Title

Diaspora, Identity, and Representation in Non- Figurative African Photography

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Abstract

African photography has long been closely linked to portraiture, initially in the way that it was used as an ethnographic tool during the colonial period and eventually as a means of visual identity-building and self-fashioning in studio photography when Africans appropriated the form and decided to use it for themselves. It can be argued that portraiture, in its ability for representation, perhaps lends itself to photography that is linked to identity politics. However, by looking at the works of three artists, Edson Chagas, Francois-Xavier Gbré, and Mame-Diarra Niang, this essay looks at the ways in which these African photographers approach issues of identity and diaspora without using the portrait, but rather by interrogating the form of photography itself, and its relation to the photographer's subjectivity. These three artists all photograph various African cities, specifically Luanda, Abidjan, and Dakar, from their own distinct diasporic viewpoints, whether as returnees or as visitors to their parents' hometowns. By doing this, they propose a new direction for diasporic African photography, one in which the fragmented form of the images can speak to the hybridity of their identities. Thus, this essay aims to interrogate the idea that portraiture is the only way in which the African experience can be accurately represented. By looking at the work of three contemporary photographers, I will examine the way they bring their own experiences and subjectivities to the non-figurative and imbue it with a renewed sense of identity.

Somewhere in Luanda, there is an electric blue wall, with its paint fading to reveal a pink wall in parts, a white wall in other parts, and brown concrete in others. The peeling of the paint and the various colors it reveals creates a natural pattern on the wall. At its base sits what seems to be a sack but on closer inspection, with its pattern of black and white hexagons, could also be a deflated

football. It is hard to tell. Without prior knowledge, it is also hard to tell where this picture might have been taken, with its being nondescript to the point of creating a sense of displacement. It is a scene that Luandans might casually walk by, as it contains ordinary aspects of their daily lives, but it is one that Angolan photographer Edson Chagas carefully placed together for his *Found Not Taken* series (Fig. 1). This photograph, with its peeling layers, fragmentation, and focus on found objects and on the ordinary, signals a new kind of African photography, one which mirrors the photographer's own fluid diasporic experience.

In this essay, I will look at three photographers whose work I believe embodies this diasporic sentiment, and whose work probes our understanding of African photography. I will be examining images by Mame-Diarra Niang, Edson Chagas, and Francois-Xavier Gbré, three artists looking at African cities, and by proxy Africanness, without the usual genre of portraiture. In contrast to the generally accepted idea that the non-figurative is necessarily apolitical and incompatible with identity politics, these photographers charge their works with their own subjectivity and personal politics.

Mame-Diarra Niang, born in 1982, is a photographer based in France who grew up between France, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. Francois Xavier Gbré was born in 1978 in France to a French-Ivorian family. Edson Chagas, born in Luanda in 1977, was raised in the city before leaving for Europe to study. I will be looking at the ways in which these photographers, all from a similar generation and with similar dual relationships to Africa and Europe, employ the non-portrait. They treat it as a form that is cognizant, really in three different ways, of both the familiarity and also the ambiguity of the experience of returning to one's "home." These images reflect the lack of clarity that comes with the diaspora experience and relationships to cities you return to and leave often. With these works, at times you can immediately recognize where it might be, should you have links to that city, but at other times, they could be anywhere.

Both Gbré and Chagas include works set in France and London in their series, intermixed with those set in Luanda, Abidjan, and Dakar. There is a sense of belonging and displacement that the fragmented and non-figurative works evoke, which I argue is reflective of what it means to be part of the African

diaspora. Diarra's work, for instance, focuses on the fluidity of
territories and the futility of walls. Gbré's work is centred on the
intersection of public and personal memory and the architectural
legacy of colonialism. Chagas' series evokes thoughts on waste,
environment, and human impact. These artists demonstrate the
different ways diaspora identity can be invoked, questioned, and
felt without the typical use of portraiture.

