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Netflix as site of transnational gender conflict: the US (mis) understanding of Maïmouna Doucouré's *Mignonnes*

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ABSTRACT

A confronting French film which condemns the influence of sexualised media on pre-teen girls, Maïmouna Doucouré's *Mignonnes/Cuties* premiered to acclaim at the Sundance International Film Festival in 2020, where Doucouré won the Directing Prize and the film was purchased for international distribution by Netflix. Yet when *Mignonnes* reached the US-based streaming platform in September that year, advertised with a misguided poster that failed to convey the film's critical gaze, it became the target of the #CancelNetflix boycott, spearheaded by US politicians and co-opted by the QAnon movement, who accused Netflix of endorsing child sexual exploitation. This article considers both the experience of the protagonist Amy (Fathia Youssouf) in *Mignonnes*, and the reaction of the US groups who boycotted Netflix following its release, through Bourdieu's habitus and field. Both Amy and the boycotters lack the embodied, contextual, cultural competency to truly understand the field they occupy, to interpret the sexualised imagery they are consuming and to take it up in productive ways, leading in both cases to disastrous results. Thus, the authors contend that both inside the film (in its plot) and around it (in its reception), *Mignonnes* teaches us a lesson in the dangers of media illiteracy.

KEYWORDS

Mignonnes/Cuties; girlhood; Netflix; media literacy; habitus; reception

In 2020, Maïmouna Doucouré's first feature-length film, *Mignonnes/Cuties*, premiered to positive acclaim from audiences at French and US film festivals and award shows. Doucouré won the Directing Prize at the Sundance International Film Festival and was nominated for Best First Feature Film at the 2020 Césars, where the film's 13-year-old star, Fathia Youssouf, won the Most Promising Actor Award. However, in early September 2020, less than a month after its uneventful French theatre release, *Mignonnes*'s appearance on the US-based, internationally available streaming platform Netflix resulted in the film becoming one of the year's most controversial. The result was a media storm in which widespread outrage at the film's poster and the boycott which followed it, unwittingly mirrored the film's plot and illustrated its intended message. The fiasco evokes Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' (1980): an individual's ways of thinking and being, which are crystallised through the act of embodiment and the accumulation of

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experience in the ‘field’, the contextual environment whose parameters and customs must be learned. For both *Mignonnes* (in its story of young girls unversed in sociosexual norms) and the story of its polemical US reception (which was sparked less by the film’s content than by its advertising) reveal the extent to which Doucouré’s film is centred on the importance of habitus in the hyper-connected fields of digital and social media.

Mignonnes, a French film set and produced in France and purchased by Netflix after its award-winning premiere at Sundance, depicts the struggles of pre-teen girls, mostly of colour, in a working-class area of Paris where they create a dance troupe to imitate the sexualised twerk routines of the teen and adult dancers they admire on social media. While the film depicts disturbing imagery of children imitating adult dance, it does so with the clear intent to critique and condemn the threat of sexualised media saturation to vulnerable young people who do not possess the maturity or knowledge to place it in context. Indeed, the film’s Senegal-born protagonist, Amy (short for Aminata), and her experiences of transcultural displacement, are inspired by the childhood of Doucouré herself, who has written that the film tells her ‘story’ (2020) as a cautionary tale. This article considers both the experience of Amy in *Mignonnes* and the reaction of the US groups who boycotted Netflix following its release, from the perspective of Bourdieu’s habitus and field, whereby ‘the purely social and quasi-magical process of socialization . . . produces quite real effects, durably inscribed in the body and in belief’ (1980, 58). Following from this, we ask what happens when these effects are ‘inscribed in the body’ *without* the necessary socialisation to precede them. Both Amy and the boycotters lack the habitus – the embodied, contextual, cultural competency – to truly understand the field they occupy, to interpret the sexualised imagery they are consuming and to take it up in productive ways, leading in both cases to disastrous results. Thus, we contend that both inside the film (in its plot) and around it (in its reception), *Mignonnes* teaches us a lesson in the dangers of media illiteracy.

