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# Negotiating the Visible

## INTRODUCTION



Fig. 0.1. Macky Kane, Portrait of Mrs. Fatou Thioune, Saint Louis, 1939–1943. Scan from gelatin negative, 3.5 x 5 in. (9 x 13 cm).

In my view, the invitations issued . . . set up the universal as a building site and as a horizon: they include the invitation to travel, which means decentering oneself and moving away from exceptionalism, and the invitation to learn other languages, which means leaving behind the universalism of the Logos to understand, firstly, that every language is one of many and, secondly, that the universal is evaluated in the trials of translation.

—Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “On the Universal and Universalism”

Art is a state of encounter.

—Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*

Eyes wide open, Fatou Thioune looks into the camera, together with the dozens of other women who, behind her and before her, similarly posed for posterity (fig. 0.1). This is one among many portraits that her husband, Macky Kane, took of her between 1939 and 1943, the year she suddenly and prematurely passed away. The shot is set in their home in the city of Saint Louis, the historical capital of French West Africa. As in other images in the series, Kane portrays his wife against walls covered in photographs that were bought and gifted and included portraits, postcards, and cartes de visite. In its loving celebration of the photographic—and with the potentially infinite images it calls for and connects to—this single portrait distills and discloses the histories of photography. This portrait, as one of Senegal’s most celebrated and intriguing photographs, was the starting point for my writing this book. It is the photograph to which I have returned year after year as it seemed to offer a cartography of photography’s histories and a way to look at them.

This portrait, and the dozens of others in the series, documents a deep-seated passion for this medium and portraiture as a genre. It features a woman as the bearer of the gaze, and the fulcrum of an expansive image world, reminding the viewer that in Senegal, photography was and often still is a women’s thing, *une affaire de femmes*, as I was regularly told. The photograph encapsulates the bond between the sitter and her husband, while bringing forth multiple other relationships between the sitter and those posing behind her, between this print and those it re-presents. Some are arranged symmetrically on woven mats, while others are more casually curated. Some of the subjects are visible; one might depict Mrs. Thioune standing pregnant with her first daughter. Others are out of focus and indiscernible, offering varying degrees of visibility. In such display, these images are placed in relation to one another, even as they point and pull outward and elsewhere, to those who are not—or are no longer—there. Each print calls forth other portraits and places, initiating and accelerating a way of thinking about and looking at photographs, one that moves decidedly and centrifugally away from its center.

This book follows photographs' centrifugal relations in Senegal, as a privileged area in which to explore the histories of photography, as a site of encounter, negotiation, and translation within and between people, and within and between media. Strategically located on the Atlantic Ocean at the westernmost point of the continent, Senegal is well known as an epicenter of Africa's modernisms and liberation movements. It is also one of the first sub-Saharan African countries in which the daguerreotype arrived by the early nineteenth century. At that time, Senegal did not exist as a nation-state. As France launched its imperial project in 1815, local kingdoms were in power. In Senegal, the pioneers of photography were European, Asian, African, and African American entrepreneurs. Among the medium's generous patrons, we find Senegalese women in positions of power (fig. 0.2), Muslim clerics, city dwellers with French citizenship (fig. 0.3), and colonial subjects in rural areas. That is to say, Senegal's photographic histories thrived as part of a global visual economy before, during, and despite the colonial experience. Like that of Fatou Thioune, the photographs discussed here do not exist in a void or as an appendix to this medium's Senegalese or French histories, but as exemplary of the centrality of such exchanges (fig. 0.4).

The book's approach to the photographic is informed by a Saint Louisian practice of curating photos called *xoymet* (*kho-e-mët*) in the Wolof language, one of Senegal's national languages and the most commonly spoken in the urban centers. In Senegal, the *xoymet* is known as a practice of decorating a bride's room with photographs and other objects that are temporarily borrowed from relatives and friends. What is of interest here is not only a local habit of curating spaces and narrating her-story through photographs that are placed together and in relation to one another. The *xoymet* initiates and articulates a distinct optical experience. Before it was associated with this photographic practice, the word *xoymet* indicated a quick revealing action that sought to entice the viewer to see more.<sup>1</sup> For example, a woman could "xoymet" a man while dancing to the *sabar*'s drumming. As a verb, it means "to let someone catch a glimpse of something intimate." Similarly, the woman's preparing the photographic room seeks to "xoymet" the viewer, who is entering that visual field. The woman wants to offer a glimpse of who she is, through her relations. The *xoymet* calls for the viewer's attention and indicates that there is more to be seen yet does not grant absolute transparency. Embedded in the *xoymet* is the tension between seeing and not seeing, coupled with the desires that such friction engenders.

As in the *xoymet*, this book zooms in closely on specific portraits and places, focusing on four moments between the 1840s—with the earliest surviving daguerreotype from the region—and the 1960s—with the modernist practices of the independence era. These microhistories, complete with their gaps and centrifugal inclinations, counter a desire to trace a linear process of "visual decolonization"<sup>2</sup> or the coming of age of a "Senegalese" photographic language. They instead situate these objects and their authors in an expansive world of images that circulated across geographic regions and transregional imaginaries, including West Africa, the Black Atlantic, and the Islamic *Ummah*. Each photograph, as an object of relation, disrupts any assumed separation between media and aesthetics, and upsets any alleged natural teleology toward the establishment of an autonomous subject. Privileging a relational approach means, to borrow philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne's words, "decentering oneself and moving away from exceptionalism." The book accounts for the exchanges taking place in such visual economies, showing that they were neither pure nor peaceful but, in Diagne's words, consisted of "an incessant testing of the self by the other and a testing of the other by the self, carried out against a back-



Fig. 0.2. Unidentified photographer, Woman posing with infant, c. 1890s–1900s. Cabinet card.



Fig. 0.3. François-Edmond Fortier, Photograph, 1900–1910. Gelatin silver print, 6 1/2 × 4 1/4 in. (16.5 × 10.8 cm).



