfer experience and knowledge of individual and/or shared trauma.

#### *Postcolonial shame: White Material*

In a recent interview with the filmmaker, Andrew Hussey notes:

Denis read [Frantz] Fanon when she was about fourteen and [...] what she found most humbling in his work was his analysis of the degrading effect of the shame and humiliation, which infect coloniser and colonised alike. 'I understood that humiliation was the important feeling that people had in this relationship', she says, 'and this is on both sides, black and white'. [7]

This theme is explored most recently in *White Material*, a story set in an unnamed African country, where Maria Vial (Isabelle Huppert) struggles to save her family's coffee plantation in the midst of civil war and racial unrest. As her business and family unit crumbles, Maria makes a connection with le Boxeur (Isaach De Bankolé), a wounded African resistance leader, now hiding from both the authorities and rebel gangs. Maria's lethargic and impressionable son Manuel (Nicolas Duvauchelle), a teenager who spends most of his time in his room, flees the family home and forms an alliance with a gang of local rebel children. As plot events unfold in dramatic fashion, Maria becomes increasingly stubborn and irrational, refusing to abandon her plantation. Violence escalates, leading to the death of a staff member and of her ex-husband (Christopher Lambert). Finally, having lost everything, Maria is left with no one to blame but her ailing father-in-law and family patriarch, Henri (Michel Subor), upon whom she enacts the ultimate act of violence and revenge: death by machete.

Taking the Vial family as its focus, *White Material* chronicles the violent transformations of a range of characters, and in doing so, breaks from typical portrayals of postcolonial behaviours and relationships. Shohat and Stam make the point that 'dominant cinema has spoken for the "winners" of history, in films which idealised colonial enterprise as a philanthropic "civilising mission" motivated by a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny'. [8] By contrast, Denis' film suggests that there are no 'winners' and that the values and practices associated with past colonialism – of seizing, occupying and cultivating the land, and of transmitting imported values to new populations – are no longer viable

nor acceptable. Throughout the film, Maria's focus is the cultivation of her coffee beans, an act that seems increasingly illogical as civil conflicts escalate around her. Rather than follow orders to evacuate her property, Maria puts her family in danger by refusing to abandon her crop, and later finds her property invaded. Certainly, being visible as white is no longer a 'passport to privilege' as was the case in colonial contexts. [9] Racial hierarchies are transformed, with those that once held power (in this case, the Vial family), now victims of their own inability to move with the times. At the conclusion of the film we are left with a sense that Maria's life is over. Her European-headed plantation is burnt by African soldiers, her family dead and she herself is a murderer; indeed, there seems no future for Africans and Europeans to peacefully co-exist. Denis' film does, however, end with a small sign of hope for the future of the unnamed African country: a young soldier runs into the forest with Le Boxeur's red beret, signalling future resistance and resurgence.

In *White*, Dyer makes the point that, historically, white people have been seen as the norm: 'not of a certain race, they're just the human race'. [10] He calls for works in which white people are alert to their particularity, so that whiteness is 'made strange'. [11] The Vial family (the only white characters to appear in *White Material*) are surrounded by African characters occupying a range of class positions, including servants, neighbours, resistance fighters and government officials. I would argue that in this film, Denis has achieved Dyer's challenge. The casting of the pale and freckly Isabelle Huppert as Maria and the blonde-haired Christopher Lambert as her ex-husband, means that the family at the centre of the drama stands out physically, as well as on account of their wealth and power as employers. Several scenes show Maria focussing on her physical appearance: applying red lipstick or changing from work clothes into a dress. In fact, the changing of costume functions as a means to understand the timeline of the story, with frequent jumps between past and present recognisable due to the protagonist's changed dress. More than just fulfilling the function of marking time, however, Maria's clothing and makeup further identifies her as an outsider. After her family house is ransacked, a key scene shows her entry into town, where she discovers a female gang member wearing one of her dresses and a set of her earrings. The two women stare at one another, with Maria seemingly unnerved by this dangerous stranger who is now proudly adorned with her 'white material'. At this moment it is difficult to determine who is more displaced, with these pieces of clothing and jewellery signifying changed statuses of power and control.