***Mignonnes* and its French and festival reception**

Amy’s story in *Mignonnes* begins soon after she has moved to a cramped Parisian apartment with her mother, Mariam (Maïmouna Gueye) and two younger brothers, where she is caught between the conservative Islamic practices of her family and her desire to be accepted by her modern and internet-addicted peers. While at home, Amy is expected to follow the traditional Islamic teachings of her mother and aunt (Mbissine Thérèse Diop, of *La Noire de . . . /Black Girl* fame [Ousmane Sembene, 1966]), while they await the return of her polygamous father from Senegal with his new fiancée. Yet at her new school Amy rebels and joins the titular ‘*mignonnes*’, a clique and dance troupe led by Amy’s neighbour Angelica (Médina El Aidi-Azouni). Wanting to impress the ‘cuties’ and land a permanent position in their group, Amy steals her adult cousin’s phone and proposes that they emulate the suggestive dance moves seen in the hip hop music videos she watches. Meanwhile, she posts increasingly sexual photos on social media in imitation of the older rival dance group, the ‘Sweety Swags’, against which the *mignonnes* compete. But when the *mignonnes* perform their dance in public in front of a largely adult audience, Amy is confronted by the inappropriateness of their behaviour, seen through the audience’s shocked eyes, and she abandons the group mid-routine. Returning to the comfort of her family, who allow her to not attend her father’s wedding, the film ends with

a joyful, slow-motion shot showing her jumping rope in the street with other local children, a symbolic resolution that allows Amy to exist as a girl, both outside of the sexualised girlhood of the *mignonnes* and the conservative gender norms of her family background.

Alongside *Mignonnes'* initial festival and award success, the film was received mostly positively by critics. Though many were confronted by the objectification the film portrays, both US and French reviewers understood that this was the intention of the film. In *Le Monde*, Clarisse Fabre and Damien Leloup write, 'this film critiques the hypersexualisation of the world in which our children live, and many other important things, such as integration, what it means to become a woman, etc' (2020).¹ In *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody explains that 'the subject of "Cuties" isn't twerking; it's children, especially poor and non-white children, who are deprived of the resources – the education, the emotional support, the open family discussion – to put sexualised media and pop culture into perspective' (2020). In *Première*, Thierry Chèze argues that while the film intends to make the viewer uncomfortable, it does so while avoiding fetishising its young stars by adopting their gaze:

The director's immense talent is to go to the limits of her subject, to not turn her camera away when the girls dance sensually in low-cut outfits. Does it bother us? Obviously. Does it feel voyeuristic? Not for a moment, for the gaze cast on these young bodies who aspire to be seen and 'liked' is precisely the gaze which these middle schoolers cast on themselves and their friends. (2020)²

Thus, within a transnational critical context, just as locally in France, the film was widely perceived as a confronting, centrist feminist critique of the self-sexualisation of young girls, especially those raised in conservative households, whose lack of cultural competence and sexual understanding leads them to transgress boundaries of self-representation that they don't fully comprehend. The sexualised gaze of social media and pop culture is understood as the film's object of critique, for ultimately furthering the idea that the 'dominant image of girlhood', to use Catherine Driscoll's words, is an erotic one (2002, 157). Central to the film's reception was Doucouré's positionality: a French woman of Senegalese descent herself, when making the film Doucouré drew on her own experience of growing up menaced by the disparate but equally unrealistic expectations of girls in both her cultures, expectations which push many girls to grow up too fast (whether that be to emulate Western images of female sexuality or to marry according to family traditions). In her autobiographical op-ed for *The Washington Post*, Doucouré explained: 'this film is my own story' (2020). Though she was raised before the social media era, Doucouré was inspired to begin the project after being confronted by the sight of a group of pre-teen girls dancing provocatively at a community event, after which she spent a year interviewing young French girls (of racialised and non-racialised descent) about their views on culture, puberty, social media and identity. This ambivalence is at the centre of *Mignonnes*. Critically, the film positions its child protagonist not simply as a victim, but also as a perpetrator of control; Amy commits both physical violence (pushing fellow *mignonne* Yasmine into a river) and sexual harassment (taking photographs of male classmates without their consent while they are using the school urinals) in her quest to secure herself a place in the girl group. In France and internationally, the critical reception of *Mignonnes*, while not unanimously laudatory, received the film in the

