

Merudjina Normil'19

Marguerite W. Friedberg Fellowship Report

After an amazing abroad experience in Dakar, Senegal researching the place of women in film, I wanted to push my research towards a different francophone context with the same subject. Thanks to the Marguerite W. Friedberg Award, I could afford to conduct research on Afro-French and Franco-Senegalese women filmmakers in Paris to see if/how they were combating the male gaze and constructing senegalese womanhood. I aimed to meet with and to interview the filmmakers Alice Diop, Marie Ka, Dyana Gaye, and Safi Faye, so that I could get access to the films *Les Sénégalaises et La Sénégalaise* by Diop, “L’Autre Femme” by Ka, *Des Étoiles* by Gaye, and “La Passante” by Faye. These films stood out because they centered and focused on women. I was interested in seeing if the filmmakers framed the female body differently than male filmmakers, and if they constructed an oppositional gaze to the male gaze. I would have to travel to Paris, France because of the difficulty to view the films without the directors’ permission.

Before arriving to Paris, I was able to get the contact of Safi Faye and Alice Diop. Both responded expressing that they did not wish to speak with me about their films. Faye’s film was being restored and was undistributed, making it widely unavailable, so I was unable to watch it. Faye also shared that she did not do interviews because her films speak for themselves. Diop also declined an interview because she did not identify as a Senegalese woman filmmaker, since she was born and raised in France. She identified as Afro-French, which I had not considered at the start of my research when I had labeled Faye, Diop, Gaye, and Ka as solely Senegalese. Both responses presented new ideas and complications to the project. Diop’s reponse forced me to

reconsider how I labeled the filmmakers and interacted with their films, since one's identity and connection/distance to Senegal and Senegalese culture may alter the way they frame a Senegalese subject. Faye's response resulted in my research excluding "La Passante" due to its restoration process, while also presenting that I, the viewer, am entitled to my understanding of her films and possibly the others as well.

Though two women remained unresponsive and two declined interviews, I continued with my research and found all of the other films except for "La Passante". I used Union Catalog of France to track down the three films. I found *Les Sénégalaises et La Sénégalaise* and "L'Autre Femme" at the BnF (La Bibliothèque Nationale de la France) and I found *Des Étoiles* at la Bibliothèque Universitaire de Paris 8. Since I could not borrow either of the films from the two libraries, I spent most of my time in both locations until they closed. The topic of Sénégal in all of my films and the topic of migration in *Des Étoiles* inspired me to meet and to talk to migrants from Sénégal and Afro-French people of Senegalese descent. These conversations helped to paint a picture of the migrant and black experiences in Paris. The city would also bring connections to further my understanding of Afro-French identity, leading me to question my own identity in the context of Paris as well as the politics behind the identities of the filmmakers.

A girl that I met from Paris Pride 2018 invited me to an Afro-Punk event where I watched "La France Cachée". The film is a documentary on l'identité afro-française and how the name came to be. I learned that afro-français(e) or français(e) noir(e) are adjectives or labels meant to describe a person with a black complexion or identity who was born and/or raised in France. It was a very different formation of identity from blackness in the U.S., which intrigued me greatly. In the U.S., most people who identify as Black or African-American are descendants

of slaves. Other black americans who are immigrants or descendants of immigrants tend to combine their mother country to their American identity, like I do. I identify as Haitian-American. I was born in Haiti and raised in the U.S. This does not mean that there aren't any Afro-French people that combine their mother country with their French identity, it simply points out that during my time in Paris I did not meet anyone who was for example Franco- {insert black country here}. Thus, the identity afro-français(e) or français(e) noir(e) identity was more frequent in my experience.

Being black in Paris had its highs and lows overall. Being in black spaces like Afro-Femme events or events on the Afro-French Experience was fun. However, when it came to navigating research spaces, simply purchasing food, or being in my living environment, I ran into micro-aggressions or implicit racism. At the BnF, when I went to the information desk, a man, though our conversation began and ended in French, decided to speak English to me when I showed him a film title on my phone. This moment was one of many that I encountered. If someone detected an English accent, they would only speak broken English to me. If I had a white or white passing friend with me, the friend was assumed to speak French. For example, one of my roommates only spoke to me in English, but when my white american friend came to stay with us he was asked if he spoke French (which was never asked of me). The irony in this situation was that I would help translate for my friend.

After expressing my frustration with these racist encounters, I learned that my Afro-French friends dealt with the same issue. They would have white French people speaking to them in English because blackness was seen as un-French. Women who were born and raised in France would have other French people asking them where they were from, or assumed they did

not speak French simply because of the color of their skin. The true issue I found was that France does not acknowledge racism, though it is alive and well in the country. This realization solidified my understanding as to why Alice Diop's work focuses on the placement of black people in French society, which is why she only made one film in Dakar, Sénégal. When blackness or color is unnoticed it is important to create work that brings those who are at the margins to the forefront, Diop does. Overall, the experience of researching in Paris was amazing, despite the negatives moments that brought great insight on the racial dynamics in different Francophone contexts. I am greatly appreciative of my time spent in Paris thanks to the Friedberg Award.



This is me outside of La Sainte Chapelle



A picture I took at the Square Louise Michel



Graffiti at Sacré-Coeur Basilica that says: "All We Have is Now"