When it comes to diaspora and the postcolonial experience,
it is difficult to pinpoint an exact definition apart from a shared
feeling of living and existing in more than one culture. Stuart Hall
describes it from personal experience as follows:

I knew England from the inside. But I'm not and will never
be "English." I know both places intimately, but I am not wholly of
either place. And that's exactly the diasporic experience, far away
enough to experience the sense of exile and loss, close enough to
understand the enigma of an always-postponed "arrival."[1]

Hall also points out that "cultural identity is not fixed—it's
always hybrid,"[2] and that diaspora experience is defined "by the
recognition of a necessary heterogeneity, diversity; by a con-
ception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite,
difference; by *hybridity*."[3]

In this essay, I will first explore the relationship that African
photography has to portraiture and the way that the two have
been closely linked, especially when employed as a means of self-
definition. I will then look at how other Black artists have utilized
the non-portrait as a way to move away from representation and
interrogate the idea that to make Black art is to make representa-
tive art. I will also consider contemporary photography trends in
the West such as the "deadpan" to try to determine where this new
mode of photography situates itself in relation to larger global
movements. Finally, I will examine specific works of these three
photographers, and look at the way in which their work conjures
up feelings of diaspora and displacement within specific African
cities—without employing the portrait.

Portraiture and Representation in African Photography

The African photographic form has always been necessarily
hybrid—an amalgamation of that which photographers picked
up from Europeans during the colonial period, and that which

applied and appealed to them in their own local contexts. Kobena
Mercer wrote about the upending of the dynamic that the African
portrait underwent in the years leading up to independence, spe-
cifically in West Africa:

> What arose out of this interactive dynamic was a situation
> of technology transfer whereby the skills Africans acquired
> as apprentices to European photographers were gradually
> adapted to convey the expressive needs and imaginative
> choices that African subjects made for themselves.[4]

Most of the African customers would not have seen the
results of the images taken of them by the Europeans, so it can be
assumed that their initial adoption of the portrait form was not a
conscious response to the ways in which they had been portrayed,
but rather an opportunity to fashion and see themselves. Malick
Sidibe, the Malian studio photographer, said about the form:

> Africans love photography. It is the very emblem of the
> self. People want to preserve themselves, their faces. . .the
> person knows that he can look in the mirror and see his own
> face. . .what a discovery! The camera functions like a mirror.
> It proves one's existence, or at least a part of one's existence.
> It leaves you with a permanent trace.[5]

Therefore, with studio photography, the first vernacular
African photographic form, the initial goal was not necessarily a
rebuttal of the way they had been portrayed in European spheres,
but an opportunity for visibility, to see oneself in the way that one
wants, and this was often as one's best self, in one's best cloth-
ing. When looking at studio photographs, there is a sense that
these images are made for the consumption of fellow Africans—of
family members, friends, co-workers. As Enwezor and Zaya put it,
"The subjects of these portraits are African, but they are not con-
tained by the questionable episteme of ethnographic delectation
and otherisation."[6]

These studio photographs began to be consumed as visual art
when Andre Magnin, the curator of Jean Pigozzi's Contemporary
African Art Collection, eventually brought them into the public
realm in 1992.[7] From then on, they were an important basis for
African photography, as they became a reference point of what it

meant for Africans to self-determine while using specific vernacu-
lar visual tropes.

In more recent years, with the exchange of images that has
occurred on a global scale, portraiture made by African pho-
tographers has also been a tool for response and resistance—of
reshaping narratives about the continent that were prevalent in
the West. Artists such as Santu Mofokeng, Rotimi Fanikayode,
and, eventually, Zanele Muholi and Omar Victor Diop made work
that challenged the othering of African people. Essentially, the
portrait has been a direct form of rebuttal and self-determination.
And it is perhaps for this reason that African photography has
almost become synonymous with portraiture.

Furthermore, Black intellectuals have often encouraged
Black artists to make representative work that responds to their
inferior positions in certain societies. In his article "Criteria of
Negro Art," W.E.B. Du Bois makes the case that "all art is propa-
ganda and ever must be."[8] For Du Bois, it was important for the art
produced to be a kind that "refutes stereotypes" and "represents
the race"[9]: representational artwork as a form of respectability.