Like his mother, Maria's son Manuel is also positioned as an outsider wanting to form alliances with the local community. Notably, the body of the blonde-haired and blue-eyed teenager is marked by a series of large tattoos, further differentiating his skin from that of the local Africans. His physical features could be considered 'uniquely white, to the degree that a non-white person with such features is considered, usually literally, to be remarkable'. [12] This conspicuous nature of Manuel's appearance places him at odds with his young neighbours. In a key scene he follows two intruding rebel boys with spears into the Vial plantation fields. Not fully aware of the potential danger of the situation, Manuel is quickly captured by the boys, who strip him of his clothing, cut off a chunk of his blonde hair and label him 'yellow dog'. Devastated by this reminder of his physical difference, Manuel returns to his homestead, and driven by inner turmoil and the quest for empowerment, he shaves his head in the family bathroom. Having then removed one of the physical traits that separates him from other youth, he stuffs his cropped tufts of hair into the mouth of a young female African servant, an attempt to impose his physicality onto another that is, ultimately, an unsuccessful bid for empowerment. Manuel flees the plantation with a rifle and a crazed expression, now aware that he is no longer protected by his status as the son of a plantation owner. Looking to increase his chances for survival, he seeks to form an alliance with the rebel group that tortured him, and does so by inviting them into his house. Manuel's movement towards this dangerous group brings him a short reprieve; however, his death comes when he is caught in a fire in the Vial family's large barn. Whereas his mother has the wealth, experience and authority to form relationships with government officials and servants, Manuel is completely alienated from his peers, demonstrating again how the film challenges traditional notions of whiteness, and features transformations and shifts of power as the two characters renegotiate their identities (and those associated with the coloniser/colonised)

in a conflict ridden postcolonial setting.

The cinematography of *White Material* includes cameras that stay close to bodies, a stylistic choice that connects the audience to the physicality of the protagonists' skin, whilst the choice of angle, a frequently side-on gaze on the protagonist, also restricts our ability to access character psychology. Instead of traditional shot/reverse shots of characters, Denis favours a floating handheld camera view that obscures facial expression (the face is often turned away from the camera), moves from the side, and lags over the shoulder of moving bodies. As well as sometimes creating a sense of dread comparable to the over-the-shoulder shot often employed in traditional horror films, the lack of full facial exposure/expression adds to the ambiguity of sparse plot developments. The audience must imagine and/or formulate character motivations and responses, bringing their own personal biases and experience to the film viewing. This is evident as the protagonist Maria combs the African landscape in an attempt to find her missing son. With social order disintegrating around her, the disembodied camera keeps us guessing as to the extent of Maria's psychological distress and/or resilience, as we are frequently unable to obtain a clear view of her face. In the sense that the motivations for Maria's actions are not always clearly signposted for the viewer, the strangeness of her body goes beyond her physical appearance to include her reactions and behaviours. Whiteness is 'made strange' on a behavioural level, through our inability to access Maria's psychology.

#### *Displaced bodies: Beau Travail*

*Beau Travail* (1999), a feature film commissioned by cable TV channel Arte in a series on the theme of 'foreignness', is set in the former French colony of Djibouti in North-East Africa. This film also allowed Denis to explore postcolonial behaviours and relationships. Furthermore, in *Beau Travail*, Denis interrogates the physicality of the body and reappropriates the gaze for local African women, therefore subverting traditional representations of the exotic other. Loosely based on Herman Melville's story *Billy Budd, Sailor* (first published in 1924), the film tells the story of a former French Foreign Legion officer, Galoup (Denis Lavant), who recalls his emotionally isolated and regimented life as a leader of troops in the not so distant past. His recollection of events in Djibouti is presented in flashbacks intercut with scenes of present-day France. Galoup first recalls the moment when his mostly happy existence in Djibouti was disrupted by the arrival of Sentain (Grégoire Colin), a young soldier who captured the attention of Galoup's superior Bruno Forrestier (Michel Subor). Galoup's resulting jealousy led to destructive acts, which revealed the full extent of his status as outsider and also led to his dismissal from the Legion. Plot developments are interspersed between images of bodies in motion as the troops perform their exercises and daily routines in choreographed sequences. Denis makes a strong comment on the legacy of French colonialism with this group of men: of their different ethnic backgrounds and appearances (black, Asian and predominantly white), all working to become part of an unsegmented whole in the harsh North-East African landscape. These are displaced men from a variety of backgrounds now seeking to master a dislocated space: the postcolonial Djibouti landscape. Susan Hayward relates Galoup's crisis to that of the 'post-colonial (white, male) body in crisis,' as he (and in a more general sense, the Legion as a whole) attempts to get his location under control. [13] Surrounded and observed by a range of foreign bodies, including the North African and Arab women they encounter in the Djibouti streets and bars, the legionnaires work to master their unfamiliar environment. As with *White Material*, Denis offers us an insight into this unknown world, without being didactic or nostalgic in regards to colonial history and its aftermath.