context of a well-established tradition of *jeune cinéma* and coming-of-age drama, familiar both to French cinema and broader film festival cultures. More specifically, the vast majority of media coverage in these contexts positioned the film as a worthy interlocutor with other coming-of-age contemporary francophone films about Black and POC girlhood, such as Houda Benyamina's 2016 *Divines*, Céline Sciamma's 2014 *Bande de filles/Girlhood* and Mati Diop's 2019 *Atlantiques/Atlantics*.

The Netflix controversy

It is important to acknowledge the role that film festivals play in creating public spaces in which controversial media content can circulate and be amplified – and indeed, acquired for streaming. It is also not our intention to imply that Sundance and Netflix audiences are entirely mutually exclusive, nor that the former will necessarily interpret a text more 'correctly' than the latter. However, the overall receptions of *Mignonnes* at Sundance versus on Netflix are unusually disparate. After its Sundance success, the film was released peacefully in French cinemas in August 2020. But a month later, its Netflix reception could not have been more different. Within hours of the film's Netflix debut, US Twitter, or X, exploded with accusations of criminal misconduct. Within a day, the hashtag #CancelNetflix began trending. Republican Senator Josh Hawley tweeted for Netflix to justify the film before Congress. Followed by thousands more tweets, Republican politicians from Senators Ted Cruz and Mike Lee to Representatives Jim Banks and Andy Biggs sent letters to Netflix and the Department of Justice, tweeting screenshots of their statements and calling for investigation into the conditions of the making of the film. In his letter, Cruz writes, 'it is likely that the filming of this movie created even more explicit and abusive scenes, and that pedophiles across the world in the future will manipulate and imitate this film in abusive ways' (2020). Though most of the critics were right-wing politicians, Democrats were also among those who tweeted under the #CancelNetflix hashtag, including then-Democratic Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, who called the film 'child porn [that] will certainly whet the appetite of pedophiles & help fuel the child sex trafficking trade' (2020). Over the first week of *Mignonnes'* Netflix run, the streaming service experienced its most precipitous drop in subscriptions ever, recording an eightfold increase in cancellations compared to average weekly rates (Spangler 2020), as thousands of users cancelled their membership in protest against the film. Websites such as IMDb, Google Reviews, Metacritic and Rotten Tomatoes, which allow unverified audience reviews, were flooded with 'review bombing' – an online practice in which users upload negative reviews en masse as a form of protest to dissuade potential viewership. Doucouré herself instantly began to receive death threats online and soon deleted her Twitter account.

Though the political condemnations originally came from both Democrats and Republicans, the #CancelNetflix movement was quickly co-opted by and parsed in the terms of the far-right conspiracy movement QAnon, which espouses theories of a left-wing child exploitation cabal led by Democratic politicians such as Hillary Clinton as well as Barack and Michelle Obama. (The Obamas' production agreement with Netflix through their company Higher Ground Productions featured in much of the far-right conspiracy discourse on the controversy.) Thus, QAnon members came to view *Mignonnes* as an emblem of so-called liberal-sanctioned

paedophilia, which was used on multiple occasions to discredit the Democratic Party by the Trump family on the 2020 presidential election campaign trail. At a campaign event in Arizona in September, Donald Trump Jr. was quoted as saying of his father's opponents: 'You know what the left is doing? They're justifying *Cuties*, they're justifying paedophilia.'