Kobena Mercer tracks this mindset from Du Bois to Alain
Locke and his criteria for "The New Negro" to those involved in
the Black Arts Movement, all of whom, he concluded, suggested
that it was important for Black artists to "represent the race."
Thus, in the 1960s, when artists such as Norman Lewis, Jack Whit-
ten and Frank Bowling were creating abstract work, they found
that "because their work was nonrepresentational, they were not
'Black enough'."[10] Mercer also pointed out that "the realist refuta-
tion of racist stereotypes often ended up with an idealised view
of a Black identity untouched by degrading images of otherness."
The supposed realism became a way of depicting Black perfection,
even though this could, of course, never exist.[11]

This is the dilemma faced when respectability has been so
closely linked to representation and portraiture. Furthermore, it
can be argued that portraits are most easily identifiable with and
therefore innately linked to identity politics. So if the people in
the images are identifiable as African, whether by their Blackness,
their clothing or signifiers within the images, are they more relat-
able as symbols of African identity?

The relationship between identity and the non-representa-
tional is one that I will explore in the works of these photographers.

The tension between form and content is extremely important when looking at their work. Based on colonial history alone, it is understandable how a concern with form rather than content can often seem like a luxury, especially when considering how useful portraiture has been as a tool in representation and therefore humanization. That being said, several Black artists have taken it upon themselves to "escape the tyrannical demands of identitarian fixity."[12] Mercer wrote, "The terrain within which Black artists intervene can no longer be adequately met by an aesthetics of realism or protest which seeks to counteract 'misrepresentation.'"[13]

In the case of these three artists, both the form and the content are representative of the Black experience. The way in which Chagas employs bricolage is something that is emblematic of the diaspora experience. It evokes the idea of a mixed identity, with its varying fragments that are somehow connected. The personification of buildings and space in Gbré's work is something that is also linked to the postcolonial experience. The spaces come to represent the false hope of independence in certain West African cities, and the way in which these hopes continue to erode and be replaced by new, soulless monuments. And with the flatness of Niang's images, as well as our constant ability to see clearly what is behind the walls she depicts, she interrogates the purpose of barriers and borders when people can exist so fluidly between them.

"Deadpan" And African Urban Photography

Within photography's history, the development from direct representation to the conceptual is one that is linked with certain movements in art history, and which "matched the gallery and collecting climate of the decade."[14] Charlotte Cotton referred to a specific kind of non-portrait photography from this era as the "deadpan": a "cool, detached and keenly sharp type of photography."[15] She continued, "deadpan photography often acts in this fact-stating mode: the personal politics of the photographers come into play in their selection of subject matter and their anticipation of the viewer's analysis of it, not in any explicit political statement through text or photographic style."[16] It is a form that is extremely considered, and "popular with landscape and architectural subjects," due to its focus on "the objective" and its attempts to go "beyond the limitations of individual perspective."[17]

Deadpan has its roots in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the founders of the Dusseldorf School of Photography in the 1970s, in the way they photographed architecture and developed a kind of "typology," a visual language that was at once uniform and specific.[18]

When it comes to Niang, Chagas, and Gbré, their works do not fit perfectly into the definitions that Cotton has put forward, nor should they, as their contexts are different. However, they are asking some similar questions and displaying similar aesthetic qualities as those that Cotton proposed, albeit in an African context.

The city takes on a very important role in their works. In the introduction to *Under Siege: Four African Cities*, the editors acknowledge the differences inherent on the continent, but generally describe the postcolonial African city as one that is in "crisis" due to "a decline in infrastructure," and one that is "chaotic and disorderly, and therefore always outside the category of order of modern urban planning and procedures of rational spatial organisation."[19] It is thus interesting how the photographers employ an aesthetic of order to depict these cities, one that focuses on straight lines and patterns, one that offers an "almost clinical mode," as Cotton described the deadpan. Thus, these artists are using these European aesthetic devices to depict the African city, in a way that demonstrates very clearly the notion of hybridity. They are making work that asks complex questions, questions that are not isolated from those that their contemporaries in Europe are asking, but approached from a diaspora perspective, looking at certain African cities and the ever-present dialogue that exists between Africa, its diaspora, and its former colonizers.