Fig. 0.4. Emile Noal, *Groupe d'O'lofs Sénégalais à St-Louis*, c. 1890–1900. Print on baryta paper, 5 x 7 in. (12.1 x 16.9 cm).

ground of incomprehension, even untranslatability.”<sup>3</sup> I account for a diverse group of photographers and patrons, media and aesthetics in order to undo the imperial and Eurocentric chronicle that has constituted photography’s metanarrative. This book zooms into that middle ground of negotiation and compromise, a meeting place that can transform “our sense of photography.” As such, the photograph appears as a moving image that demands we stop looking at it and “instead start watching it,” as it negotiates the visible.<sup>4</sup>

## Photography as African Art

Fatou Thioune’s portrait from the early 1940s documents a long-standing history of living with and looking at photographs in Senegal. Yet, this portrait and the many older images contained within have rarely, and only *belatedly*, been featured in Western accounts and collections of art.<sup>5</sup> In the West, they were seen for the first time decades later, in the early 1990s, with the first exhibitions on African photography. This delay in paying attention to such objects points to an ambivalence and a resistance in accepting photography as art and as African art more specifically.

Consider this anecdote. In 1878, the Belgian explorer Adolphe Burdo embarked on his first trip to the African continent. As he recounts in his travelogue, his journey began along the Atlantic coast in today's Senegal. Once he arrived at the harbor of Dakar, Burdo decided to pay a visit to the local authorities. In his first encounter with the man whom he describes as the "King of Dakar," Burdo offered money and bead necklaces as gifts.<sup>6</sup> The king, he said, was greatly delighted at his generosity. At that point, Burdo pauses his narration to address his readers and tells us:

My readers you would never guess what he gave me in return. Neither palm wine, nor amulets, but his portrait, taken by a real photographer, Mr. Bonnevide. Dakar is decidedly too civilized and I took my leave—as soon as possible—to go in quest of more genuine savages.<sup>7</sup>

For his portrait, the king had chosen to sit with his hands on his lap (fig. 0.5). With his torso at an angle, he turns his head to face the camera. The wide hat resting on a smaller cotton bonnet protects him from the sun. A voluminous



Fig. 0.5. Bonnevide, King of Dakar, c. 1870s. Carte de visite, 2.5 x 4 in. (6.4 x 10.2 cm). Published by Noal frères, c. 1875.



cloak hangs over his grand boubou, emphasizing the importance of the occasion. Across his chest are three protective amulets or gris-gris and a finely decorated leather bag holding his personal properties and possibly a Quran. There is nothing spectacular about this image. Many would describe it as formulaic and uneventful, like most cartes de visite.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the image *shocked* Burdo. As the king's coy smile seems to anticipate, in 1878, at the height of French colonial expansion and the genesis of significant European collections of African art, an African man was, and often still is, supposed to offer traditional amulets to his visitor, not his photographic portrait.

Burdo was one of those explorers who, between the 1860s and 1930s, traveled across the continent (fig. 0.6) and amassed objects that have since populated the vitrines and storage rooms of the first museums such as the first anthropological museum in Paris, the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, inaugurated in 1878; the Pitt Rivers Museum, established in 1884 by Augustus Pitt Rivers; and the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Brussels, founded in 1897. In these spaces, a wooden sculpture that Burdo collected during his trip would not be exhibited side by side with a *coeval* photographic portrait commissioned by an African patron. Until now, these objects, along with their historical and aesthetic details, have been slotted into two disconnected if not discordant taxonomies. And yet, African art was created and theorized in the West as an academic field and collection of objects precisely as photography was being invented.<sup>9</sup> Photography played a critical role in the making of the field of African art and its canon, offering the first "objective" ethnographic records and amassing the visual archives necessary for the establishment of genres, typologies, their significance, and their value.<sup>10</sup> Burdo witnessed the king's embrace of the carte de visite, yet he chose not to collect it. Instead, in his travelogue as in many contemporary albums, the king's likeness is presented without the embossed frame and as an engraved type removing any trace of his modernity and agency (figs. 0.7, 0.8).<sup>11</sup>

Burdo offers a rare report of Africans' uses of photography in the nineteenth century, but it is just one example among countless others registering a Western ambivalence and resistance to African photography. When scholars account for the beginnings of photography on the continent, the medium is regularly described as establishing itself in a "blank spot."<sup>12</sup> In such statements, photography is understood as a new, foreign, and at times even shock-provoking technology. In these articulations, the arrival of photography is seen as marking a radical shift that introduces something unprecedented. For instance, in his study of photography in Ghana, Tobias Wendl suggests that the medium's novelty resides in the photograph's visual mimesis, which, along with portraiture, are historically assumed to have been lacking in African countries.<sup>13</sup> And in fact, until relatively recently, many scholars believed it was photography that brought the genre of portraiture to the continent.<sup>14</sup> The assumed confoundment that photographic realism would generate led scholars to maintain the myth that Africans, like other "primitive people," were afraid of photography because it could steal someone's soul.<sup>15</sup> Susan Sontag, for instance, stated that "Everyone knows, primitive people fear that the camera will rob them of some part of their being."<sup>16</sup> Here, the supposed shock of photography consists in witnessing the reproduction of one's own likeness, which metonymically stands for the subject itself. In other words, "primitive people" are confounded by the verisimilitude of the object and photography's mimetic power, prompting the collapse of the signifier

INTRODUCTION



Fig. 0.7. Engraved portrait of the king of Dakar.  
From Adolphe Burdo, *A Journey Up the Niger and Benue*  
(London: Richard Bentley, 1878).

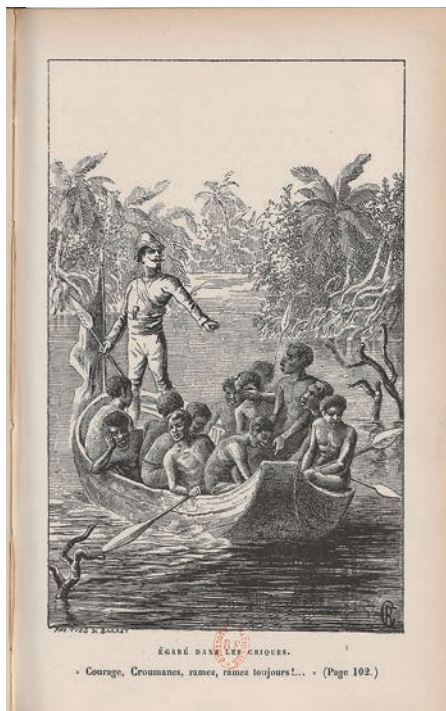


Fig. 0.6. Camille Renard, *Égaré dans les criques*.  
From Adolphe Burdo, *A Journey Up the Niger and Benue*  
(London: Richard Bentley, 1878).