So how did this happen? After a nuanced but mostly positive reception among US and French reviewers, an uneventful cinema run in France, Sundance and César awards, and a lucrative international streaming acquisition deal, how did this small, France-produced, Black woman-led critique of French girlhood become the most controversial film of 2020 in the United States? It is true that France has a history dating back to the 1980s of casting under-aged girls in sexualised roles, such as 15-year-old Charlotte Gainsbourg in the 1986 *Charlotte for Ever*, notoriously directed by her own father, and 12-year-old Natalie Portman in Luc Besson's 1994 *Léon/Léon: The Professional*. *Mignonnes* can be read not only as a critique of a contemporary Western culture that sexualises youth, but also of this dangerous historical precedent so closely associated with French cinema. But in large part, the controversy centred not so much on the content of the film itself, but on its Netflix marketing material. Unlike the cinematic release poster (Figure 1), which depicted the film's main characters running jubilantly down a street flinging shopping bags like confetti, Netflix designed a poster (Figure 2) that shows the girls mid-dance routine, in Lycra short shorts and crop tops, each striking a sexually suggestive pose. The poster is drawn from a real scene in the film: the climactic competition performance that Amy and her fellow *mignonnes* have been working towards throughout the plot and during which they emulate disturbingly pornographic dance moves with little understanding of the origin of their movements. What the poster does not convey, however, is that this dance scene is met with almost-universal horror from the diegetic audience and filmed in a cold, confronting style designed to inspire the same discomfort in the film's viewers. In finally seeing herself not through the filter of TikTok or through her own or her friends' gaze, but through the eyes of the disgusted spectators, Amy experiences a moment of horror. In tears, she runs from the stage and abandons the dancing and its associated aesthetic forever. The poster, though technically true to some of the imagery of the film, erases its irony and severs it from the cultural and cinematographic context which condemns rather than endorses it. It is possible that the designers were attempting to channel the above tradition of sexualisation of girls on screen, imagery (perhaps unconsciously) associated with France, but in so doing the critical dimension central to *Mignonnes* is erased. In all senses, the poster is a failure: failing to accurately advertise the film and failing to gauge the impact it would have when disconnected from the nuance of the scene. From the beginning of the Netflix controversy, Doucouré condemned the poster, which she had not seen beforehand, leading to the publication of her unplanned, explanatory op-ed with *The Washington Post* about her personal connection to the film and its intent to criticise child exploitation. Netflix quickly withdrew the offending poster, replacing it with the uncontroversial shopping bag image, and issued an apology that condemned the poster but upheld its support of the film. The statement emphasised the film's critical credentials: 'We're deeply sorry for the inappropriate artwork that we used for *Mignonnes/Cuties*. It was not OK, nor was it



Figure 1. The French release poster for *Mignonnes* (Bien ou Bien Productions).

representative of this French film which won an award at Sundance. We've now updated the pictures and description' (2020).

A double lesson in media literacy

In many ways, the *Mignonnes* controversy appears to boil down to a simple misunderstanding, mostly of a single image, which was (whether unknowingly or wilfully) taken up during the 2020 US presidential election campaign as a tool to foment discord and to align contemporary media giants (associated in far-right circles with anti-Semitic notions of international liberal media control) with QAnon or adjacent far-right conspiracy theories. Given the proud admission that very few of the high-profile

