

Disentangling from Epistemic Violence: Contemporary Photographers Unfixing the Image of Africa

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This essay looks at ways of disentangling from epistemic violence in visual production in African urban contexts. Tracing parallels between the colonial intrinsically violent gaze and contemporary attempts to disentangle from epistemic violence, the author seeks to problematize the violence of images of Africa. The essay examines works of photographers who explore urban environments in West Africa by

establishing an intimate relationship with a place, opening avenues for multiple ways of seeing. This contribution shows how this personal dimension allows photographers to transcend objectivity and go beyond epistemic violence based on the opposition of 'right' and 'wrong.' Contemplation of the city occurs both in thoughtful relation with the self and with the surrounding environment.

Keywords: colonial legacies, epistemic violence, photography, visual representation, West Africa

Author's note: This essay was written in 2020 and submitted to *The Garage Journal* in 2021, before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. During the final editing process, the Russian Federation began its war of aggression against the Ukrainian people. Since then, Russia's army has been killing civilians, raping women and girls, destroying cities and villages, and perpetrating imperial violence. This work, dedicated to epistemic colonial violence, cannot not express support for Ukraine and Ukrainians struggling for their freedom and for their home. Different types of violence—physical and epistemic—are essentially two sides of the same coin. They are perpetrated in order to subjugate and dominate populations and to expand colonial and imperial domains. For this reason, I decided that, in the current context of the ongoing war, it was still important to publish this text and continue the in-depth investigation of colonial and imperial violence.

Can the Subaltern Speak?

In her seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) analyzes the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized by looking at the practice of *sati*, Hindu widows' ritual

self-sacrifice. One of the central problems Spivak's essay addresses is the silencing of the voices of subaltern subjects, their inability to speak, their constitution as a group through epistemic violence. Her example is based on the intertwining asymmetry of essentializing 'opposed' categories, such as 'black—white' and 'men—women.' She uses these categories to illustrate the essence of 'epistemic violence' through a specific case of colonial India. Her main point is that women of her country—structurally oppressed by the system—in fact deal with a double subalternity, both in relation to their male counterparts and to the men of the imperial powers who profess to protect them. Spivak sums up the oppressive, imperial relationship that she seeks to deconstruct by paraphrasing Freud: 'White men are saving brown women from brown men.'

The elimination of the Hindu practice was instrumental for the affirmation of British power and 'civilization.' But the widow self-immolation practice, seen by the British as 'a poor victimized women going to the slaughter is in fact an ideological battle-ground' (Spivak 1988: 302). Spivak sees this British colonial initiative as silencing the subject that has already been silenced by others. Instead of ending oppression, it continues the violence as a vicious circle. As a result, the gendered subject is now doubly muted. Spivak herself states that 'as the discourse of what the British perceive as heathen ritual is sublated into what the British perceive as crime, one diagnosis of female free will is substituted for another' (Spivak 1994: 96). Spivak asserts that she does not at all advocate killing widows in her pointing out the violence of the British colonial gesture. She simply illustrates that the Indian female figure remains obscured by two competing visions of freedom that leave her with neither a voice nor room for agency.

Central to Spivak's essay and thinking is the concept of *epistemic violence*, inspired by Michel Foucault's definition of the term as a 'remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other.' (Spivak 1988: 280). Spivak demonstrates a complex structure of domination that takes place under imperial rule in the context of asymmetric power relations. The colonial regime and the British 'benevolent act' of 'the "masculine-imperialist" ideology can be said to produce the need for a masculine-imperialist rescue mission' (Spivak 1988: 296). These solutions neglect 'the alternative histories that might have been written—not as the disclosures of a final truth, but as the assemblages of utterances and interpretations that might have emerged from a different location, namely, the place of the subaltern woman' (Morris 2010: 3).

My own essay looks first at the colonial and imperialist representation pattern that legitimized the conquest and exploitation of colonized non-European populations. Gayatri Spivak's work is also relevant to the imperial practices of domination that nourished the visual representation of the African continent and its inhabitants. The second part of the essay, inspired by Spivak's analysis, discusses how the work of individual photographers creates a new gaze and new images that consciously contrast with epistemic violence.