Fig. 0.8. Bonneville, *Paysages et types des mœurs du Sénégal*,  
1880s. Detail of album.

and the signified. Such confusion between photography and reality was precisely born of an inability to distinguish between technology and magic, an ability seen as essential to sanctioning the civilized identity.<sup>17</sup> Africans' engagement with photographs, where accounted, is then assumed to involve fetishism, which William Pietz defines as a "double consciousness of absorbed credulity and degraded or distanced incredulity."<sup>18</sup> The inability to *see properly* suggests what Yi Gu, in the Chinese context, describes as "epistemological inadequacy" or a "cultural deficit" that in the Westerners' eye prevents these viewers from both grasping reality and distinguishing it from its photographic rendition.<sup>19</sup>

What would happen if instead of disregarding the king's *carte de visite*, as Burdo did, we were to study it? What if we were to look at this photograph and the African art objects collected in museums as complementary and interdependent? What if we rooted photography in Africa's long history of art and mediation, which includes light? What would the fields of African art or photography look like?

Counter to Western primitivizing narratives, this book shows that in Senegal photography was one of the most popular modern media, and portraiture one of the most beloved genres. Even if Senegal did not historically feature forms of portraiture, the examples of the king of Dakar and of Fatou Thioune indicate an embrace of this medium as part of established practices of representation and as integral to their experience of modernity. The book explores the ways in which photography—approached broadly as the art of writing with light, as a process of mediation, as a way of seeing, and as material object—relates to, and overlaps with, other art forms and practices including glass painting, lithography, painting, orality, and textile.

An expansive and intermedial understanding of photography is required as indicated by the words that continue to be used in Senegal to describe the photographic. In Senegal, at least three terms are used for photographs: the French *photographie* and the Wolof *nataal* and *sotti*. The employment of the French word indicates, as in English, an embracing of the idea of photography as the practice of writing with light, from the Greek *photos* (light), and *graphos* (writing). The Wolof terms are lent to the photographic: *nataal* indicates any two-dimensional picture, while *sotti* denotes both a reproduction and a translation.<sup>20</sup> The primary significance of the verb *natt* is "to measure or size clothing," and the related term *nataal* suggests the idea of putting something into shape. It is regularly used to indicate a representation, including a painting or a drawing. The verb *sotti* primarily expresses the act of pouring a liquid or solid substance, like water or sand, from one container into another, and by extension conveys a process of translating, whereby an idea or form is transferred from one language to another or, in the case of reproduction, from one support to another. In Senegal, then, photographs are understood as representations, as reproductions, as forms of transcriptions that originate from a transfer that, by definition, necessitates mediation and, in the process, adjustments. In other words, the photographic in Senegal may not include ideas of mimesis, objectivity, and indexicality, which continue to shape Western understanding of this medium.

In approaching photography within a longer and expansive history of art making, this book moves past Eurocentric purist histories and theories of art. The study of both photography and African art as mediated technologies can help us see some of these fields' blind spots and connect image worlds. Photography was embraced as a tool for mediating reality rather than mimicking it,



Fig. 0.9. Unidentified artist, Group portrait with record player, c. 1920s–1930s. Postcard format gelatin silver print, 7 × 4 1/2 in. (17.8 × 11.4 cm). Youssef Safieddine, Self portrait of Youssef Safieddine, Dakar, Senegal. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, 7.5 x 12.9 cm. 1966.



Fig. 0.10. Youssef Safieddine, Self portrait of Youssef Safieddine, Dakar, Senegal. Gelatin silver developing-out paper print, 7.5 x 12.9 cm. 1966.

reinventing identities rather than fixing them, and negotiating relations and ways of seeing (figs. 0.9, 0.10). I argue that if we want to learn about the significance of art making and consumption in Africa, we need to consider photography, not as an alternative to the history of African art, but as integral to it. The book documents some among many instances when the photographic—as a way of seeing, as object, as mediation—is embraced. As these photographs unsettle myths of African art as noncritical and nontechnological, they offer new vantage points from which to approach this extraordinary heritage, and by the same token, the history of photography.

## Photography as Universal Language

We need to aim for a “lateral universal,” based on encounter and reciprocity.

—Souleymane Bachir Diagne, “On the Universal and Universalism”

Photography has, since its inception, been described as a language, and a universal one at that. When François Arago officially announced the invention of the daguerreotype at the French Chamber of Deputies in 1839, he offered photography “generously to the entire world.” In his speech, the medium was presented as a promising language that could serve humanity by, for example, documenting the world’s heritage from France to Egypt.<sup>21</sup> In the West, this universalist discourse was maintained almost intact by photographers such as August Sander in his 1931 radio lecture “Photography as a Universal Language” and Edward Steichen in his 1955 exhibition *Family of Man* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York.<sup>22</sup> The idea was that, unlike any other medium, photography could be used and understood regardless of cultural differences. Over the decades scholars have challenged the idea that photography functions as a “universal equivalent,” an approach that, in Roland Barthes’s terms, holds us “at the surface of an identity” and suppresses human differences and injustices.<sup>23</sup> The literature that has flourished at least since the 1990s on non-Western histories of photography, in what Shahidul Alam prefers to call the “majority world,” has continued to challenge the West’s monopoly of photography, and its claim over its universality.<sup>24</sup>

In reflecting on the booming field of photography from the majority world, Geoffrey Batchen maintained that these contributions were transforming the field “beyond recognition.”<sup>25</sup> And yet, despite the critical importance of such contributions, many still lament that accounts from the majority world remain footnotes to a master narrative of photography or, in Diagne’s framing, “an attack of particularisms against the universal.”<sup>26</sup> Even Batchen seemed to expect that in order to challenge the Eurocentric writing on photography, histories from the majority world have to provide evidence for their “localism.” They have to persuade their (Western) readers that images that seem legible or even familiar “*might actually be different objects.*”<sup>27</sup> But are they? In comparison to what, and for whom? Does the king of Dakar’s

portrait, which was taken by a French photographer, count as “different” or even “Senegalese”? And can Fatou Thioune’s portrait be, by the same token, regarded as universal? How can we reconcile the simultaneous yet contradictory paths photographs take, as both physical objects and disembodied images, when a portrait such as that of the king of Dakar functions both as a sign of modernity when used as a carte *and* as an index of primitivism when reproduced in anthropological treatises back in the metropole?<sup>28</sup>