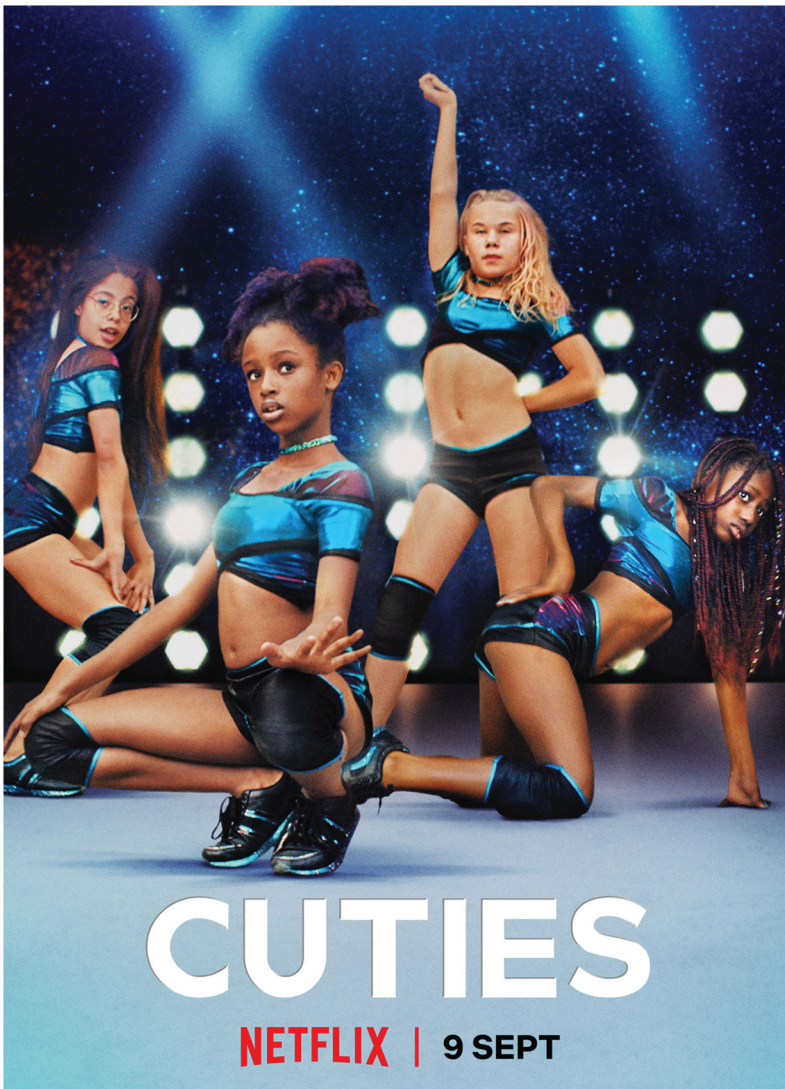


Figure 2. The controversial initial Netflix release poster (Netflix).

politicians who attacked the film had actually seen it, the fact that Doucouré herself had not seen the offending poster before release and was herself offended by it, and the hasty apology and re-framing of the film by Netflix, the case of a transcultural marketing blunder would appear to be closed, a dramatic example of the power of false or incompetent advertising.

However, we contend that the transnational reception of *Mignonnes* has more to teach us. In *The Logic of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu shows us how 'a feel for the game' comes not simply through repetition or replication of the accepted actions in a field, but through conscious embodiment of them (that is, through habitus). He writes:

Produced by experience of the game, and therefore of the objective structures within which it is played out, the 'feel for the game' is what gives the game a subjective sense – a meaning and a *raison d'être*, but also a direction, an orientation, an impending outcome, for those who take part and therefore acknowledge what is at stake . . . Because native membership in a field implies a feel for the game in the sense of a capacity for practical anticipation of the 'upcoming' future contained in the present, everything that takes place in it seems *sensible*. (1980, 66)³

Mignonnes and its surrounding controversy show us what happens when membership is *not* native, when what takes place is *not* sensible. Just as Amy fails to achieve a 'feel for the game' (or rather the dance) despite replicating its moves, so too did the Netflix poster designers fail to 'anticipate the "upcoming" future contained in the present'. And in turn, the boycotters failed to grasp the film's 'meaning, *raison d'être*, direction, orientation', having in most cases not even seen the film at all. In the remainder of this article, we will show how Amy, the Netflix poster designers and the US boycotters alike share more in common than one would think: a fundamental illiteracy in the cultural scripts required to consume this complex French media content in context, leading to catastrophic results. None of these groups possess the necessary cultural capital to understand this controversial imagery in the context of contemporary French social media and society. This underpins the central message of Doucouré's film, which warns against misinformed and disproportional action taken in reaction to media content prompts.