Edson Chagas' Luanda

Michel De Certau wrote about the ways in which Medieval and Renaissance painters "represented the city as seen in a perspective that no eye had yet enjoyed."[20] They depicted the city from the perspective of an "all-seeing power," whereas normal inhabitants of the city "live 'down below'. . .they are walkers."[21] This concept of walking, or *flânerie* (strolling), is one that Walter Benjamin also examined in his unfinished "Arcades," the idea of "the bourgeois viewer, almost invariably a man" that "strolls the city,

at the pace of (or even with!) a tortoise, opening himself to the reverie brought about by its combination of sensations."[22] Furthermore, this *flâneur* was not interested in the grand, but rather the "average run of the place"—the ordinary.[23] When it comes to this character, whether it is the Renaissance painter or the bourgeois *flâneur*, it is clear that this is not a role that was to be occupied by Africans. Edson Chagas, with his *Found Not Taken* series, embodies this role, as the *flâneur*, as the walker, as the all-seeing that is able to observe and give value to objects that have been ignored.

Images from *Found Not Taken* were exhibited in *Luanda, Encyclopedic City*, the Angolan Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale, which won the Golden Lion in 2013. The setup of that exhibition was one that encouraged the viewer to walk. Large prints of the images were stacked almost high enough to be sculptures, and viewers were encouraged to walk through and take the prints. It seemed like the culmination of Chagas' *flânerie*—in his walking through the city, in his choice to photograph discarded ordinary items in the hope that their value might be acknowledged, and finally in the act of viewers taking away these prints, the recognition of his own work and practice.

For Chagas, this series came about as a result of his own "emotional geography," his personal relationships to Luanda (where he grew up and lived), London, and Newport, South Wales (where he studied).[24] While studying in London, he began to ask himself, "How does space really belong to you?" The question is in line with a diasporic feeling, a sense of not quite belonging and a desire to figure out what one's contributions can be.[25] Furthermore, on his return to Luanda in 2008, he felt "distant from everything. . .as if I had remained isolated in the diaspora."[26] He also found that as he was adjusting and figuring out his own work, he was able to see "the difference between spaces. . .by looking at their discarded objects."[27] Thus, this is how he begins his practice of walking through cities, finding objects and backgrounds, and creating these works that reconcile his own feelings about being lost in each city that he is in, and trying to find his own sense of belonging and identity.

Firstly, the choice to extend this series to three different cities is reflective of this idea of hybridity. He could have made three different series, but to put them all under one umbrella and to challenge the viewer to think about each city in relation to

the other, with the main link being himself, forces one to think about his own subjectivity. Even though there are no people in the images, the very nature of the series and its locations revolve around one subject: Chagas himself. Furthermore, the uniformity of the images and the way that he chooses to photograph from a certain distance, each time against a wall of his choosing, again does not allow the viewer to forget that the artist is the one making aesthetic choices.

Chagas is the only one of the three artists who actually stages his images; they are at once deadpan and still-life images. Some photographs have single objects and others have several objects carefully arranged by the artist. In this sense, his work falls in the tradition of bricolage, due to his ability "make to with 'whatever is at hand'," which is Claude Lévi-Strauss' definition of the bricoleur.[28]

This idea of bricolage takes on another dimension when it is linked to Blackness. Kobena Mercer talks about Romare Bearden's collage work and how "the cut-and-mix approach involved in collage resonates with the improvisational aspects of the Black vernacular, which selectively appropriates what is given or found in one's environment and transforms it into raw materials for one's distinct stylistic signature."[29] This echoes what Frank Bowling described as a tenet of Black art, which is "that powerful, instinctive and intelligent ability which Blacks have shown time and again. . .to rearrange found things."[30] It can almost be interpreted almost as an essential quality of contemporary Black art, the ability for repurposing, whether it is by taking traditional methods and reinterpreting them, or through the physical act of rearranging, as in Chagas' case.