In this book, I approach photography as an encounter between people and ways of seeing. Such an encounter is never pure nor peaceful. It engages and affects all who are involved, including viewers, who play an active role in negotiating the visible—that is, what is seen. Only by attending to such relations, even when they clash or do not align, can we restore or even consider the possibility of photography’s universality, not as a given, but “as a building site and a horizon.”<sup>29</sup> As this technology circulated around the world almost simultaneously, as photographs were exchanged and reproduced, the medium offered new ways of connecting—of putting in touch—communities, subjectivities, geographies, and temporalities, in a manner that would never before have been imaginable. It is in—and through—these exchanges that photography’s universality can be found.

Let me return to Burdo’s travelogue one more time. The anecdote indicates that photography’s universal language was not available to all but accorded only to some. Irritated, Burdo could not accept, let alone engage with, a fellow man who presented himself as inhabiting the same image world.<sup>30</sup> The Belgian man was unable to accept an African as his coagent in a shared visual economy. Through the gesture of handing over his personal portrait, the king of Dakar challenged Burdo’s worldview, his order of things, and asserted his position as a coeval and active agent in photography’s relations of exchange.<sup>31</sup> In gifting a portrait of himself taken by a Frenchman, the king challenged the idea that photography was monopolized by the West. Through that gift, the king initiated an exchange and asserted his power over the man who accepted it.<sup>32</sup> With that apparently banal gesture, he established a horizontal encounter based on reciprocity, or in Diagne’s words, a “lateral” rather than a “vertical” relationship.<sup>33</sup> In sum, the king of Dakar’s action makes photography visible as an art of relation, which reorients the universal. And only through reciprocity can it be universal.

In this example, as in the book, I am not invested in revealing the originality or exceptionality of photography in Senegal, its localism or foreignness. I am interested in lingering in liminal spaces where the exchanges are taking place and relations negotiated. As such, my approach is close to George Baker’s as I explore photography’s relationality and seek to make visible its many attachments, which by sharing the act of seeing allow the observer to reach beyond the self. In his writing, Baker presents photography as engendering an embodied, rather than exclusively ocular, visual experience that engages the outer world and creates a relational field. In his words, “separation gave way to incorporation; distance and individuation to relationality, to indistinctness, to a fusion between subject and object, viewer and image, looking and feeling, body and photograph.”<sup>34</sup> For Baker, the photograph is not an “operation of visual isolation, framing, cropping, freezing an object as a motionless specimen,” but through its “doubling” it creates bonds and ties that are affective and most crucially build relations. For scholars such as Nicolas Bourriaud, all art, regardless of media, can be relational when and if it takes “as its theoretical horizon the realm of

human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, for Baker, the photographic medium specifically can produce this model of sociability.

Baker’s articulation is generative for this project, although I also see the risks of romanticizing the relational. Relations, including photographic ones, can be extractive. That is the case with colonial photographers, who often *took* and circulated photographs without the sitters’ consent. Also extractive are those photographs where the sitters’ and authors’ names have been stripped, but whose embodied likeness has continued to be consumed by the white gaze over the decades. A relationship can also be narcissistic. Western modernist photography has often championed an exploration of reflexivity, as a concern with the self and the insistence on its purity. The ultimate example of such a trajectory is with photographs of photographs, or photos en abyme, from the French, which literally means “put/placed in the center,” whereby the object depicts itself. The photograph placed “en abyme” initiates a potentially infinite mirroring effect, giving a sense of a visual, bottomless abyss. Such images indicate relations, but ones that remain decidedly self-absorbed and self-serving. Through photography’s relationality, I seek to make visible its outward-facing relations, complete with their opacities, asymmetries, and incomprehension. The relational makes visible the dialogue, which shall not remain a monologue. The relational makes visible the encounter between subjects and gazes, which cannot be assumed to be devoid of power differentials or differences. A relational approach entails seeing photographs in relation to one another, as in the *xoymet*, where they are curated and seen together. They exist in those relations, and only in accounting for such struggles can the idea of photography as well as that of its universality be entertained.

Through such framing we are asked to surrender any attachment to ideas of autonomy or originality and to embrace instead these objects’ kinships and transformations, resonances and impurities, intimacies and violences, which are recorded on the surface of the objects themselves and narrated through their social lives. Against a distinctly Western desire for autonomy, legibility, stability, and faithfulness, relation discloses the contested field in which photographs and our optical experience actually take place. Mediated and polysemic, photographs cannot be held captive. As spectators we are constantly engaged, deliberately or otherwise, in their unending (re)mediation.<sup>36</sup>

## A Note on Method

When this research started in 2007, the academic literature on the histories of photography in Senegal was limited to a few publications. That is not to say that a history of photography in Senegal did not exist. Rather, it was conceived, archived, and circulated through other platforms, media, and genres, such as the *xoymet*. And indeed, I described Fatou Thioune’s portrait as offering both a cartography of the history of photography in Senegal and a method for looking at photographs. The *xoymet* constitutes simultaneously a visual archive of images, a language to articulate the photographic, and a practice of beholding. Fatou Thioune’s portrait, like the *xoymet*, offered evidence of a deep passion for producing, collecting, and curating

photographs. The images are of various sizes and are often remediated copies. Each photograph, hung in a specific position on the wall, is placed in relation to those around it. Together, they offer an organization and an orientation of the visible. The images are often borrowed and the installation is temporary. Photographs are chosen and displayed to entice, but they are also understood as offering only a partial view. They constitute a mnemonic scaffolding to recount—orally—individual and collective histories. The term’s etymology encourages consideration of the optical in relation to other senses and media including dance and textile. In short, the *xoymet* offered important clues as to what one should pay attention to in narrating Senegal’s photographic histories.