*Beau Travail* is an extremely sensual film with a focus on the choreography of human movement. One of the early shots of the film begins with the camera panning across sand to show shadows of motionless human bodies. The camera tilts upwards to reveal a legionnaire posing with arms raised into the air, surrounded by others in similar stances, all facing different directions. In their silent tai-chi style poses, they resemble a frozen human sculpture that exists within the environment. This sense that human bodies are part of the landscape reoccurs in several shots, such as when the troop of soldiers march through a wide shot of the barren desert, their steps in time to the dramatic and poetic orchestra of human voices

singing. Here, the audience is physically kept at a distance through the use of an extreme-wide shot; the activities of the legionnaires are presented without context or narrative explanation. Other scenes of *Beau Travail* reinforce the routinised and regimented movement of the soldiers' black or white bodies as the camera captures the troops at work digging holes or ironing shirts in their desert habitat. With a comment that captures the ideals of French colonialism, Morrey describes the legionnaires' activities as seeking 'at once to impose themselves on the landscape and to mark themselves off from it: shaping it, appropriating it, reconstructing its roads, but at the same time fencing themselves in and preserving their peculiar, inward-looking dynamics'. [14] In the pursuit of this goal, I would suggest that the tightly knit unit of soldiers becomes more than the sum of its parts: personal histories and varying ethnicities can be discarded in favour of group identification and history. In a sense, we see Shohat and Stam's idea of 'radical multiculturalism' at work as 'the hierarchy that makes some communities "minor" and others "major" and "normative"' is challenged by the group. [15] With their shaved heads and frequently naked torsos, the individual identities of the legionnaires are lost, their male bodies are reduced to their surface physicality and all bodies seem equal.

Writing on the presentation of the white body in American films set against colonial backdrops (*Rambo* [dir. Ted Kotcheff, 1982], for example), Dyer makes the point that images of hard, contoured bodies foster a sense of separation and containment; 'a hard, contoured body does not look like it runs the risk of being merged into other bodies. A sense of separation and boundedness is important to the white male ego'. [16] In contrast, Denis' film includes several scenes of exercise routines involving the entangling of toned and contoured but seemingly vulnerable naked black and white bodies. One scene in particular shows dust rise as the legionnaires throw themselves back and forth into one another's open arms. Earlier, a group of soldiers clad in blue swimwear huddle together as one tends to the wounded foot of another; they work as a unit rather than individual entities. However, the protagonist Galoup occupies the position of outsider, not just because of his status as their superior, but due to his physical distance (as watcher) from the group. Additionally, the fact that he is clothed in a cap and uniform (whereas the lower rank legionnaires appear sweaty and shirtless) reflects his distinction from the lower ranked soldiers and further distinguishes him from his colleagues. Whereas Dyer describes the naked body of Hollywood adventure films as a vulnerable body and the loss of clothing to mean a loss of prestige, I would argue that on the subject of clothing and prestige, a different set of values are at play for Galoup in *Beau Travail*. Whilst he has rank (in and out of uniform), Galoup is an outsider who is unable to access the camaraderie and team spirit of the younger officers. As the clothed commandant, his white body seems especially foreign, not just from the lower ranked legionnaires, but from the Djibouti locals, and as such, his appearance contributes to his alienation rather than facilitates alliances.

