

# BLACK STUDY: OF ABSENCE, RETURN AND RENEWAL

*The theory of blackness is the theory of surreal presence*

Blackness and Nonperformance<sup>1</sup>

FRED MOTEN

## RETURNING THE GAZE

Towards the end of Ousmane Sembene's allegorical masterpiece *La Noire de...* (1966), there's a stunning revelation.<sup>2</sup> A singular object, a mask, elevates the film from tragic fable to poetic metaphor. Post-colonial angst and the logics of globalisation collide into an overpowering sense of dread and inevitability.<sup>3</sup> The film follows the quiet disillusionment of Diouana, a Senegalese woman living as an indentured servant for a bourgeois French family living on the French medditeranean coast. The feeling that pervades the film is what the curator Okuwi Enwazor referred to as the "terrible nearness of distant places".<sup>4</sup> Here, Enwezor references the ever changing postcolonial condition that is built on the twin engines of neocolonialism and technological determinism. In his essay *The Black Box* for DOCUMENTA 11, Enwezor describes the postcolonial condition as "a world of proximities". In the film, Sembene illustrates this point masterfully: here, architecture is the primary signalling device that distinguishes France from the peripheral shanty towns of Dakar. The fact that we seamlessly move between France and Dakar merely illustrates post-coloniality's ambivalent relationship to the circulation of objects and labour. A closer look reveals that ambivalence is tied to another powerful force: memory. Half-remembered and doubtful memories are the indelible link across the Black diaspora. It is the refusal of ambivalence and the vessel that links individual lives (those that were lost) to the material culture born out of slavery, subjugation and colonialism. The archive lives on in collective memory. Sembene's mask, that is to say the archive, is significant because it is contextualized and energized by personal narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Moten, F. Fred Moten. (2015). Blackness and Nonperformance: MoMa.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2leiFByllg> [Accessed on February 10th 2020]

<sup>2</sup> Sembène, O., Diop, M., Jelinck, A., Sene, M., Fontaine, R., Films Domirev, & New Yorker Films. (2005). *La noire de-*. New York]: New Yorker Video.

<sup>3</sup> *La Noire de...* central message is the pervasiveness of the colonial project. In this case the fast shifting exploitative practices that defines the relationship between the former colony and its coloniser.

<sup>4</sup> Okwui's view on the global circulation of art rests partly on the notion that African art is a legitimate force in critiquing global politics and socio-economic systems of exploitation, a theory he demonstrates to full effect at the 56th Venice Biennale, *All the World's Futures*. "The Black Box," in *Documenta 11\_Platform 5: Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Heike Ander and Nadje Rottner (Ostfildern, DE: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 45.



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Few cities in Africa have quite the cultural gravitas of Dakar. In Djibril Diop Mambéty's biting documentary *Contras City* (1969), Mambety collapses modern Dakar into a stark division between the colonial city and its shadowy, informal and much larger neighbour - the native shanty town.<sup>5</sup> Twin relationships after all define the postcolonial, resulting in relenting alienation and an endless clash of culture and identity. It is not surprising that Dakar is a feverish stand-in for the contemporary African city in Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019).<sup>6</sup> The city is eternal, ghostly and hostile, the turbulent flows of foreign capital heightening the feeling of helplessness. It appears that the city is part dream/part simulation, where its inputs are profit-seeking capital, and its outputs a steady stream of dreams and bodies. Jean Baudrillard's simulacra is an apt metaphor for Dakar when he writes "it is the map that precedes the territory... it is the map that engenders the territory."<sup>7</sup> What Baudrillard means is that increasingly, globalisation has abandoned reality in favour of action in an idealised version of events.<sup>8</sup> The reality of mass migration and exploitation are irrelevant. Gleaming towers, mega infrastructure and cultural centres prop up this illusion, creating the myth of progress. Indeed, this is the antithesis of Franz Fanon's warning when he writes "Let us not

<sup>5</sup> Mambéty, D. Kankourama. (1969). *Contras City*

<sup>6</sup> *Atlantics*. (2019). [film] Directed by M. Diop. Senegal, France, Belgium: Ad Vitam Production, Arte France Cinéma, Canal Plus Canal+ International, Cinekap Ciné ,Plus Frakas Productions.