The process of researching and writing the book and even the embrace of the *xoymet* as this project’s frame were never straightforward. On the contrary, Edward Said’s description of the world of images as so disorderly and unpredictable that it generates a sense of “panic” resonated powerfully.<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault described photography’s early history as one of folly—an excessive liberty that could only be characterized as impertinent, daring to “disrupt the flow of history-as-usual” beyond the hegemony of the written word and the official archives:

How might we recover this madness, this *insolent freedom* that accompanied the birth of photography? In those days images traveled the world under false identities. To them there was nothing more hateful than to remain captive, self-identical, in one painting, one photograph, one engraving, under the aegis of one author. No medium, no language, no syntax could contain them; from birth to last resting place they could always escape through new techniques of transposition. [emphasis mine]<sup>38</sup>

The “insolent freedom” of photography’s genesis was, in fact, only a prelude to what was to come. The medium has since continued to erode ideas of autonomy and originality. Photography’s inherent itinerancy and restless reproducibility challenge any presumed ownership of the apparatus, its images, their meanings, and their histories.

Throughout the years, I have struggled with but then learned to value photography’s insolence. And indeed, this book goes beyond the medium’s certainties to explore its instability, following objects that cross borders, decades, and media. This book follows these objects’ itinerancy, examining their changing relations to what or who is depicted, at once exposing and eluding any desire to control the visible. I address these photographs as unfinished—even unfaithful—narratives, as their past and future viewers continue to negotiate their significance. As the field of African photography remains in its infancy, scholars have felt the urge to recover and restore these histories’ “original” contexts in an effort to counter a colonial or Eurocentric master narrative of the medium—often eliding or resolving photography’s ambivalence in the process. I am not interested in restoring the authentic gaze of these photographers or their sitters. Instead, I search for an “oppositional gaze” that looks back, transforming these objects.<sup>39</sup>



Because of the nature of both the research and the photographic, this book had to renounce overly linear or comprehensive approaches. While the book is organized chronologically, it is not linear; it includes multiple moments where specific subjects and objects take the reader back and forward in time. Like the photographic wall of the *xoymet*, where images are reprinted, photographs across the book return in a recursive manner. In its structure, the book weaves connections across the chapters, with images that return, at times as copies, at other times as visual citations. The book maintains the mapping structure of the *xoymet*, which seeks to entice, but only by offering a glimpse. Its narration is often episodic, and as such, much is left out. So, for instance, I address only in passing famous photographers like Mëïssa Gaye, regarded as one of the pioneers of photography in Senegal; François-Edmond Fortier (see fig. 0.3), one of the most prolific authors in the age of the postcards; and lesser known Senegalese photo entrepreneurs traveling across the continent such as Demba N'Diaye (fig. 0.11). Instead, the book, like the *xoymet*, accounts for something more intimate and organic in its relations. It traces some of the centrifugal paths these photographs take, always pulling elsewhere.



Fig. 0.11. Khalilou, Ogooué Lambaréné—Young girls, early 20th century. Postcard format photomechanical reproduction, 3 1/4 × 5 1/4 in. (8.3 × 13.3 cm). Published by Demba N'Diaye, Libreville, Gabon.

The microhistories that this book accounts for are both locally rooted in specific places—namely, Dakar, Saint Louis, and Touba—and globally connected to real and imagined communities. As such, it seeks to put the multiple and even incongruous photographic practices that developed *before* the achievement of independence and even before the dawn of colonialism in dialogue with a diverse array of sources from inside and outside Senegal. Senegal is not approached as an exceptional location whose difference or localism needs to be made visible,

but rather as a nexus, a starting point, and a question mark. In many if not most histories of modernism in Africa, the national axis is the privileged lens through which to account for the teleological development of a visual language toward the apex of independence. This book instead firmly roots Senegal in the Afro-Atlantic visual scape, the Islamicate—a term for the culture in which Islam flourished and its broader community or Ummah—the global civil society of photography, and the French empire and West Africa as a region.<sup>40</sup> Senegalese men and women played a critical role in such diverse communities, where multiple ethnic, national, and transnational identities at times align and often conflict. By understanding identity not as a boundary but rather “as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging the subject,” to use Barry Flood’s words, we are able to see photographs as “objects of translation” born from these dialogues and interactions, whose significance is constantly shifting.<sup>41</sup> This global focus and relational “archipelago” aesthetic do not alter the fact that Senegal is nevertheless at the center of this exploration.<sup>42</sup>

I use the term “Senegal” in line with its historical meaning, as its significance and geographical scope changed across the decades. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, mostly European writers used “Senegal” to indicate the city of Saint Louis and its “dependencies” (*dépendances*) or posts along the Senegal River.<sup>43</sup> But as the French general and colonial administrator Louis Faidherbe initiated France’s aggressive imperialist project, the term came to indicate larger territories in the interior that were at times still ruled by local kingdoms. During the time span covered by this book, “Senegal” named a geographical location coinciding with French communes, French colonies, territories controlled by local kingdoms, and only in 1960 a newly independent nation-state. The term “Senegal” is thus used to designate a changing and contested space.

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My choice to spend more than thirty months pursuing research in Senegal was first of all impelled by the understanding that materials on African photography available in the West are not representative of the country’s photographic heritage. Photographs from Senegal held by collections in France are overwhelmingly of colonial origins and were often produced in support of the imperial project. The images that I encountered in family albums, private collections, and public institutions in Senegal were not the same as those collected in the West, with some important exceptions, such as *Revue Noire*’s archive. Doing research locally has been essential to learning about the most important photographers, such as Mama Casset (fig. 0.12), and understanding the changing significance of the medium, which forced me to look in unexpected places. If I had conducted all my research in Paris, I would not have seen the family photos featured in chapter 3 or encountered Oumar Ka’s unpublished archive, discussed in chapter 4 (fig. 0.13). Equally, if I had not gone to Washington, DC, the letters in which the African American photographer Augustus Washington recounted his trip to Saint Louis, Senegal, in 1859 would not have presented themselves. By traveling to Italy, I was able to connect with Mama Casset’s descendants, who are now based there, and see other archives that have moved with their owners along today’s new migration routes. Other important images taken in Senegal by Lebanese photographers such as Safieddine (see fig. 0.10)



Fig. 0.12. Mama Cassette, Woman in the studio, 1964.  
Gelatin silver print, 5 x 3 in. (13.5 x 8.5 cm).