Consider, firstly, Amy's own digital illiteracy. While it is established early in the film that Amy is not entirely new to living in France and thus would have some exposure to French cultural norms, at the start of the film Amy doesn't have any close friends, nor a phone or computer, and has never encountered girls like the *mignonnes* before. She has had a conservative Senegalese upbringing and been insulated from French media culture. As Fiona Handyside observes, in French girlhood cinema 'global modern girlhood', which we can see as being embodied by the *mignonnes*, 'is constructed as antithetical to Islamic religious belief' (2019a, 351). Wanting, as all young girls do, to fit in with her peers, Amy must learn how to emulate this modern girlhood without a competent guide.

A clear encapsulation of this occurs during one of the prayer sessions Amy attends. Surrounded by older women in veils, Amy uses this as an opportunity instead to play on her stolen phone (Figure 3). Hiding under her veil, Amy watches a music video on silent, in which underwear-clad Black female dancers twerk and gyrate in a club (Figure 4). This pseudo-pornographic adult clip appears to Amy as equally compelling as the video she and Angelica watch of the late-teenaged Sweetie Swags performing their competition routine. Adult viewers understand that the dancers of the music video are hypersexualised, as they mimic sex acts with their movements and are filmed in close-ups of their breasts and buttocks in motion, recalling the fragmented erotic objects of the 'male gaze' Laura Mulvey critiques (1975, 12). But to the culturally unversed Amy, the two videos both encapsulate aspirational femininity. As both the adult dancers and the Sweetie Swags 'have lots of likes' (*Mignonnes*, 2020), Amy sees them as comparable signs of success and inspiration, unable to differentiate between their differing levels of maturity and position in society – and her own.⁴ Amy fails to comprehend that the adult music video is a male fantasy, and instead it becomes her girlhood one – desirability and popularity through dance. When showing clips she has found to her friend, we can see her observing



Figure 3. Amy watches twerk videos in secret during prayer, beneath her veil (*Mignonnes*).



Figure 4. Amy watches twerk videos in secret during prayer, beneath her veil (*Mignonnes*).

Angelica's reactions, attempting to learn how she should be reacting herself. Consider Handyside's explanation that:

[t]he French girl/woman is one who has embraced equality as common sense, and has embraced her professional and sexual autonomy. [...] The French government endorses a form of liberation which expects women to be attractive to men on the street and to show their bodies, to act as sexual free agents, as a sign of the nation's well-being and good health. (Handyside 2019b, 94–95)

It is therefore unsurprising that Amy, wanting to reject her conservative Muslim upbringing, would see these images of female sexuality as aspirational. She, along with her fellow *mignonnes*, seek successful womanhood within the French model of female liberation and the actions of the older dancers they observe – desired by men, free in their dress and sexually available. This cultural script is what Amy seeks to enact, but she is without the cultural competency that is needed to truly understand it. We can see this most explicitly when Amy is rejected from her friends' group after posting a picture of her genitals on

Instagram. She has failed to grasp how far she, as an 11-year-old, can reasonably take her emulation of sexualised adult social media content and practices before she elicits horror from those that witness this emulation. To return to Bourdieu, she isn't at ease in this habitus; she doesn't know the 'things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say, in relation to a probable, "upcoming" future' (1980, 53). She has crossed a line that is never explicitly articulated, but of which the other *mignonnes* have an innate understanding, which informs their actions and comprehension of the media they have been consuming for years. Bourdieu shows us the importance of 'the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception, thought and action, tend to guarantee the "correctness" of practices and their constancy over time' (1980, 58). Conversely, Amy shows us what happens when such practices are enacted without this necessary history, 'without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them' (53).