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation (The Body, in theory)*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

<sup>8</sup> In the opening of the film, a ghostly high rise tower dominates the desert landscape. It is apparent that the property developer has run out of money.

imitate Europe” towards the end of the *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).<sup>9</sup> In response, Diop, who dedicates her film to “the lost youth” hinges her film on the line “*the men have gone to sea*” - a sentence both simple and devastating in its reference to a right of passage both ancient and contemporary; the journey of no return.<sup>1011</sup>

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Film, more than any medium, is a powerful tool to illustrate loss, alienation and the non-linearity of black life.<sup>12</sup> Taken together, these three films are emblematic of the cultural and socio-economic dilemmas thrown up by colonialism and globalisation. Thus, the return of the mask at the end of *La Noire de...* (1966) is a potent metaphor to unpack the implications of Africa’s cultural legacy held abroad. As this is a film existing also as a memory, we are privy to Diouana’s interiority. The mask travels with her from Dakar to Marseille. At the end of the film the mask haunts its owners, expediting its unceremonious return to the shanty town outside Dakar. This is a guilt ornament: one that represents Diouana’s tragic life, her silence and the lives of all those who came before her. Thus the mask is enlivened in that it is a metaphor for black life. In this light, how then can we re-contextualize objects such as these? Where will they be held? How should they be circulated? What happens to those who/which left and never returned?<sup>13</sup>

## ETHNIC NOTIONS

While films have successfully explored fraught African identity, architecture has only begun to grapple with the multiplicity of contemporary Africans. Caught between the discipline’s imperialist leanings and the need to articulate identity in the built form, African architects find themselves unable to articulate the African, or even Africanness, in contemporary architecture.

Outside Europe and America, designers around the world have had to deal with the dual weight of achieving High Design (that is, the architecture derived from the Western notions of purity and enlightenment) and breaking into the Western canon of architectural masterpieces. Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Mies van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion and Phillip Johnson’s Glass House, for instance, all exhibit the West’s obsession with varied styles and inevitably, impracticality. This schema has

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<sup>9</sup> Earlier in the essay “concerning Violence” Fanon illustrates the farce of decolonization by stating “Gabon is independent, but between Gabon and France nothing has changed. Fanon, F. (1968). *The wretched of the earth* (1st Evergreen Black Cat Ed.] ed., Evergreen black cat book, B-342-K). New York: Grove Press.

<sup>10</sup> Netflix. *Atlantics*’ Director Mati Diop in the Corner Booth: Netflix <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=52eAbCWz1BU> [Accessed 10th February 2020]

<sup>11</sup> *Atlantics*. (2019). [film] Directed by M. Diop. Senegal, France, Belgium: Ad Vitam Production, Arte France Cinéma, Canal Plus Canal+ International, Cinekap Ciné ,Plus Frakas Productions.

<sup>12</sup> Moten’s theory of the “surreal present” has influenced contemporary filmmakers like Arthur Jafa who seek to “make black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of black music.”

<sup>13</sup> An estimated 95% of Africa’s cultural legacy is held abroad, primarily in Europe and North America.

proved difficult for architects operating outside this tradition. African architects can seldom justify such selfish devotion to a “building”. Unlike fine art, film and music, architecture does not strive for plurality or differing perspectives. Precisely because of the globalised, western-facing “professionalisation”, or even “civilisation” of the discipline, architecture is unable to reconcile its social function (world building) and its ambition (world domination). This paradox hasn’t worked well for African architects, or indeed for anyone designing at the margins.<sup>14</sup> As an elite profession, architecture demands recognition, and recognition is born out of a consensus as to what is good architecture and what is simply “vernacular”. Thus, the inherent contradiction of working in an art form geared towards problem solving and articulating identity requires careful negotiation. For instance, the role of artifice and decoration in architecture has been contested in the West since the turn of the 20th century, prompting some African architects to strive for minimalism to prove that they too are capable of rationality. In *Ornament and Crime*, the architect Adolf Loos consigned the decorative arts to backward degenerate cultures, simply stating “lack of ornament is a sign of spiritual strength.”<sup>15</sup> Later, modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe reduced Loos’s words to the adage both succinct and mendacious, “less is more...”<sup>16</sup>