Fig. 0.13. Oumar Ka, Two Women in Front of a Thatched-Roof House, 1959–1968. Scan from gelatin negative, 2.4 x 2.4 in. (6 x 6 cm).

surfaced unexpectedly in collections such as that of the Arab Image Foundation, based in Beirut. On social media, I first met descendants of photographers such as Linguere Fatou Fall, whose grandparents were featured in one of Africa's most iconic series and had remained anonymous until she named them on Facebook in 2019. These examples point to the global visual economy that photographers, patrons, and sitters in Senegal inhabited then as now, and the critical importance of conducting research in situ while also following these networks of exchange.

Akin to the experience of looking at a photographic wall, each chapter takes the reader close to a specific object. The close looking at details and fragments allows an intimacy with the object and invites questions about its relations to the whole. The book begins and remains anchored in objects, which offered the starting point of this research and the many conversations with their owners and users. The paucity of written sources on these histories encouraged deeper study of particular photographs as points of entry for unpacking the medium's histories in Senegal. My close formal analysis does not stem from a fetishization of the object or from a belief that each object can disclose an inherent and stable truth. Rather, it is motivated by an urge to take these images seriously, since many of them have been—and continue to be—dismissed as derivative of Western convention or as unmediated and unreflective traces of the real.

Whenever possible, the close study of objects has been accompanied by extensive interviews with photographers, sitters, patrons, curators, and historians. The photographic experience, one that includes the act of shared seeing, discloses and bonds. Most of the images and the stories narrated emerged from intimate conversations, with one person or in small groups. Interviews were not conducted to recuperate an authentic, and unchanged, gaze unfiltered by my own presence in asking questions and interpreting answers. Most were not in my native language (Italian), but rather in Wolof, French, and English. I studied Wolof, the most commonly spoken language in Senegal, for two years at Columbia University and then for three years in Dakar. Nevertheless, most of the interviews conducted in Senegal would not have been possible without the assistance of the Saint Louisian photographer Ibrahima Thiam. Very knowledgeable about photography and interested in its history and preservation, Ibrahima played a critical role in such conversations.

Since my first research trip, I have interviewed about 150 people in France (Paris and Marseilles), Senegal (Dakar, Saint Louis, Keur Massar, Thies, Tiwawone, Ziguinchor, Touba, Joal-Fadiouth, Djourbel, Guédiawaye, Gorée, Rufisque, Kaolack, and Podor), Italy (Verona and Milan), and the US (New York and Washington). While most were photographers and their descendants, I also contacted photo clients, artists (painters, singers, sculptors, and glass painters), curators, collectors, university professors, archivists, tailors, marabouts, photo lab technicians, journalists, filmmakers, and novelists. Each and every one of them provided wonderful insights into this rich history. I learned very quickly that interviewing is an art, and a difficult one at that. In my interviews, the gap or even incongruity between my own interest in historicizing or theorizing a medium and the individual's experience of handling and relating to these photographs was unmistakable. It took me many months to refine my ability to articulate questions, listen, and cultivate relationships with those who were generously willing to share their knowledge and time with me.

As I conducted interviews, the central role of orality never escaped me: both the orality of this history, which is mostly preserved in people's memories, and that of the photographic event, which was enacted each time I asked questions about a photograph, prompting a new *récit*. As part of this unstable and unfinished process of translation, my encounters and exchanges made visible the collision, and even incommensurability, of the visual, the oral, and the written, as well as the impossibility for a scholar's interpretation to "retain the power of the original."<sup>44</sup> In such exchanges, I had to negotiate my own positionality—that is, my proximity to and distance from the images, their histories, and their authors.<sup>45</sup> On the one hand, as an outsider—a white Italian woman—I had many advantages and privileges, including access to important authors and archives, even though I was only a graduate student when I started. I asked questions, some of which I then learned were inappropriate or wacky; but because I was a foreigner, a *toubab*, I was allowed to make, and even forgiven for, such faux pas. As a woman, I could engage with women, the medium's most prolific patrons, sitters, and consumers. I could ask direct questions or follow-up clarifications even around sensitive topics, which, paradoxically, insiders might not be allowed to address.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, my Eurocentric upbringing has constructed my vision, and a process of both learning and unlearning was required for me to see beyond what I knew and consider my own complicity in imperial regimes. Édouard Glissant argued that relation and opacity are inextricable from one another. Relation happens through opacity. Opacity reminds us of the impossibility of transparency between one culture and the next, and still only by moving with and alongside that tension and through that chaos can relation unfold.<sup>47</sup> The dynamic tension between translation and its inevitable betrayals is then a methodology in my research, where neither transparency nor mimesis is possible or desirable.

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The book's four chapters address the tensions between mimesis and mediation, opacity and transparency, translation and betrayal, universality and localism, subjugation and liberation, rural and urban, place and portrait. Written as independent, albeit related, case studies focusing on specific locations, genres, questions, and moments in history, they provide in-depth insight into a particular history of the medium in Senegal on the microlevel, while addressing larger questions about the theory of photography and the history of African art on the macrolevel.<sup>48</sup> The chapters privilege moments where transition and encounter—the arrival of photography, the popularization of portraiture, the rise of amateur practices, and modernism—complicate rather than simplify what photography is. By looking at distinct moments and material fragments, each chapter seeks to build on the existing literature, addressing key themes such as the medium's invention, intermediality, and modernity.

The first chapter focuses on the earliest and only surviving records of photographic practices in the city of Saint Louis, the historical capital of French West Africa between the 1810s and the 1860s. Photography as a technology and way of seeing was being imagined at a moment when France's imperial ambitions were also taking shape. Set against this backdrop—as the colony of Senegal transitioned from a group of trading posts to a territory controlled

by the French through military conquest—the chapter documents the activity of Senegal’s earliest itinerant photographers, such as the African American Augustus Washington, and the first commissions by patrons like the *signares*—an emancipated class of women who controlled a great portion of the coastal trade. Close analysis of these photographic fragments, which include daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, albumen prints, and lost and failed images, makes the invisible visible, including colonial ghosts, spectacular failures, and future spectators. Together these images destabilize the idea of photography as an essentially Western medium monopolized by the colonial power, while firmly grounding Senegal’s photographic histories within a global “image world” that extended across West Africa and the Black Atlantic during and despite, inside and beyond, the colonial experience.<sup>49</sup> Today they invite us to look again and consider our complicity, as spectators, in maintaining imperial structures.