This idea of collage is further emphasised by some of the surfaces in Chagas' work, specifically the walls in Luanda. In one photograph, a legless chair is placed in front of a multicolored wall littered with graffiti (Fig. 2). The wall is multicolored not intentionally, but through wear and tear; the original dark orange paint has peeled and given way to a light pink surface in some parts and a beige concrete surface in others. There is a small patch of white paint carelessly painted the middle of the wall, perhaps the work of one of the graffiti artists. This image is representative of the fragmentation that Chagas' work depicts. There are several layers to the wall surface; even the chair is a fragment, unable to stand.

This image is an example of the way Chagas assembles multiple elements—some of which are naturally there and some of which he added— into a whole image. And it is this form that I argue is representative of the diaspora experience and the way in which various fragments can form a whole, multidimensional identity.

Through Chagas' journey, we are able to see his relationship to the three cities. We also see his questioning of what it means to belong, both in his identity as a foreigner in London and Newport, and as an isolated returnee in Luanda, and in the objects that he finds and resituates in new contexts. In his choice of objects, he reflects on human impact and value systems—what we assign as useful and useless. Through his bricolage style, he evokes the very nature of diaspora: the assemblage of different identities into one hybrid one.

Francois-Xavier Gbré's *Tracks*

Francois-Xavier Gbré's practice differs from Chagas' in that his journey to Africa was not one of return and subsequent isolation. He had grown up in a French-Ivorian family and wanted to move to Ivory Coast in 2010, but due to political unrest was unable to. So he decided to first go to Bamako, Mali, a place he had visited once before the previous year. Therefore, he was coming to the continent as a familiar stranger, someone with roots that he had never actually put down. The intersection of personal and collective memory is a key tenet of his practice. Through his intervention into these forgotten sites, we sense his own nostalgia for what these West African cities could have been, and at the same time, for those who are familiar with the sites, for what these cities were.

Marianne Hirsch defined postmemory as "the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right."[31] In this particular instance, she uses the term to refer to the remembrance of the Holocaust, but I would argue that it also applies to second-generation children from the African continent growing up elsewhere in the immediate postcolonial period. It is a sense of not having a direct memory, but having the passed-on pain, and in the case of Gbré in the West African context, subsequent hope after independence. The idea of postmemory is also

very closely linked with diaspora: the case of having spiritual and familial—but not necessarily concrete—links to a place.

Gbré's choice to revisit certain sites and document their spectacular degeneration seems steeped in memory and lost hope. He describes his practice as one that is "concerned with territory, urban mutations and architectural resilience as narrative."[32] He looks both at "abandoned buildings that were commissioned during the colonial era and at the moment of independence," as well as "ordinary objects and materials" due to their ability to provide "more nuanced insights than individuals could provide about these social landscapes."[33] In fact, these two approaches intersect in that the buildings that Gbré chose to visit have become ordinary; they are no longer considered within their societies to be the symbols that they were intended to be.

Stuart Hall explores the idea that a return to an idealized form of home is not possible. He quoted Iain Chamberlain, who says, "We can never go Home, return to the primal scene, to the forgotten moment of our beginnings and 'authenticity,' for there is always something else between."[34] Furthermore, Hall writes about how those in the diaspora have "gone about producing 'Africa' again, a kind of imaginary conception of an Africa that is unchanged from the years of the slave trade."[35] This is also impossible because the Africa that exists now is one that is dynamic and constantly changing.

That said, Gbré's return seems to recognize this fact; he seems acutely conscious of the imagined Africa. In the way he shoots, he seemingly wants to distance himself from this romanticism. Thus, his style of photographing is one that has an air of objectivity, in the tradition of the Dusseldorf School. Cotton writes about how Bernd and Hilla Becher made "unromantic documents of historic structures" and created a "typology" by photographing buildings from "the same perspective" each time.[36] In Gbré's case, although his method of photographing seems to be as fair as possible, his choice of subject, especially in the *Tracks* series, has a sense of nostalgia and lost hope.