Aesthetics aside, the promise of creating a better, more inclusive world attracts many to architecture. The African-American poet and designer June Jordan co-designed the audacious plan *Skyrise for Harlem*, which grew out of the scientific materialism of cold-war America.<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> Her solution was radical, proposing the literal upliftment of African Americans living in Harlem far above the reach of the state power. Though lyrical and audacious, *Skyrise for Harlem* only worked in the context of the technically impossible mega-project (a popular obsession during the Cold War). Her co-designer, Buckminster Fuller, had previously unshackled architectural ambition from the scale of a building by expanding its reach to the territory through his radical designs.<sup>19</sup> Put another way, architects saw themselves as social engineers proposing elaborate, technological solutions to urban decay, ghettoisation and a changing climate.<sup>20</sup> While it was unclear who would run this new world covered in mega infrastructure, what is still clear is that complete trust in the power of technical solutions continues to underpin the current model of production of the built environment. Under this regime, context and history are irrelevant. One city is interchangeable with the other.

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<sup>14</sup> Here, I’m referring to the non-Western world as well as the peripheral zones in the West.

<sup>15</sup> Loos, Opel, & Opel, Adolf. (1997). *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture, and Thought. Translation series). Riverside, Calif.: Ariadne Press.

<sup>16</sup> Mies is not the originator of the phrase but he made it his own. A longer version of the quote reads “More is less. Less is more. The eye is a menace to clear sight. The laying bare of oneself is obscene. Art begins with the getting rid of nature...”

<sup>17</sup> Jordan was also directly referencing the opening line of Ralph Ellison's essay *Harlem is Nowhere* (1964) where he states “To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city”.

<sup>18</sup> June Jordan’s plans were pushed under the unfortunate title “Instant Slum Clearance”. Meyer, J. Instant Slum Clearance. *Esquire*. June 1965.

<sup>19</sup> Fuller, a modernist, summed up his approach to design and engineering as “doing more with less”

<sup>20</sup> Jordan herself stated, “Harlem is a political embarrassment in which no political solution is adequate.”



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Architects of African descent have a tortured relationship to artifice and ornament. There is palpable dread when the word “vernacular” is used to describe their work, since critics (often Western) use the term vernacular to mean primitive and therefore degenerate. At a public lecture at Harvard University, the architect David Adjaye remarked that mining the archive of African vernacular design was an “opportunity to understand a way of negotiating complex urban scenarios.”<sup>21</sup> Adjaye was making a bold call for re-appropriating historic objects for contemporary use. Across the spectrum, negotiating this aesthetic and pedagogical tightrope prompted Burkinabè architect Diébédo Francis Kéré to explain that his work rose to the highest ideals of architecture by stating:

“I did a modern building that is not westernised, and not a traditional African building.”<sup>22</sup>

Taken together, Adjaye and Kere raise a number of questions concerning aesthetics and the archive. Are buildings and architecture synonymous with each other? Are buildings as we know them modern inventions in Africa? And on and on... Society has always ascribed meaning to buildings, giving rise to the term “architectural language” to attempt to codify the tangible power buildings have over our lives.<sup>23</sup> But architecture is not a language, and even if it was, very few speak it. To paraphrase the English

<sup>21</sup> Adjaye, D (2013). David Adjaye: Harvard Graduate School of Design <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azEctOHCdmg> [Accessed on February 10th, 2020]

<sup>22</sup> Kere, F (2017). Francis Kéré interview: The architect's hometown school launched his career | Architecture: Dezeen [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2zQjZTzpK8&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j2zQjZTzpK8&feature=emb_title) [Accessed on February 10th, 2020]

<sup>23</sup> “Architectural language” is used to imply a systematic way of approaching the design of buildings. No clear definition of the term exists.

critic and bomast, Jonathan Meades, “buildings do not speak.” Nonetheless, valid concerns are raised as to how architecture can encapsulate cultural diversity and painful histories. In doing so we must accept the universality of language to communicate both tragedy and aspiration. Accepting her Nobel Peace Prize, the writer Toni Morrison vividly described the power of language to illustrate the purpose of human endeavour:

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.”<sup>24</sup>

It is under this charge that the architect Mario Gooden, in his landmark study of architecture and black culture, *Dark Space* (2016), expands the social function of architecture beyond an elitist discipline to a system of understanding history, cultural artefacts and language.<sup>25</sup> In the essay “*Made in America*”: *There is no such thing as African American Architecture*”, Gooden states:

“The intersection of architecture and black American life does not simply express the static conditions of ethnic identity.”