Scholars have for decades challenged the popular belief that Islam is intrinsically and implacably hostile to anthropomorphic art. Drawing on this literature, the second chapter shows that Islam was responsible for popularizing portraiture in Senegal, which previously featured none. With the establishment of Sufi brotherhoods like the Tijaniyya and the Mouridiyya in the 1890s, the popularity of religious leaders such as Amadou Bamba led to an unprecedented demand for portrait making. Glass painting became the privileged medium for reproducing images that first appeared in other media, as lithographs or photographs. Inspired by the respect for Muslim saints inherent in Sufi practices, the widespread desire to display portraits in one’s home and for one’s personal devotional practices made this genre indispensable. Rather than concentrating on any one medium, this chapter focuses on both the theoretical and formal interaction among chromos, photographs, and glass paintings, and the migration of images across the three between the 1910s and the 1950s. Investigating these parallel and overlapping visual practices forces us to reconsider canonical distinctions between artwork and ornament, original and copy, index and icon, and handmade and machine-made objects.

The third chapter is devoted to one of the most iconic series in African photography, which was produced between 1939 and 1943 by a Saint Louisian amateur photographer. The series was first published by *Revue Noire* in 1998 as anonymous and remained nameless until 2019, when Madame Fatou Fall went on social media to identify the sitters in a particular image as her grandparents, Mr. Macky Kane and Mrs. Fatou Thioune. This chapter asks what happens when we have a name. Building on a series of interviews with the descendants of Macky Kane and Fatou Thioune and with the collectors who made this series famous, the chapter redresses past interpretations of this corpus and its significance within a larger history of photography in Senegal and West Africa. As it explores the repercussions of these objects’ *multiple* authors shifting from anonymous to named, the chapter considers these snapshots as affective family treasures, marketable commodities, political devices, and aesthetic meditations. Through their distinctive histories and formal qualities, these images challenge us to reconsider notions of authorship and anonymity, originality and seriality—or, in other words, our sense of photography itself. In their layered formal structures—that is, in the recurrence of the motif of the photograph-within-the-photograph—these photographs en abyme demand that we as viewers do not stall at the surface but explore connections, analogies,

and citations that refuse to be tied to any one final resolution or confined to any one author. They prompt us to plunge into photography's relations.

The fourth chapter focuses on two photographers active during the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era: Mama Casset (1908–1992), one of the most renowned African photographers, who worked in the capital city of Dakar, and Oumar Ka (1930–2020), an itinerant photographer based in Senegal's interior. By considering their diverse practices and antipodal aesthetics, this chapter complicates and expands conceptions of African modernity and photography's role in it. Until now, African photographic modernism has been largely equated with urban living and the aesthetics of "surfacism" and "shine," which are concerned with the image's optical shallowness and production of light.<sup>50</sup> While Casset, with his emphasis on the image's texture and reflectivity, largely ascribes to these aesthetics, Ka's exploration of the photograph's depth and opacity encourages us to expand the canon of photographic modernism. Mama Casset served Senegal's growing middle class, whose imaginations were shaped by the popularization of mass media such as cinema and glossy magazines. His interest in the surface and its reflectivity was also informed by his experience taking aerial photographs and documenting Senegalese Muslims on the hajj. Unlike Casset, Ka catered to the largely rural community of the Baol region. Instead of abstracting his sitters against patterned backdrops, Ka captures his clients' labor and land, insisting on their daily lives, local architectures, and actual *métiers* as constitutive of their modernity. As these images visualize Senegal's working class, they resonate with social realist films like those of Ousmane Sembène more than with popular magazines like *Bingo* or the fantastical paintings of the *École de Dakar*. Formally, Casset's and Ka's opposing aesthetics of shine and opacity, surface and depth reveal the contradictory impulses of African modernism. Ka's archive encourages us to consider modernity's blind spot: the rural areas that are home to the majority of Africans, whose vantage point has until now remained invisible.

The conclusion considers Léopold Sédar Senghor's (1906–2001) engagement with photography and its relation to the arts of Africa. As the first president of Senegal and cofounder of the Negritude movement, Senghor is regarded as one of the most important African intellectuals and patrons of the arts of the twentieth century. If most art historians pay homage to his commitment to and investments in the arts, his writings on Black aesthetics often pass unnoticed. Starting in 1964, Senghor published five volumes titled *Liberté* gathering hundreds of his essays and speeches, spanning his whole career from the 1930s to the early 1990s. This last chapter provides a close reading of Senghor's interpretation of African art, focusing on his engagement with photography and mimesis. If in 1970 Senghor stated that "Africa teaches that art is not photography," what does this tell us about the status of photography in Senegal and Africa at large? In exploring Senghor's writings in relation to masks from Ivory Coast and photographs by Mama Casset working in Senegal in the 1960s, I argue that Senghor's understanding of African art as analogy rather than mimesis opens up new avenues to interpret these objects and photographs more broadly.

Joining the few academic volumes devoted to African photography, this book is the first to focus exclusively on Senegal and privilege the close study of photographs as constantly engaged in a dynamic process of circulation, negotiation, and conversion. By tracing such relations with their inevitable asym-



metries, slippages, and opacities, this book aims to push the current scholarly conversation beyond dichotomies of self and other, local and foreign, authentic and derivative, or original and copy. Only if we center these images' protean trajectories and generative translations can we see their authors' ingenuity and restore photography to its universality, no longer as a prerogative of the West, but as a horizon that can exist only in the presence of all.

# Contested Sights

## Ghosts, Failures, and Other Lives of Early Photographs

### CHAPTER 1



Fig. 1.1. Théodore Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819.  
Oil on canvas, 193 1/2 × 282 1/10 in. (491.5 × 716.5 cm).