Tracks is the culmination of Gbré's travel to three cities in West Africa, where he photographed buildings that were once important symbols of national identity but had become abandoned, decrepit spaces that no longer functioned in neither their original capacity nor a new one. The three buildings are the Palais

de Justice in Dakar, the former courthouse built in 1958 two years
before Senegal gained independence, the Palais du Gouverneur in
Lomé, which was the residence of the German and French colo-
nial governments until 1960, when Togo gained independence,
and the Imprimerie Nationale in Porto-Novo, which was the old
national printing press in Benin. These buildings all have varying
relationships with colonialism—in the case of the residence, the
space actually housed colonial officials, whereas the other two
locations have been sites of Africans retelling their own stories.

Gbré's project is similar to that of Guy Tillim, the South
African photographer born in 1962, whose series *Avenue Patrice
Lumumba* from 2008 looks at decaying modernist structures in
Angola, Madagascar, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic
of Congo. He focuses on buildings constructed by colonial govern-
ments and names the series after Patrice Lumumba, the first Prime
Minister of the independent Democratic Republic of Congo and a
symbol of African independence. Unlike Gbré, Tillim emphasizes
that the focus is not on the abandoned, and he includes people in
his images so as to not "become a connoisseur of decay" nor to
offer "some sort of Havana-esque vision."[37] It was important for
him to show the link between optimism and utilitarianism, how
these buildings are able to house both the "dreams" of Patrice
Lumumba and the reality of post-colonialism.[38] Gbré, on the other
hand, focuses on the abandonment and in many cases the lack of
human care or maintenance of these buildings. His project has an
air of what could have been, especially coupled with his own per-
sonal "return" to the continent, while Tillim's focuses on what is.

The way Gbré deals with the decaying nature of these
buildings and their contents is in line with the objective style
of deadpan, a choice that seems very pointed given the subject.
For example, in *Salle des pas perdus* from the Palais de Justice in
Dakar (Fig. 3), he uses a wide-angle lens so that the entire image
is in focus. We get a sense of the grandness of this room, with its
floor-to-ceiling pillars. Light seeps in from the windows and from
the ceilings as well. Yet right in the center of the image is a heap
of battered chairs lying on a dust-covered, untiled floor, some with
their cushions ripped apart, others with their legs broken and their
leather stripped. One gets the sense that the pillars might actually
be the structural skeleton of the site: the last remaining elements
from when the space was functioning. This juxtaposition of the

grandiose with the decaying gives a sense of what used to be, what could have been and what is.

In *Bibliothèque* (Fig. 4), an image of the former library, we see perhaps the most charged image of them all: a room filled with torn-apart books piled in a heap. Again, Gbré stays at a certain distance and shoots with a wide-angle lens so that the whole room is in focus. Here, the color scheme is bleak; there is the mahogany wood of the shelf, the aging browns of the book covers that are falling apart on the shelves, and the light, rusting browns of the books in a heap on the floor. The white walls also dotted with brown stains. In this image, we sense an absolute loss of hope; this once great institution has neglected its most important resources. Gbré confronts the the destruction of books again in his *Imprimerie Nationale* series. He discussed his own need to "make an archive" when the official ones have been so badly managed:

The Imprimerie Nationale (National Printing Factory) is more particular because I documented a place in charge of the official documentation of an African state. And the conclusion is sad. This chapter of my work includes both a question and an answer: Why don't we have a better understanding or recognition of African history? Because African archives are in a mediocre state.[39]

Oftentimes Gbré displays his work in what he calls "constellations": installations made up of several small pictures. He described his process as follows: "I print many photographs, and I create groups regarding the stories, shapes, and colors. I give a structure to each group, and then I try to link the groups in order to make sense of the series."[40] So he often presents these works together, not in a way that distinguishes one city from another or one continent from another, but in a way that looks at the way human neglect presents itself in different spaces. By presenting the works this way, he examines this idea of hybridity of the different spaces and worlds that have contributed to his own formation, and he brings this subjectivity to the works.