Visual representation as epistemic violence

The process of colonization created a great divide among world populations: those who had control over the knowledge production of the colonizer versus those who did not (Azoulay 2018: 100). As systems of total domination, colonial systems imposed their knowledge and destroyed or silenced all other possible forms of knowing. The colonizers framed colonized populations, their way of living, and their epistemic systems through their own understanding and interpretations, thus establishing a hierarchical divide between knowledge systems and traditions. Local and indigenous knowledge systems were marginalized and almost inaccessible to European societies. In the colonies, 'official' knowledge promoted by educational institutions and museums was also anchored in colonial knowledge production.¹ At the same time, there were African artists, scholars or photographers who opposed colonial representation patterns, producing their work against the 'colonial canon.'²

Photography was central to creating colonial representational patterns. What medium better imposes views by visual means? Image production was largely based on essentializing and romanticizing African realities: white men inventing the image of Africa and Black men and women. Photography was an instrument used to produce a 'vision' of Africa. It was also visual evidence 'in the theatre of cultural violence against non-Europeans' (Sealy 2019: 109). The portrayal of African life widespread in the West during the colonial period and immediately after was predominantly the work of non-African photographers, though indigenous African photographers lived and worked in the colonies (Enwezor, Oguibe and Zaya 1996: 30, footnote 2). 'Cultures do not exist outside of how they are represented,' as Stuart Hall wrote (cit. in Sealy 2019: 109). As a matter of fact,

'from the inception of the medium, photography has served and continues to serve the interests of the state and of capital, of state-bounded knowledge systems, of disciplinary, racialized regimes embodied in the apparatuses of science, education, and police, of the social control of minorities and the racializing orders of colonialism outside and inside the West' (Holert 2019).

Mainstream representations of the continent center on two opposing poles: on the one hand, the 'pornography of misery' featuring a continent of disaster, ravaged by famines, war and death; on the other hand, exoticization and romanticization. Both poles are oversimplified, essentialized, and inherently violent. Colonial photography modeled its roles after its spectacular and pure landscapes with exotic animals: the photographer was a hunter playing with the African game-like subject waiting to be captured (Enwezor 2006: 14–15). Colonialism produced a vast archive of visual images that still influences the stereotypical idea of 'Africa.' 'Africa has been transformed into a wasteland of the bizarre and outrageous' (Enwezor 2006: 13).³ In particular, this imaginary still dominates the domain of humanitarian photography produced by development and

charitable organizations as well as by international NGOs. The field of 'saving' Africans from themselves continues to draw on the imaginary of disaster and/or exoticization. In this case as well, Spivak's paradigm of 'white men saving brown (wo)men from brown men' holds. The whole salvation operation became an industry based on international activity and supported by the production of images as a testimony to its 'rightness'—images underpinned by the idea of African abnormality. I am interested instead in attempts at disrupting this epistemic violence of visual images through evolving forms of documentary in its wider sense.

Although photography's capacity to capture the world around us is undeniable, whether or not it is 'objective'—and in what sense—is a crucial controversy.

'Photographic images have always been carriers and mediators of claims of knowledge, evidence, and truth, and thereby participate in and are complicit with the constitution of epistemic regimes and their constitutive epistemic violence' (Holert 2019).

In fact, this ambiguity of photographic images makes them oscillate between forms of knowledge and non-knowledge, often manipulated by those producing them. Photography's violence concerns those depicted in photographs, reducing them to an essentialized and objectified representation and at the same time perpetrating the violence of continued power relations and reproductions of the colonial relationship through these images. It is precisely via this double violence that the photographic 'vampire machine' created and diffused the colonial images of Africa that are still suffocating the continent (Enwezor 2006: 15).

Documentary photography is a double-edged sword: it claims to represent the world as it is, *documenting reality*, even while such images may do more harm than good. Take the significant case of Kevin Carter's 1993 image of a dying child watched over by a vulture, documentation intrinsically based on the 'pornography of misery.' Such photographic production is characterized by Enwezor (2006) as turning photographic practice into a mythology factory, thus entering into conflict with the original purpose of documentary photography. The violence produced by such images relates to the contents (represented people) and, at a more macro level, to the overall idea of Africa through the continuation of power relations characteristic of the colonial period.

Searching for ways to disentangle from epistemic violence

In their introduction to the special issue of *Public Culture* dedicated to Johannesburg as a metropolis, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nutall (2004) discuss some crucial problems related to the conceptualization of 'Africa' and its representation, the two aspects intrinsically linked to one another. As they write,

'Africa as a name, as an idea, and as an object of academic and public discourse has been, and remains, fraught. [...] Africa is not only perpetually caught and imagined within a web of difference and absolute otherness. More radically, the sign is fraught because Africa so often ends up epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the abject, or the other-worldly' (Mbembe and Nutall 2004: 348).