The displacement and alterity of the soldiers' vulnerable, exposed bodies is reinforced by the distant but interested gaze of Djibouti locals who pass by on foot or in an open vehicle. Through their eyes, the activities of the legionnaires are made strange, as it is the soldiers who are on the outside (rather than the African locals); it is they who become the objects of spectacle. Denis has commented on her desire to portray black people as desiring subjects (rather than as exotic objects) and *Beau Travail* is a film in which the representation of the exotic 'Other' (usually the black characters within films featuring a multi-racial cast) are explored and subverted. [17] This occurs through the positioning of the Djibouti locals as a knowledgeable social group. With *Beau Travail* Denis reappropriates the gaze for the local Djibouti women in particular, with many sequences revealing them to be active and desiring. For example, a later sequence from the film shows the legionnaires move to a new location where they mark their territory with painted stone paths and begin training exercises in an unoccupied building. Local women watch from a distance, fascinated, as this group of outsiders go about their array of tasks. They are active bearers of the gaze and rather, it is the Legionnaires who become the exotic Other. A similar point is made in *White Material* when, as I have described, Maria comes face to face with a young rebel woman who is adorned in her clothing and jewellery. The camera gives us a series of close-up shot-reverse-shots as the two women stare at one another. Both Maria and her opponent are active bearers of the look, so that

neither French nor African woman holds the power of the gaze at this moment. However, the fact that Maria is at this point outnumbered by a large group of young African rebels draws attention to her difference and places her in a vulnerable position.

### *Trauma, Memory and Remorse*

In *Traumatic Contact Zones and Embodied Translators*, Ann Kaplan suggests that bodies have histories linked to traumatic past events. She uses the term ‘contact zone’ (borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt) to refer to cross-cultural intersections of subjects who were ‘previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures and whose trajectories now intersect’. [18] In the case of *White Material* and *Beau Travail*, this ‘contact zone’ describes multicultural social and geographical spaces affected by civil war, military occupation and/or the aftermaths of French colonialism, as lived out in contemporary Africa.

As previously mentioned, both *White Material* and *Beau Travail*’s fractured narratives jump back and forth through time; in the case of the latter, between contemporary France (where a solitary Galoup is now exiled) and Djibouti (the not so distant past). Denis favours ambiguity in the organisation of plot as the film’s traumatic events unfold. In the case of *Beau Travail* Galoup narrates the story with remorse, now able to recognise his unstable emotional state, his obsession with Sentain, and his resulting destructive behaviour, which almost cost the younger officer his life. Hayward suggests that Galoup’s remorse points towards ‘the neurotic state in which the dislocated postcolonial body can find itself, [...] a neurosis which is the by-product of repressed history/memory/desire and which leads to pathological behaviour whose recognisable effects can take the form of uncontrolled economies of desire’. [19] Kaplan’s concept of ‘traumatic contact zones’ provides a similar explanation. In the case of large-scale catastrophes such as war or colonisation, Kaplan suggests the existence of ‘collective’ or ‘shared’ trauma and proposes that traumatic memories are passed from generation to generation of peoples unable to cognitively process events directly. These ‘traces of past events,’ are expressed in the form of ‘repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours’. [20]

While Kaplan does not cite him directly, a similar phenomenon was described by the Frantz Fanon, who investigated ‘the impact of the internalising process of inferiority that widely affected those who lived in former colonies or had come from these territories to establish themselves in France’. [21] According to Fanon, the effects of this process on the oppressed and oppressor continue well beyond decolonisation. I would suggest that in her portrayal of foreignness, Denis associates bodies with histories of trauma, the memory of which is stored in the body, rather than cognitively processed by the brain. Unprocessed emotions and desires are expressed through thoughts, dreams or behaviours, both during and after the trauma itself. In this sense Galoup’s remorse is linked to his experience in the ‘contact zone’ of Djibouti, the full trauma of which was absorbed into his body, rather than cognitively dealt with at the time. The protagonist’s displacement and foreignness, even upon his return to France, appears linked to an internalised history of trauma, which is expressed most notably through bodily movement alone in his final scene on the dance floor in a Djibouti discothèque. As the disco track ‘Rhythm of the Night’ plays, his frenzied steps in an empty nightclub (one seen earlier as a crowded meeting place for legionnaires and local women) allows the awkward movement of his body to reveal the full extent of his alienation from his peers. The absence of both the other legionnaires and the Djibouti women from the nightclub reflects Galoup’s status as an outsider in relation to both groups. Although he begins his solitary dance seemingly in control of his body, his movements become increasingly bizarre and frenetic, until finally, he appears to have lost control of himself. On the subject of preparation for this energetic, unrehearsed scene, which was filmed in a single long take, Denis comments that ‘I told him (Denis Lavant) it’s the dance between life and death’. [22] Galoup’s potential death is foreshadowed in the film’s penultimate scene, in which he lies on a neatly made bed with a gun in his hands. Denis’ camera gives us a close-up shot of a pulsing, twitching vein in his forearm: a reminder of his vulnerable beating heart. The dance scene that follows could be read as a rare moment in which the unprocessed trauma of his experience in Djibouti escapes from his body in a series of uncontrolled frenzied movements.