Mame-Diarra Niang's Dakar

Mame-Diarra Niang is the only one out of the three artists that does not acknowledge diaspora as an important part of her work. She explicitly said in her artist statement, "I make no attempt

to portray the African continent or postcolonial architecture."[41] So how does she see her work? For her, it is about "the plasticity of territory,"[42] the fluidity of identity and really the futility of walls and borders. I was able to interview her via Skype in order to attempt to better understand her comments about identity, since she rejected the idea that Blackness and diaspora play a role in the formation of her work. Niang has a French-Ivorian mother and a Senegalese father, and she grew up between Lyon, France, Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and Dakar in "a state of constant metamorphosis."[43] Due to this "continual change of environments," in a way she sees her work as trying to reconcile these places, trying to piece them together "like a puzzle."[44]

During our conversation, Niang made it clear how important it was for her work to be seen as conceptual and not literal, hence her comments about it not being about architecture. In fact, she has begun to make video art, as she worries about the limits of photography for the expression of her ideas. When asked about her work's connection to identity or diaspora, Niang's response reflects a sensitivity to it being viewed solely in this light: "I don't have to define myself, and I don't have to define my work."[45] After her father's death, Niang found herself in Dakar and was struggling to reconcile the fact that "the territory was not my father's anymore; it was mine."[46] Thus, similarly to Gbré, there is a sense of return in Niang's work; rather than to the imaginary Africa, however, it is a return that involves her own desire to reconcile different parts of her own identity.

Niang's work explores this idea of "plasticity," something that echoes Jonathan Raban's theories on cities, about which he said "cities. . .are plastic by nature. We mold them in our images; they, in turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try to impose our personal form on them."[47] In Niang's images, people only appear as background figures, and lines and structures take precedence over anything else. Unlike Chagas, Niang is not interested in photographing the specifics of a place. As she told me, "I am not speaking about Dakar"[48] in her photographs of Dakar. Thus, this idea of different places merging into one, with the common factor being the eye of the photographer, is one that I would like to explore, especially in relation to hybridity theory.

I will focus here on her series *At the Wall*, which was shot in Dakar in 2014, and which is a group of photographs that examines

different wall surfaces in the Senegalese capital. *At the Wall* is the second part of a trilogy called *Citadel*, which was shot between Senegal and Johannesburg. Niang photographed *At the Wall* from the back of a taxi, never stopping, and prioritizing "the first look, the first image."[49] It is interesting to compare this idea of motion, of an artist moving through a city, with that of Benjamin's *flâneur*, and even with the way Chagas made his own series. Niang refuses to stop to try and get the perfect picture, but rather focuses on the initial moment, something that contrasts with the overt care taken in deadpan photography. In many of her images, the ground takes up a large part of the foreground, revealing that she must have had little time to prepare herself and her camera for the photograph. Further, she does not crop the image afterward, suggesting that there is something about the found character of the spaces that she wants to keep. There is an air of spontaneity in the photographs and an openness to allowing the city to reveal its character to her.

Like Chagas, Niang uses flatness to interrogate the nature of walls: What is the point of them if we can see so clearly what is behind them? For instance, in *Détail du mur #1* (Fig. 5), there is a three-panelled low barrier or gate, and two of the panels are covered in a patterned green fabric with the third in the natural beige color of the wood that was used to construct it. It is clearly a haphazardly made gate to the property behind it. The property behind the gate, clearly visible and in focus in the image, is one that is in the process of being built, also in the natural beige-gray color of concrete. The flatness of this image is such that the third panel of the barrier seeps into the building; it is almost impossible to tell where the panel stops and the building starts. With this, Niang reveals the futility of the barrier that so clearly reveals everything that it is supposed to conceal, to the extent that the elements merge together. The balconies of the building are also covered in fabric, this time in blue and white stripes, and there is almost a sense of coordination between the building and the gate.

It is also important to think about the way Niang defines walls. Yes, she refers to walls in the general sense, but she also sees walls as blank surfaces that could be anywhere. This lack of specificity contributes to her own idea that her work is more about herself than the city she is photographing. She said, "You are the starting point of what you are seeing."[50] In one image, she shows

a gray concrete wall, with a pile of gray gravel at its base and one green weed protruding from the rocks. This image is simple in its content, but in its title, *Plasticité du mur* (the plasticity of the wall) *#4* (Fig. 6), we are forced to think about her own theory on the flexibility of territory—the idea that anywhere can be anywhere—but it is an individual that brings experiences to that territory. Thus, a blank wall can be seen as a metaphor for a *tabula rasa*, a surface on which to project one's own subjectivity.