The focal point in this discussion is that different forms of knowledge and knowledge production are all interlinked by their nature, particularly in situations where the idea of 'Africa' overdetermines the outcome of the process. Very often, as rightly underlined by the authors, Africa is described as an object apart from the world, while it needs 'to be open[ed] up to the full spectrum of meanings and implications that other places and other human experiences enjoy, provoke, and inhabit' (Mbembe and Nutall 2004: 348).

Africa's realities are often reduced to several stereotypical ideas and images limited to the colonial past, liberation struggles, and present-day imperial capitalist exploitation of resources. These are undoubtedly true, but only partly so. Not because they modify reality, but because they focus on a limited part of it. They carve out the African world from the history of relationships and interactions that the continent had with European domination, framing the timeline through this relationship.⁴ Thus, they leave aside some crucial, probably less spectacular characteristics of reality that are decisive for understanding (contemporary) Africa. It may be Western self-centeredness that does not allow for 'letting go,' for looking at the continent through a different, clear lens, rather than through the prism of self-condemnation and self-reflection. The question would be: 'How best to overturn these perpetual and predominant imaginings of Africa?' (Mbembe and Nutall 2004: 351). Mbembe and Nutall (2004) suggest one viable option: relying less on difference and more on *sameness-as-worldliness* (p. 351).

As the voices of formerly colonized peoples emerge through photography, poetry, literature, cinema, and visual art, they have significantly shifted the typology of images produced. As Spivak made clear, the crucial point is not representing oneself but having ownership over one's own representation and not being silenced. This opened radically new ways of seeing and telling stories. African photographers who gained global visibility pushed for a more just representation of African peoples and places. This complex process of re-appropriation of knowledge and images began in the years of African independence and is still ongoing, because the 'imperial shutter' (Azoulay 2019) continues shooting violent images and producing epistemic violence.

This essay is not intended as a review of major landmarks in the history of Africa-related photography, but as a more general discussion of epistemic violence and visual representation. It will be based on a subjective selection of works and photographers, included two watershed exhibitions for photographic representation of Africa in the West (co-)curated by Okwui Enwezor. The exhibition *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present*, organized at the Guggenheim Museum in 1996, presented the work of thirty African photographers working in different genres over the course of the

twentieth century. *In/Sight* stages African visions in order to testify 'against the dominant notions, preconceptions, and normative codings entrenched in modernist iconography' (Enwezor, Oguibe and Zaya 1996: 29). The exhibition presented images exclusively by African photographers and void of representations of war, genocide, dictators, and disasters as a deliberate curatorial choice. The selection of works aimed to celebrate the creativity of modern Africa and, as such, created a form of resistance to the epistemic violence of Western images. In a subsequent curatorial project, *Snap Judgements: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography*, organized ten years later, Enwezor wanted

'to direct attention to the multiple ways of representing African life and space, to enunciate forms of visual practice that open us up to the fact that we do not only share the same space, but also the same time. In other words, [...] focused on visual practices that recognize contemporaneity, that reach beyond the stock images that have endured until now and are the iconography of the "abandoned" continent' (Enwezor 2006: 18).

These two exhibitions represent novel thinking around African image production as well as the production of images of Africa. The formation of a new gaze as a response to an overwhelming production of violent images is an ongoing cultural and political process in all spheres: writing, cinema, music. It is linked to a wider process of anti-colonial struggle, decolonization of knowledge, and knowledge production. In these shows, Africa is depicted as a place that may be lived in and not only fled from, that can be a point of arrival and not only of departure. This shift brings Africa towards the lacking 'normality' that was discussed at length by Enwezor.⁵ Enwezor (2006) pointed out the lack of the representation of Africans 'in normal human terms' (p. 19). Normality is opposed to exceptionality, a common representational pattern for Africa. Enwezor (2006) clearly makes his point in the catalog for *Snap Judgements*:

'The paradox is that the images of suffering—which function as a sort of shorthand for neither looking properly nor seeing Africans in normal human terms—do not ameliorate the disasters which they purportedly engage. On the contrary, they have compounded and skewed the photographic imperatives of a mediated fascination with the continent's "abnormality" as the primal scene of global media's masochist pleasure, its unrelenting horror vacui' (p. 19).