Photography, like colonialism, originated before the nineteenth century. Since at least the sixteenth century, France had imperial ambitions that included Senegal.<sup>1</sup> In this *longue durée*, scholars distinguish two periods of colonialism—the first and second French overseas empires. The former was largely mercantilist, coincided with the Old Regime, and ended with the French Revolution in 1789. The latter was marked by military occupation and is described as a “new imperialism” that, beginning in the 1830s, led to the conquest of the Western Sudan and eventually to the infamous Scramble for Africa of the 1880s.<sup>2</sup> Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, French tactics and ambitions greatly changed, but as Jenna Nigro has argued, the distinction between these two moments should not distract from their connections, parallels, and overlapping modalities, which, for my purposes here, also include their scopic regimes. Similarly, historians of photography have long challenged canonical origin stories of the medium that have described it as a singular technology invented in 1839 by “some isolated individual genius,” independent of existing practices and larger discourses.<sup>3</sup> For example, for Ariella Azoulay the origins of photography as a political formation are to be found in 1492.<sup>4</sup> For Jonathan Crary, it is in paintings such as Théodore Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa* (fig. 1.1) that new models of visibility and spectatorship are introduced, before the invention of photography.<sup>5</sup> But even for the most cautious photo historians, the 1820s, ’30s, and ’40s remain a contested terrain in the history and historiography of photography with an exceptional number of devices and procedures that overlapped, competed, and succeeded one another, resisting the possibility of talking about photography as a singular monolithic entity, or the direct descendant of linear perspective and the Italian Renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter plunges into the gray zone or “historiographical chasm” between two phases of French imperialism and competing modalities of seeing, a *terra incognita* in the histories of French colonial ambition and a contested site in the histories of photography.<sup>7</sup> It focuses on the earliest records of photographic practices between the 1810s and the 1860s in the city of Saint Louis, as the colony of Senegal transitioned from a series of small trading posts to a military-occupied French territory. In dwelling on these liminal zones, I seek to subvert Eurocentric genealogies of photography and colonialism as well as the umbilical tie often assumed to link the two. Vision is approached as “a site of resistance,” and in practicing close looking, I take on bell hooks’s invitation to “search those margins, gaps and locations” where agency can be found and scopic regimes subverted.<sup>8</sup> This analysis brings into focus the unexpected and the unseen, including colonial specters, spectacular failures, and future spectators.

Albeit organized chronologically, the chapter’s structure is intentionally episodic, presenting Senegal’s earliest and only surviving fragments of a photographic vision that here include the prephotographic and the nonphotographic. They comprise paintings, daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and albumen prints; some are encased in precious frames; others are carefully arranged in an album format; some survived and continue to circulate on social media; others were lost or never happened. They were produced by French amateurs, but also by African and African American entrepreneurs. Among the medium’s patrons we find the Saint Louisian elite and women in positions of power. The jarring differences in these objects’ materiality, biographies, producers, and intended viewers force us to engage with the complexity of the early histories of photography and colonialism as contested sites. Through close looking, it is possible to witness what Patricia Hayes and Gary Minkley recognize as photographs’ “great capacity to overturn unified, linear, and chronological ways of thinking,” and “introduce some disarray into the assumed legitimacies of genre and

genealogies.”<sup>9</sup> Seen together, these fragments destabilize the idea of photography as an essentially Western medium monopolized by the colonial power. They introduce new interpretative possibilities including situating Senegal’s photographic histories within a global image world spanning across geographical regions and imagined communities that exceeded Senegal, and the colonial empire. Seen today, they offer an invitation to pay attention and look again, perhaps even anew, and most importantly, consider our complicity, as spectators, in maintaining imperial structures.

## A Prologue: Before Photography, after a Colony (1815)

Take, for instance, the year 1815, a watershed moment in the history of Senegal. In 1815, not only was the slave trade first abolished, but the British agreed to return the cities of Gorée and Saint Louis to the French, who had established a fort back in 1659.<sup>10</sup> The announcement of the abolition of the slave trade as a condition for turning the colonies over to France marks a watershed moment, one that forced a transition to more “legitimate commerce.”<sup>11</sup> Even though Senegambia was not the region’s largest exporter of slaves, the French had to find new sources of revenue and rethink the structure and nature of their empire dramatically. However, the return of the French to Senegal was not as grandiose and triumphant as they had imagined it would be. Their journey was inauspicious and fatal.

The event, few will remember, is the subject of one of the most celebrated European paintings, *The Raft of the Medusa*, an icon of French Romanticism by Théodore Géricault (fig. 1.1). To complete this oversize painting, Géricault spent months accumulating the facts about what is now known as the nineteenth century’s most famous sea disaster.<sup>12</sup> The painting depicts the aftermath of the wreck of the French naval frigate *Méduse*, which ran aground off the African coast in July 1816 as it was leading a convoy of three ships bound for the Senegalese port of Saint Louis. The convoy was transporting French troops and administrators to reinstate French rule in Senegal. Géricault depicts fifteen of the *Medusa*’s original 147 passengers who had survived after thirteen days at “the frontiers of human experience.”<sup>13</sup>

Since its first exhibition, at the 1819 Paris Salon, *The Raft of the Medusa* has been both praised and criticized. With its sheer size, charged content, and artistic virtuosity, the painting is arresting. The “shocking physicality” of its pile of corpses and the horror in eyes that witnessed the frailty of human nature, and the might of survival instincts that would contemplate cannibalism, have moved and appalled viewers.<sup>14</sup> In the larger-than-life rendition, Géricault represented the precise moment when the Black apical figure spots on the horizon the *Argus*—a ship that did not see them at that moment but would rescue them a few hours later. Géricault’s representation of this catastrophic event contributed to the already heated public debate on what became an international scandal and an embarrassment to the French monarchy that had appointed an inexperienced and incompetent captain who caused the shipwreck.<sup>15</sup> For all these reasons, and for placing a Black man at the pinnacle of the composition, some scholars have interpreted Géricault’s painting as a “counterhegemonic cultural production”—a biting critique of France’s monarchy and history of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Most often, what is omitted, or only briefly mentioned, is the fact that the painting narrates France’s return to Senegal and Africa more broadly. It announces the dawn of modern colonialism, and a photographic vision.

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