Kaplan’s theory of traumatic contact zones may also illuminate events in *White Material*. In the case of this film, traumatic memories (in this case linked to colonisation) are passed from generation to generation of people who are unable to cognitively process them directly. As with Galoup’s dance

sequence, a frenzy of movement can be observed in the final scene of *White Material*, in which Maria murders her father-in-law Henri, the Vial family patriarch and original coloniser of the land. Following the discovery of the charred remains of her rebel son (burnt to death in a torched barn), the film cuts to a medium shot of Henri, seemingly alone in the still smouldering building. A floating camera takes us close in behind his head and shoulders, where a machete suddenly plunges into his neck. A series of jump cuts connect four shots of four further blows, each time crossing the 180-degree line of spatial continuity to add confusion to the unfolding events. A final, wider shot reveals Maria as the holder of the machete, as she strikes her final, murderous blow, before a close-up leaves us with the image of her blood stained face and tortured expression. Here, the use of jump cuts creates spatial disorientation that, with the subject matter, further shocks the viewer, and hides the identity of Henri's attacker until the end of the scene. *White Material's* violent final scene is not sign posted for the viewer, and is in line with the observation that Denis' work features 'the erased traces of a repressed past' which 'constantly threaten to resurface, and cyclically, mysteriously, as in a traumatic expression of forgotten memories, violently erupt'. [23] Henri's violent murder is in a sense driven by Maria's repressed trauma, the origins of which could be associated with the violence that had previously kept inequitable black/white relations in place. The patriarch's death signals the end of the Vial family's reign over the African land and the beginning of a new chapter for the local African people.

#### *Foreignness and Community: 35 Rhums*

*White Material* and *Beau Travail* challenge concepts of foreignness by exploring relationships between social groups in African settings. By contrast, Denis' 2008 film *35 Rhums* shifts away from themes of postcolonial conflict to explore domestic life in the contemporary, multicultural suburbs of Paris. Here, a tight knit group of multi-racial family and friends are united by their work (as RER train drivers) and their dwellings (a block of apartments). Identity is drawn from individual and cultural memory stored within the body. While these memories may not involve such immediate and/or large scale trauma as that featured in *White Material* or *Beau Travail*, trauma is nonetheless present in the form of characters' references to family members now passed away, and broken relationships. In the case of this film, the concept of foreignness applies less to racial differences than to a renegotiation of identities: the roles of father, daughter, wife or lover. As such, identities are not singular but constructed across a range of intersecting positions and reference points.

The story of *35 Rhums* revolves around a mixed-race family: train driver and widow, Lionel (played by the Afro-Caribbean actor Alex Descas), his young adult daughter, Josephine (Mati Diop), and their network of multicultural friends, colleagues and neighbours, including taxi driver and Lionel's former lover Gabrielle (Nicole Dogué). The relationship between father and daughter is close, with backstory revealing a German wife and mother long since passed away. The memory of this family member is highly present, however, in the form of photographs, keepsakes and in the unspoken absence underlying daily domestic life. Similarly, memories of Lionel's former relationship with Gabrielle are presented vividly in old love letters found by Josephine. The interaction between these three characters of father, daughter and former surrogate mother sees an exchange of loving glances and embraces which implicate their bodies as containers of memories expressed through words and touch. When Josephine begins a romance with her longtime neighbor Noé (Grégoire Colin), Lionel must release his daughter to her future husband and adult life. This process involves a road trip to Germany, where Lionel and Josephine visit the grave of the deceased wife/mother, and the home of her living relatives. Denis describes the film as 'a sort of tragedy in a family sense,' with the division of father and daughter being 'the worse separation since the mother died'. [24] This separation means an end to the routine and small domestic rituals that father and daughter have built into their life together.