In this essay, I would like to look closer in the direction proposed by Enwezor. His solution for disentangling from epistemic violence is through counter-reporting driven by an informed, balanced approach to writing or picturing Africa and a scrupulous attention to images. This would also entail an evolution of photography from a journalistic style, presenting facts, to a tool of observation and contemplation, a method foregrounding the field and object of investigation.⁶ It is related to the process of watching both reality and its observation, using photography as an analytical tool (Enwezor 2006: 25). This approach means entering into dialogue with Western

stereotypical representation of Africa and at the same time leaving it behind. This evolution of the gaze, and of the subject as well, brings to the fore those photographers who deliberately apply anti-photogenic and anti-spectacular lenses as a response to the representation of Africa's abnormality. For instance, they represent daily life through an everyday gaze—as distinguished from that of a tourist, an ethnographer, or an explorer. This critical departure from colonial imagery and the Eurocentric idea of Africa opens different avenues for creative production.

Can explicit attempts to disentangle from epistemic violence bring us to a dead end?

Responding to a call from an Italian online journal, I offered to discuss the epistemic violence of images and to include a short series of photographs that I took in Dakar, Senegal. I wanted to discuss my personal attempt to find ways to show the urban environment of the city in which I live.⁷ The abstract was rejected by the editors because the images were considered 'purely aesthetic and did not contain history and time' which they deemed necessary for any representation of Africa. My deliberate choice not to portray any humans was also considered a form of abuse because it did not grant Africans the role of subjects. The editors could not tolerate images with no reference to colonial violence or postcolonial struggles of West African populations which, for them, are an inextricable part of African reality and consequently of its representation. My choice to disregard this part of history was interpreted as epistemic violence. At the same time, the lack of violence in the images was considered uninteresting and non-political.



Figure 1. A. A., selection of images of Dakar shot in 2016–2019. © A. A., all rights reserved, used with permission.

non-violent ways to think and subjectively inhabit the urban space around me without any claim of representativity. Although the pictures do not have any political subjects, they are, at the same time, a conscious (political) attempt to disentangle from narratives of poverty, misery, and humanitarianism. This is also a reflection of how an African city can be represented by a person establishing their personal and intimate relationship with it. It is a personal

way out of a binary representational scheme based on exoticism and misery, a search for alternative visual paths.

Though respecting the decision of the editors, I saw their feedback as food for thought. While any research may be rejected and all photographs represent a subjective way of seeing, this specific situation appeared to be a good example of the invention of 'Africa' according to the editors' pre-existing ideas of the continent, which, at the end of the day, silences different ways of seeing. This approach creates a sort of epistemic grid: a linear, dichotomic relationship linking categories of people to typologies of produced images. The imposition of limits by non-Africans on viewing and representing the African continent through such kinds of 'ethical' approaches once again encloses the understanding of the African continent within the framework of epistemic violence. This clear-cut limitation on ways of representing 'Africa' is aligned with colonial knowledge production in that it aims to show it from one specific angle. Disentanglement from such imperatives opens up different and non-schematic ways of looking at the continent.

Eva Barois de Caemel points out that contemporary art curators are those who define what contemporary African art should look like (Caemel 2020: 127). In a sense, this observation can also go beyond art and be extended to the image of the continent created by a variety of professionals working on and in 'Africa.' Curators reportedly encourage certain types of artworks and certain types of images to emerge in the international contemporary scene because they somehow conform to their understanding of what 'Africa' should look like. This curatorial practice that imposes a predetermined, established, or desired image of Africa on artists (Caemel: 2020: 127) is another iteration of Spivak's formula of epistemic violence through the imposition of 'good' on the continent (Downey 2019).

Another way to deal with epistemic violence is through the explicit use of violent images as a critique of violence itself. The film *Episode III: Enjoy Poverty* by the Belgian-French filmmaker Renzo Martens (2008) became a crucial work for the debate on violence and viable avenues for its critique.⁸

As the film's official synopsis advertises, 'Dutch artist Renzo Martens traveled around Congo, from the capital of Kinshasa to deep into the interior,' observing 'the poverty-fighting industry in the post-civil war country [and] regularly appearing on screen himself' ('Episode 3'). He focuses on the UN peacekeepers, white aid workers, Western journalists and photographers. The conclusion that Martens arrives at is that poverty is an industry from which the poor themselves do not benefit or benefit very little. The solution that Martens proposes is to teach the Congolese that images of poverty are the most lucrative resource in the country. In the film's ironic finale, 'local photographers start photographing malnourished children instead of wedding parties' ('Episode 3').