In her work, Niang explores the idea of the failure and inefficacy of borders and barriers. This concept relates to a central idea of diaspora hybridity theory: that to define something singularly is to reduce it. Accordingly, her images convey a sense of multiplicity and layers, of never wanting the image to be about one focal point, hence the constant flatness. Even in her color scheme, which verges on cold, favoring blues and grays, there is almost a sense of sterility—of not allowing the places to have too much of an identity of their own. She rarely includes people in these photographs because it is not truly about them. Niang's own hybrid subjectivity is the most important part of the work; this is what informs the city she shoots in, the way she chooses to photograph, and the outcomes of the images.

Conclusion

In the way these artists have applied themselves to dealing with the non-representational and the non-figure, and through their approaches of taking on cities with which they have distant yet intimately close relationships, they have begun to develop a form of photography that is unique to the diaspora experience. This is a form in which the subjectivity of the artist takes center stage over any other potential subjects, in which humans are rarely seen and if so, only as part of the locales, and one in which series must be viewed as a whole because each picture is a fragment of a larger whole. The form of photography that these artists employ is one that is neither deadpan nor object photography nor landscape photography. It is a genre that combines all these approaches and lends them a diasporic viewpoint. This viewpoint comes from their own subjectivities, their own relationships to the cities that they are photographing, and the hybridity of their European

sensibilities and their African roots. The artists bring to the images a sense of familiarity as well as a sense of distance.

Due to the sense of intimacy that each photographer brings to the image, it is clear that even though the images are not figurative or representational in the sense that Du Bois and Locke advocated, they are still works that involve and revolve around identity. Is this identity relatable to a viewer lacking an idea of the provenance and histories of the photographers? Can images without people really stir a feeling of Africanness for the typical African viewer?

In a way, the presence of humans is felt even more through their absence. Their impact is resounding in the architectural ruin in Gbré's works, in the walls in Niang's photographs and in the used objects in Chagas' series. But one also imagines that these artists are pushing back on the idea that portraiture is synonymous with representation or that identity can ever be adequately represented.

It is important to note that these photographers all have different approaches to their work. However, the aesthetic similarities in their works suggest that something of a vernacular diasporic genre of photography may have emerged. This new genre, which follows in the footsteps of "post-Black"[51] artists such as Lorna Simpson and Glenn Ligon by refusing to conform to the prescribed norms of what Black art should or shouldn't do, reflects on the way one revisits a city that one has roots in and might even call home.

Figure 1: Edson Chagas, *Found Not Taken Luanda*, 2013, C Print, 120 × 80cm

Figure 2: Edson Chagas, *Found Not Taken Luanda*, 2013, C Print, 120 × 80cm

Figure 3: Francois-Xavier Gbré, "Salle des pas perdus, Palais de Justice, Cap Manuel, Dakar," from *Tracks*, 2014, Lightjet Print on Hahnemüle Baryta, 100 × 150cm

Figure 4: Francois-Xavier Gbré, "Bibliothèque, Palais de Justice, Cap Manuel, Dakar," from *Tracks*, 2014, Lightjet Print on Hahnemüle Baryta, 100 × 150cm

Figure 5: Mame-Diarra Niang, "Dètail du mur #1," *At the Wall*, 2014, Inkjet print on 300g cotton paper, 36.6 × 55cm. Copyright Mame-Diarra Niang, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.

Figure 6: Mame-Diarra Niang, "Plasticité du mur #4," *At the Wall*, 2014, Inkjet print on 300g cotton paper, 36.6 × 55cm. Copyright Mame-Diarra Niang, courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Amsterdam.

Notes

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2 Stuart Hall, "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts from Abroad," *Essential Essays Vol. 2* (Durham: 2018), 207.

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5 Michelle Lamunière, *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibe* (New Haven: 2001), 13.

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[51] Term coined by Thelma Golden that applies to Black artists who rejected the labeling of their work as purely Black, but whose work proposed an understanding of the complexity and multiplicity of blackness