In *35 Rhums*, Denis well and truly moves beyond Dyer's project of making white strange, to portray the harmonious relationships of a group of multi-racial family and friends. The film shows peacefully co-existing characters who have multiple, overlapping affiliations with different cultures and countries

within a single family. Like Denis' previous Paris-based films (*S'en fout la mort* [*No Fear, No Die*, 1990] and *J'ai pas sommeil* [*I can't sleep*, 1994]), *35 Rhums* reflects France's status as a postcolonial nation in which a mélange of peoples exist without a consummate reference point in relation to ethnicity, evidence that 'the colonial is not dead,' but rather 'lives on in its "after-effects"'. [25] In this sense, Josephine's marriage to Noé could be considered an 'after-effect' of French colonialism, one that signals another overlap of ethnicities, with their family or any potential children they have able to identify across a range of intersecting positions such as black, white, African, French and/or German. Like *S'en fout la mort* and *J'ai pas sommeil*, *35 Rhums* is also significant in terms of the active voice given to each of its protagonists. Carrie Tarr makes the point that 'few French authored films account for the presence of immigrants in France through subjective, historically situated, realist dramas. Rather, representations of immigrants conventionally function as signs of otherness and trouble in popular genres like the *policier* (police drama) and the comedy'. [26] By contrast, *35 Rhums* presents a functional and harmonious, working class community, without the drama focused upon racial difference and/or social disadvantage that is seen in films such as Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (*Hate*, 1995) or Abdel Kechiche's *L'esquive* (*Dodge*, 2003), which centre on the difficulties of immigrant families living in the Paris *banlieue* (suburbs) in the last two decades. All of Denis' central characters are presented as active, desiring bodies and bearers of the gaze, regardless of their skin tone or physical appearance; moreover, they accept one another as such; there is no sign of conflict or alienation based on race. The portrayal of community in *35 Rhums* can be linked to Shohat and Stam's notion of 'mutual and reciprocal relativisation, the idea that the diverse cultures placed in play should come to perceive the limits of their own social and cultural perspective'. [27] The authors make the point that different cultural groups are able to obtain a clearer idea of themselves through recognising others: 'the point is not to embrace the other perspective completely but at least to recognise it, acknowledge it, take it into account, be ready to be transformed by it'. [28] I would argue that, with *35 Rhums*, Denis has created a world in which this notion is central. Looking beyond the colour of the face in the frame, the image is concerned with integration and harmony.

Returning to the idea of trauma contained within the body, in *35 Rhums* Denis focuses on the personal experiences of a handful of characters, which are often connected to past individual trauma, rather than foregrounding the shared trauma of various cultural groups. Outside the apartment block that is central to the film, the strongest sense of community comes from Lionel's workmates, a tightly knit group of RER train drivers of mostly French-African or Caribbean descent. The predominantly male drivers are seen enjoying after hours drinks and banding together to farewell a retiring colleague. Denis has commented on her interest in the Afro-Caribbean group, many of whom migrated to France in the 1960s to fill post-World War Two labour shortages, but resists making a comment about this community (and their past experience) as a whole. Rather, as previously mentioned, trauma is associated with the individual protagonists' memories of family members now passed away (Josephine has lost her mother; both of Noé's parents are deceased), and with broken relationships (Lionel and Gabrielle). These past losses are foregrounded by Josephine's potential movement away from her father.

For Lionel and Josephine, the renegotiation of identities, from daughter to wife, and from father to independent man, is fraught with anxieties concerning the continuation of their close relationship. This anxiety is captured in one of the film's key scenes, which, as with *Beau Travail*, sees emotion expressed through dance. On the way to a late night concert, Lionel, Josephine, Gabrielle and Noé seek food and shelter in an empty café after their car breaks down in heavy rain. When The Commodores' 'Nightshift' plays over the radio, a makeshift dance floor is created in the cafe, but instead of Galoup's frenzied nightclub steps, slow rhythmic movements suggest that anxieties are being overcome as Josephine passes (literally) from her father to her future husband on the dance floor. The family unit is key and Lionel, who was previously the centre of his daughter's life, moves to the outside and is replaced by Noé. An envious Gabrielle then watches as Lionel goes on to dance with the café's attractive female owner. At this moment, themes of otherness and exclusion are made evident through changing relationships and family dynamics rather than through representations of race.