'Martens' journey can be seen as a parable for the exploitive relations that characterize virtually all Western activity in the Third World, and especially the DRC. He has gone to the country to lift them out of poverty, made a film that he will earn his living from, and given nothing but a meal in return' (Penney 2010).

The controversy around this work can be summed up in the question: can we actually disentangle from the epistemic violence of the documentary by recurring to the same violent means that it criticizes? The movie manages to illustrate the complexity of the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the intricate relationship between different actors, tied together in a situation of interdependence. It also problematizes 'social documentary's conventional production of "empathy" with its represented victims' (Demos 2013: 118).

As Martens himself states, 'So the critique of the film is not so much in the action that the guy Renzo undertakes in the film, the critique of the film is the film as a whole, it's the duplication, it's the copy in a way of existing power relationships' (Penney 2010). While the interpretations of the film are multiple and range from overt critique to praise, the aspect that interests me here is the choice of violent images. Using Spivak's formula, Renzo Martens' cinematic attempt depicts a white man saving black men and women from the activities of other white male 'saviors.' The recursive nature of this operation speaks for itself: such images continue to reaffirm the idea of Africa as an 'abnormal' place that needs help, assistance, or intervention from one group of white men or another.⁹ Images of poverty 'actually operate as commodity objects and are purchased by those who encourage or benefit from the very industries for inequality and exploitation against which concerned documentarians justify their practice' (Demos 2013: 109). Looking at the problem through this lens makes me think that the reproduction of violent images is not the answer. The global paradigm of image production should be addressed using a drastically different approach: totally different images that disentangle from the stereotyped representation of the continent. This does not mean that we must not criticize the exploitation of DRC Congo by multinational corporations, the Western world's support of corrupt and authoritarian regimes that perpetuate colonial power relations, or the UN's role in this business, as Martens does. But this critique need not rely on images of child malnutrition, general suffering, and poverty in order to be efficacious.

It seems that the approaches suggested by the Italian journal and by Renzo Martens threaten to narrow the discursive and visual representation of Africa to a pre-defined set of themes and patterns. If image-making aims to go beyond the reproduction of stereotypical images while producing work at a subtler level, then other ways of knowledge production are needed. As suggested by Mbembe and Nufall (2004), the spectrum of images needs to be open to all possible genres, subjects, and themes.

Transformative ways of seeing African urban environments

In this section, I would like to look at the existing photographic practices dedicated to 'counter-reporting' and visual counter-narratives on urban spaces in Africa. This will allow me to link my own photographic practice and

the debate I invoked above with other photographic works, and thus build my argument on ways of disentangling visual works from epistemic violence.

Urban spaces in West Africa, particularly in big cities such as Dakar, Abidjan, and Lagos, are enriching and visually challenging. Much has been said about slums, underdevelopment, infrastructure, insufficient services for growing populations, and other issues that keep living standards low. Without denying these difficulties—they appear in the images—the photographs chosen here open up room for an expanded dimension of reality, leaving space for different and new narratives to emerge. Only by relying on what we see, seeing the invisible and the beautiful in everyday life, watching and living a place through an evolving, intimate, and meditative contemplation, can we open up different forms of what is seen and how.

The idea of looking at a place as if it were not African emerges in a conversation between François-Xavier Gbré, Emmanuel Iduma, and Brendan Wattenberg (Wattenberg 2015). Gbré speaks of a picture he took: 'The red mud is the only element that says you are in West Africa, in Abidjan. If you don't look at the ground, just at the house, it could be a suburb in Germany or the UK' (Wattenberg 2015: 87). This implies that there is an implicit canon of what an African city looks like or at least how it is imagined and depicted. Here, I would like to look at works that radically modify the existing imagery and build up a new canon, not silenced by anyone and free from colonial imperatives of knowledge production.

Simon Njami writes,

'I believe that the "sense" of the city in Africa cannot be found in geometry or any conventional, verifiable logic or urban planning. The city here is not a physical entity with street names and signs, but an intangible phenomenon' (Njami 2001: 25).