For Netflix's advertising and its incensed US subscribers, we can see a conflict that emerges in the cultural expectations of appropriate levels of self-sexualisation in girlhood. Girlhood scholar Annamari Vänskä notes that within the US context, '[g]ood or proper sexuality is typically presented as heterosexual and middle-class', while other signs of sexuality outside of this, such as that demonstrated on the US poster, 'are represented as negative and damaging to girls' (Vänskä 2015, 66). The *mignonnes'* experimentation with self-sexualisation has been met with this view by its American audiences, seeing their actions as harmful to the girls, rather than a sign of their attempts to navigate self-determination within a highly sexualised media culture. The girls' actions can be seen as their efforts to play with inhabiting successful empowered womanhood within the current culture, where Western media promote a specific sexual ideal. The conclusion of the film, in which the *mignonnes'* hypersexual routine is met with alarm from adult audiences, demonstrates that their attempts have failed, acting as a condemnation of this media culture. But Doucouré does not frame the *mignonnes'* actions themselves as the problem; instead, it is the French society in which they live that encourages these girls to self-sexualise as a means of empowerment – and then condemns them for it.

Hypersexualised culture is evident throughout Western media, and playing at being a woman while still a girl is neither nationally nor temporally specific. However, targeting the film and Doucouré without engaging with the film's actual cultural critique recalls the 'excuse for adults to evade responsibility for how children are firmly connected to and shaped by the social and cultural institutions run largely by adults' that Henry Giroux theorises within US conceptions of childhood (1998, 31). Rather than critique the treatment of women in the media that the *mignonnes'* dance is inspired by, boycotters critique the film and its female director. They ignore that the film is based on both Doucouré's own experiences and the experiences of the real girls she interviewed, instead believing that the creation of the film itself is the risk to children, rather than the societal problem that Doucouré intended to highlight. They misread the film's critique of the hypersexualisation that girls are seeing as aspirational as an example of this very type of media itself. Like Amy, unable to distinguish between play and reality, the response indicates an inability to distinguish between enacting harm and critiquing the society that allows such a harm to occur. For the boycotters, their desire to have a public opinion on the trending controversy of the moment intensified during the 'extremely online' nature of the second half of 2020, when the lockdown era saw a massive uptick in social media and streaming

use. Combined with the media pressures of the 2020 election, it resulted in a controversy that ultimately harmed the very people, i.e. girls and women, especially Black girls and women, that its critics apparently sought to protect in their protest of the film.

For this reason, perhaps the most illuminating example of this lack of habitus, and indeed the most puzzling aspect of this phenomenon, is Netflix's decision to release this poster for the US market in the first place. Considering the US cultural context that Vänška observes, among other scholars such as Leigh Moscovitz and Spring-Serenity Duvall, who highlight that the young girl is frequently represented as vulnerable and fragile to sexualised threats in US media (2011), the decision to release a poster which reproduces the very sexualised imagery that Doucouré condemns in her film demonstrates a lack of media literacy on Netflix's behalf. While the reasoning behind the decision to design and release the poster in the anglophone market as opposed to the original French poster may never be known, the choice demonstrates a lack of foresight of the public's likely response to such a provocative image, or perhaps even that such an image would itself be received provocatively. The fallout for the company, being the widespread boycott and cancellation of subscriptions, was evidentially unanticipated, revealing that Netflix also had their own missing 'capacity for practical anticipation of the "upcoming" future contained in the present' (Bourdieu 1980, 53). Netflix officially state that their approach to artwork is to select images or 'assets' which are 'representative (no clickbait)' and that artwork 'must speak to [users] in a meaningful way' (Amat 2018). The fact that the US poster ultimately proved neither representative nor meaningful in the intended way, a fact Netflix admitted in their response to the boycott, reveals that from initial marketing decision to ultimate audience response, an inability to appropriately interpret media is inherent throughout the controversy.

After *Mignonnes*

Two years after the *Mignonnes* saga, Doucouré's second feature was released, a film that on the surface appeared entirely different to her incendiary debut. 2022's *Hawa* follows an enigmatic teen girl of the same name (Sania Halifa), who is soon to be orphaned as her beloved grandmother and sole guardian Maminata (iconic griot Oumou Sangaré, in her first film role) approaches the end of a terminal illness. As her grandmother scrambles to find someone to adopt her granddaughter after her death, *Hawa* sets out on a naïve but steadfast quest to track down Michelle Obama and ask her to become her adoptive mother. The contrast between the childish *Hawa*, her albino face framed with Coke bottle glasses and her 16-year-old body draped in oversized robes, and the barely pubescent Amy in her skin-tight Lycra bodysuits, is clear. Despite also focusing on a turbulent period in the life of a young Black girl in Paris, *Hawa* seems determined to distance its protagonist from the sexualisation of *Mignonnes*. *Hawa* is several years older than Amy, but is disinterested in sex and conventional gender presentation. Indeed, more than an adolescent girl, *Hawa* is depicted as a kind of transcendent, timeless being more aligned with the aesthetics of her griot grandmother than with the *mignonnes*.