Whereas attention is focused on the physical differences between the bodies portrayed in *White Material* or *Beau Travail*, *35 Rhums* foregrounds the mostly familiar bodily experiences of its protagonists as a means to demystify any sense of an exotic other. For example, in a sequence at the beginning of the film there is a long-take of the family's interior apartment front door as Josephine arrives home and prepares for dinner. This extended shot sets up domestic routines such as the removal of shoes on entry to the apartment, an action later repeated by Lionel who removes his clothes and showers in preparation for his evening meal at the end of his working day. Scenes such as this contribute to the film's 'oneiric and emotional world [...] built up out of banal, specific, precisely observed small actions,' and moreover, looking specifically at the portrayal of Lionel's body, they are important in removing a sense of otherness. [29] On the subject of the portrayal of such experiences on film, David MacDougall makes the point that, typically 'the most familiar bodily experiences are either completely absent or are treated with exaggerated caution,' including 'more mundane acts such as spitting, scratching, shaving, cutting the nails, bathing and so on'. [30] By contrast, we spend considerable time with Lionel as he undertakes mundane tasks such as having a shower and dressing. In these moments we are reminded that 'a naked body is a vulnerable body,' and that he is an ordinary, vulnerable man. [31] Later, when Noé leaves town on a business trip, a dressing-gown clad Lionel enters his apartment to close an unsecured window that is banging loudly in strong wind. Having accomplished this task, Lionel then sits in silence on his absent neighbour's couch, where he conspicuously breaks wind. We spend a few more seconds observing him on the couch before the film cuts to the following scene. This portrayal of Lionel as a functioning body, neither exotic nor sanitised, foregrounds his 'ordinary' experience in the world by focusing on details related to the ritualised experience of the everyday life, often with little or no consequence in terms of furthering the plot.

### *Bodies and Memories*

Each of the three films explored in this chapter illustrates Denis' statement that 'all my films function as a movement towards an unknown Other and towards the unknown in relation to other people'. [32] As I have suggested, in *White Material* and *Beau Travail*, the notion of foreignness, and more specifically of foreign bodies, is not only associated with physical difference, but with contrasting behaviours, embodied knowledge and histories of traumatic experience. In her portrayal of postcolonial French and African relations, Denis challenges the hierarchy that positions some communities as weak and others as strong, and blurs the line between controller/controlled. For *35 Rhums*, notions of racial difference are approached ambiguously; rather, Denis focuses on the relationship dynamics that concern a handful of protagonists with differing ethnic backgrounds. Here, the unknown indicates changing roles and futures as Josephine makes the transition from daughter to wife, and as Lionel renegotiates his position as father and provider.

Writing on Denis' portrayal of the body, Morrey notes that the director's 'frequent refusal to provide the traditional cinematic signifiers of psychological depth often means that the spectator is brought up short before the strangeness of these bodies as bodies, which in turn opens up an interrogation as to the sense of her images'. [33] I would argue that, for the three films discussed in this article, this lack of psychological depth, and the subsequent focus on the foreign, encourages the viewer to draw upon their own body of memories to align themselves with, or alternatively remain distanced from, the characters onscreen. The movement of Denis' protagonists from the inside or outside of a dominant group or structure, be it a racial group, a family relationship or social situation, is a significant theme – often enacted through violent means, as seen in the first two films discussed. For all three works, bodies are presented with the intention of exploring rather than defining difference, as a means to explore the French postcolonial landscape, and to question one's perception of self.

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### NOTES

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[9] Dyer, *White*, p. 44.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

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[13] Susan Hayward, 'Claire Denis' Films and the Post-colonial Body – with Special Reference to *Beau Travail* (1999)', *Studies in French Cinema*, Vol 1 No 3 (2001), p. 162.

[14] Morrey, 'Open Wounds', p. 13.

[15] Shohat & Stam, *Unthinking*, p. 47.

[16] Dyer, *White*, p. 152.

[17] 'In my films, black people are never objects. They are subjects who actively choose what they want. Producers usually have a very exotic idea about what black actors should do and where they should be seen. Producers' scripts would liken black characters to lions and elephants'. Denis quoted in Mark A. Reid, 'Claire Denis Interview: Colonial Observations', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, no. 40 (1996), pp. 67-72. Last accessed 7 September 2013: <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC40folder/ClaireDenisInt.html>

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