Photographic practice is thus the outcome of photographers' relationship with the intangible, with the not-always-visible. This relationship is cultivated through *practicing* the city (De Certeau 1980). One way of living the city, like walking through it, is photographing it (Magee 2007). This is a very generative approach to the city (or image-making more generally) because the way of seeing is determined by the intimacy of the relationship with a place. This approach, which Magee (2007) calls *elective belonging*, expresses 'an individual's sense of belonging to a community: one may be born into that community, or one may move to it, but in either case, when one chooses to stay, one elects to belong' (p. 110). This understanding of the sense of belonging as a specific form of representation, as an intimate sense of the city is also an instrument that could help to overcome strictly binary forms of belonging and non-belonging. Among photographers who practice African cities this way, Magee names the work of Alioune Ba from Bamako and Zwelethu Mthethwa from Johannesburg.

Another example of a creative way of practicing the city is the curatorial approach of Modou Dieng and Djibril Dramé in their open-air exhibition in Dakar *You Are Beautiful the Way You Are*. The exhibition, opened

in November 2020 in the streets of Médina and Plateau, integrates visual art (painting and photography) into the Dakar cityscape. The project is a way 'to share new Black contemporary art with the local communities of Dakar, Senegal amidst the COVID-19 pandemic' ('Statement' 2020). The artworks smartly embedded in the urban landscape of the city become part of the city and create a vivid interaction between its dwellers and its images. The integration of artwork into the places we live through on a daily basis opens our eyes anew to familiar architecture, environment, and buildings. This form of contemplating and practicing the city also becomes a creative instrument, a photographic technique. Different artists, different people, different life histories make up different ways of connecting and belonging to (their) cities. This is crucial to evolving our view of a place—how we relate to it, think about it, or representing it as a final stage of this complex relationship. Using the words of El Hadji Malick Ndiaye:

'On the seemingly disorderly architecture landscape, the works of art in the capital are open windows, boulevards of life, an encyclopedia where the stares of passersby clash. The relations between individuals and the environment receive here a contribution adapted to the context. May the city become a space of permanent exhibition' ('Statement' 2020).

I see this relationship with the city as an example of the evolving gaze on African urban environments, providing new ways of seeing as well as productive representational models that disentangle from the epistemic violence of the external gaze, and entering new depths of the place that is practiced. This takes the 'normality' of a place as an epistemological point of departure. In this case, 'normality' becomes a necessary first step in the underpinning reflection on forms of representation of African urban environments, followed by researching and producing transformative ways of seeing.



Figure 2. Djibril Dramé and Ndoeye Douts for the *You Are Beautiful the Way You Are* exhibition in Dakar, November 2020. © Blackpuffin, all rights reserved, used with permission.



Figure 3. Jordan Casteel for the *You Are Beautiful the Way You Are* exhibition in Dakar, November 2020. © Blackpuffin, all rights reserved, used with permission.



Figure 4. Patrick Quarm for the *You Are Beautiful the Way You Are* exhibition in Dakar, November 2020. © Blackpuffin, all rights reserved, used with permission.

One photographer who navigates an intimate dialogue with Dakar is Mame-Diarra Niang.

'In questioning the landscape, I am questioning myself on the landscape. I try to find myself on it. What makes me, and where I come from. [...] In fact, with the plasticity of territory, I'm talking about my territory. Not yours, not the territory of the others, it's my territory. In all of this I find myself; I find my own presence. My own story, and history' (Onabanjo 2015).

The photographer's attention is largely devoted to to built environments, almost free of human presence and depicted from the outside. Her two projects *Sahel Gris* (2013) and *At the Wall* (2014) are of particular interest for this essay and for the new turn in African urban photography

(Baumann, Chuang and Onabanjo 2017). *At the Wall* was first exhibited at the Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg in 2014. All the pictures in the show feature a wall and all their titles relate to the word 'wall': *le mur*, *détail du mur*, *le peuple du mur*, and *plasticité du mur*.

The photographer's gaze always encounters a wall as a way of delimiting urban space and dividing it between the inside and the outside, as a form of belonging, as a way of positioning herself in the space. Niang applies a non-conventional and anti-photogenic gaze (in Enwezor's sense) to Dakar's trafficked streets and roads, although her images are almost always void of humans. This exteriority nonetheless reports an intimate relationship between Niang and the photographed city. In fact, her artist statement talks about challenging the viewer to go beyond the recognizable (Baumann, Chuang and Onabanjo 2017: 302). This is visible in her interest in walls as a complex archetype of urban development that change societal ways of inhabiting territory and increasingly distinguish between the inside and the outside.