Yet, despite these differences, *Hawa* finds herself, like Amy, at a painful juncture in which her childish vulnerability clashes with her attempts to take control of her life in ways that are beyond her years. Both protagonists are played by non-professional actors found through open casting calls in Paris. Both appear

alongside grandmother figures played by West African cultural icons. Both idolise 'ideal' images of womanhood portrayed in Western media, though to very different ends. Both films were released on major US streaming platforms, with *Hawa* being commissioned from the outset by Amazon Prime Video, whereas *Mignonnes* was acquired for distribution by Netflix at the post-production stage (indeed, with its Michelle Obama MacGuffin device, *Hawa* appears to be more deliberately gesturing to a potential US audience). In both films, family demands of responsibility collide with the immaturity of children not yet able to care for themselves, in ways that reveal *Mignonnes* and *Hawa* to be far more similar than they first appear. As Tomris Laffly writes, 'in her equally confident second feature, the defiant Doucouré puts to work the same vigorous essence at the core of her previous film, one that comprehends the complicated headspace of burdened, contemporary young ones' (2022). In several interviews, Doucouré has described *Hawa* as an equally personal film to *Mignonnes* (for example, in Kay 2022; Keslassy 2022), explaining that she made the film for her own young daughter. Yet, despite its American production company, *Hawa* received very little US attention compared to *Mignonnes*, and negligible responses from the original #CancelNetflix demographic. While Doucouré has declined to compare the two films in detail, it is tempting to read *Hawa* as a careful update to *Mignonnes*: a comparable cautionary tale against the exploitation of Black girls' innocence, but one which cannot be interpreted as being complicit in this exploitation.

At the end of *Mignonnes*, Amy gains access to a new space, one separate from both her family's strict religion and the *mignonnes*' self-sexualising gaze. She is visually luminous in her surroundings of the glowing outdoors she plays in (Handyside 2019c) and also luminous in her potential as a French girl, finally occupying the habitus she has sought throughout: a comfortable girlhood identity she can truly embody. In a digital environment that rewards clickbait headlines and conspiracy theories, *Mignonnes* underlines the importance of cultural competence when it comes to today's globalised media distribution. Bourdieu writes of the field that 'one cannot enter this magic circle by an instantaneous decision of the will, but only by birth or by a slow process of co-option and initiation which is equivalent to a second birth' (1980, 68). Thus, *Mignonnes* teaches us the painful lesson that habitus cannot be forced and media exposure does not equate to media literacy. Unfortunately, in the case of the film's reception, this lesson needed to be learned twice.

Notes

1. 'Ce film critique l'hypersexualisation du monde dans lequel vivent nos enfants, et bien d'autres choses importantes, comme l'intégration, qu'est-ce que devenir femme, etc.'
2. 'L'immense talent de la réalisatrice est d'aller au bout de son sujet, de ne pas détourner sa caméra quand les gamines se mettent à danser de manière lascive dans des tenues échancrées. Est-ce que ça nous dérange ? Évidemment. Est-ce qu'on se sent voyeurs ? Pas un seul instant, car son regard porté sur ces jeunes corps aspirant à être vus et likés est précisément celui que ces collégiennes portent sur elles-mêmes et leurs copines.'

3. English translations of the Bourdieu passages in this article are taken from the 1990 translation of *Le Sens pratique, The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu 1990).
4. '[Les Sweetie Swags] ont beaucoup de likes.'

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