Like Adjaye, Gooden is staking a claim for the ever evolving archive of cultural influences that inform architecture. However, for the black diaspora this does not simply mean looking out towards Africa but, instead recognising the value of interiority, ingenuity and absence. While buildings can be said to be immutable, culture and the global circulation of people and objects are not. Nonetheless, architecture has the potential to help us make sense of ourselves, our histories of erasure and plunder, and the radical potential of making a better world out of nothing.

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<sup>24</sup> The Nobel Prize. Toni Morrison: Nobel Lecture. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/> [Accessed 29th February, 2020]

<sup>25</sup> Gooden, M. (2016). *Dark space : Architecture, representation, black identity*. New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City.



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Two recent buildings have tried to grapple with history and architecture, with varying results, while consciously wresting themselves from the confines of Western architecture. In Dakar, the Museum of Black Civilization, designed by the state-owned Beijing Institute of Architectural Design, is a bold cultural centre that could be seen as a subversive take on the encyclopedic European museum. Across the Atlantic, David Adjaye's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington D.C. attempts to do the same in the context of American nation building. Here, both monuments seek to physically manifest hundreds of years of cultural innovation as well as showcase cultural injustice. In many ways, both operate as museums dedicated to absence.<sup>26</sup> But the two monuments are not without their critics. Referring to the NMAAHC, Gooden describes it as a building that "relies on architectural fragments that have been removed from their historical and cultural context." In Dakar, the Museum of Black Civilizations tries its best to shake off the fact that it was designed and financed by the Chinese government in the spirit of "friendship and cooperation".<sup>27</sup> Creating a narrative of civilizations is an important step in nation-

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<sup>26</sup> At the Museum of Black Civilizations the absence is literal and is evidenced by vast, empty galleries.

<sup>27</sup> Just before its opening, the then Chinese ambassador to Senegal remarked "We had similar vicissitudes. It is for this reason that we understand (...) the suffering of our African friends. It is this common destiny that unites us and continues to give a dynamic impetus to the strengthening of our relations of friendship and cooperation."

Afrikephri Foundation. Senegal has built the largest museum of black civilizations <https://afrikhepri.org/le-senegal-construit-le-plus-grand-musee-des-civilisations-noires/> [Accessed 29th February, 2020]

building. What the two buildings illustrate, though, is the limitation of encapsulating history and aspiration into singular monuments.

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Globally, people of African descent live under what Fred Moten (2013) terms “regimes of gradual emancipation”.<sup>28</sup> The artist Arthur Jafa remarked that “Black people have a privileged relationship to blackness, but it's not a proprietary relationship to blackness.”<sup>29</sup> Here, Jafa is referring to the circulation of contemporary black cultural production and how globalisation and neo-colonial power structures have left black people out of the loop. But Jafa makes a more nuanced point. Black culture is global culture. As such, blackness has a life of its own beyond the reach of its creators. The return of objects of African descent therefore highlights the contradictions of capitalism and the post-colonial condition—the objects themselves have had other lives and influenced cultural production, which is then held up as a pinnacle of human ingenuity. One thing is therefore certain: institutions alone can not re-contextualize and re-circulate returned objects of African descent. Recognising global, exploitative logics of consumption and circulation means that African citizens should have the power and agency to create an archive that reconciles the past with a shared future.

## NEW RELATIONSHIPS

In early January 2019, the New York Times brought together the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, academic Cécile Fromont, and the artist Toyin Ojih Odutola to grapple with the real and imagined impact of the unwieldy titled *Restitution of African Cultural Heritage Toward a New Relational Ethics Report*.<sup>30,31</sup> The report, authored by economist Felwine Sarr and historian Bénédicte Savoy, is notable for its ambition and polarising approach to solving a problem centuries in the making. It is apparent that without a concrete framework for restitution, the very idea of returning Africa's lost archive is transgressive. Indeed, Cécile Fromont, stated, “we can't even fathom what new African museums could be, and what they could do...” pointing not to a lack of imagination on the part of African cultural institutions, but, instead to the

<sup>28</sup> Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe ; New York ; Port Watson: Minor Compositions.

Saidiya Hartman refers to the contemporary moment as “the afterlife of slavery”, a powerful reminder that black life remains precarious, fragile and devalued.

Hartman, S. (2007). *Lose your mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (1st ed.). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

<sup>29</sup> Rown, K. (2018). ‘Black People Figured Out How to Make Culture in Freefall’: Arthur Jafa on the Creative Power of Melancholy. Artnet. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/arthur-jafa-julia-stoschek-collection-1227422> [Accessed on 9th February, 2020]

<sup>30</sup> Farago, J. (2019). Artwork Taken From Africa, Returning to a Home Transformed. New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/03/arts/design/african-art-france-museums-restitution.html> [Accessed on 11th February 2020]

<sup>31</sup> Sarr, F. & Savoy, D. (2018). *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*. [http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr\\_savoy\\_en.pdf](http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf) [Accessed on 11th February 2020]



new method of engagement for governments, institutions and the citizens of Africa in unpacking the radical potential of the expanded archive. The central thrust of the report therefore rests on the premise of “full restitution”. The magnitude of “restitution” is echoed by Fromont who states that it now “demands that the logic of France’s relationship to Africa be renegotiated.” The implication of this hangs like a fog above the conversation. While the historic archive held in the West is vast, postcolonial artistic production has flourished across the black diaspora. Thus, living with absence defines post-coloniality. How then can the historic and the contemporary be reconciled?

## BEYOND REPRESENTATION

We return to *La Noire de....* (1966). In its final scenes, the fabled mask of Africa returns. The desecrated object is unwanted by its rightful heirs, except for one little boy who values it for its aesthetic function. The allegory of the returned item is one that will play out for years to come: what will the citizens of Africa do with these returned objects? Will these objects imbue contemporary life with meaning, or, like the lost youth, haunt our memories with their ghostly presence?



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Throughout modern history, Africans have struggled to claim ownership over the use and circulation of their own cultural objects. Bluntly put, Africans don’t profit from black cultural production within the current economic system. Not surprisingly, uneven power relations have yielded new and innovative forms of representation born out of absence. Contemporary artists including Julie Mehretu and Otobong Nkanaga are

interested in mapping historic and contemporary logics of extraction, migration and degradation, illustrating global hyper-connectedness, and paving the way for language to describe turbulent and hybridized cultures and identities. There is a quiet optimism embedded in these works of art, that represents the flow of time and a visual of its scars. For Nkanag, the driving question of her practice is, “how can we be here together?” The “we” here speaks to Africans as global citizens, recalling the powerful charge at the close of the Sarr/ Savoy report.<sup>32</sup>

Having incorporated several regimes of meaning, they [objects] become sites of the creolization of cultures, and as a result they are equipped to serve as mediators of a new relationality.

## CONCLUSION

Restitution of cultural artefacts can be a form of restorative justice but with some caveats. In some ways they can mediate across the abyss. For a long time now, cultural production has dealt with loss, phantoms and absence; the greatest works of art engage with the terror and beauty of black life in the context of time. Seen this way, recontextualising returned artefacts is an open ended question. The question depends on the observer and their context, allowing us to speculate and ponder. I do not have the right question yet but perhaps we can end with this one posed by the academic Saadiyat Harman:

“... what would it mean to not have [a] social [and] political order[s] that’s founded on settler colonialism and slavery, racism and anti-blackness, in particular?”<sup>33</sup>

A provocation, a call to action, an appeal to memory? Perhaps, a new world coming.

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<sup>32</sup>Nkanaga, O. (2019). Artist Otobong Nkanga – 'Imagining the Scars of a Landscape' : Tate. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=17&v=qZZruEToDCI&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=17&v=qZZruEToDCI&feature=emb_title) [Accessed 11th February 2020]

<sup>33</sup> The Creative Independent. On Working With Archives: An interview with writer Saidiya Hartman <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/> [Accessed 28th February, 2020]