'The artist's complex relationship with a place that is deeply part of her history and yet does not offer her a sense of home is palpable; she seems to move in a void, following the same wall through the city, as if looking for a thread, a sign, an encounter, and maybe a connection. One could say that the subject of the series is the search, the pilgrimage to gain answers on the future and the past alike. The encounter with the wall offers a surface where her desires and fears are projected. As in any encounter with a reflective experience, the answer ultimately lies with the pilgrim' (Niang 2014).

This form of analytical observation and research on the territory within and around herself is even more evident in her series *Sahel Gris*. In this series, shot in one hour, as stated by the artist herself, Mame-Diarra Niang shares metaphorical and abstract landscapes of territories adjacent to the airport, now subject to real estate predation. Niang's interest in the architectural environments, void streets, and recently urbanized, apparently almost uninhabited areas hides deep visual research and attention to both societal and personal dilemmas. The landscape is in transition between rural and urban, lived and abandoned, personal and impersonal. The transitional nature of the place that Niang documents echoes with the artist's search for herself, for her formal and elective belonging.

Another photographer who emerged in the 2010s working on transformative ways of seeing the continent is François-Xavier Gbré. His aesthetic research frames the past and present in one photograph, revealing the tension between an idea and its practical realization. He looks at architectural monuments as traces, as 'marks of the absence of a presence.' Gbré's practice centers on changes and mobility in urban environments and architectural resilience as a narrative. He looks at a common denominator for all the photographers mentioned in this section of the essay, that is, 'the beauty of often overlooked quotidian objects' (François-Xavier Gbré' 2023). Thanks to Gbré's photographic production, buildings 'have a brief second life as purely aesthetic objects' (Wattenberg 2015: 5). Gbré's works



Figure 5. Mame-Diarra Niang, *Le peuple du mur* #1, from the series *At The Wall*. © Mame-Diarra Niang. Courtesy of Stevenson, Amsterdam, Cape Town, and Johannesburg, all rights reserved, published with permission.



Figure 6 and 7. Mame-Diarra Niang, *Untitled*, Diptych, 2013, from the series *Sahel Gris* 33. © Mame-Diarra Niang. Courtesy of Stevenson, Amsterdam, Cape Town, and Johannesburg, all rights reserved, published with permission.

depict internal and external spaces as perfect frames of reality that his gaze captures in the built urban environments. A building or a house is represented as a stand-alone sculptural structure, seen by the photographer as a symbol and a symptom at the same time (Wattenberg 2015: 7). While this resembles an evolved understanding of the documentary, it also leaves space for the viewer to question such notions as time and history through perfectly framed pieces of reality. Like Mame-Diarra Niang, François Xavier Gbré also investigates his elective belonging, his personal experience exploring built spaces, past aspirations, and memories encoded in buildings. These images relate different chronologies and suggest new readings of the urban environment, constantly revealing the effects of human intervention upon the landscape ('François-Xavier Gbré' 2023).

Gbré's images, devoid of human beings, are an exploration of man-made landscapes as evidence of human history, activities, intentions, and goals, juxtaposed against the present-day state of affairs. The lack of humans can be explained by Gbré's attempts to unify different dimensions and parts of the puzzle to reflect on the complex history and present that his camera immortalizes. These contemporary architectural portraits lead the viewer to reconsider the past, to critically think about the gap between the past and present.

Figure 8. François-Xavier Gbré, *Baie de Mermoz II, Dakar, Senegal*, 2012. © François-Xavier Gbré. Courtesy of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, all rights reserved, used with permission.





Figure 9. François-Xavier Gbré, *Cité universitaire Mermoz*, Abidjan, 2014. © François-Xavier Gbré. Courtesy of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, all rights reserved, used with permission.

The visual representation of Africa began with a neat distinction between the makers of the image and those captured. This resulted in silencing voices and imposing qualitative judgements, as described in Spivak's essay. Since then, 'epistemic violence' has been on the radars of scholars, writers, critics, and artists, yet its interpretation still varies radically. In this essay, I attempted to demonstrate how the 'invention of the new image of Africa' is a visual rupture with the colonial invention of Africa. I've argued that an intention to criticize epistemic violence does not necessarily produce a different gaze, as the examples of the arbitrary criteria of the Italian journal and the work of Renzo Martens demonstrated. Perhaps it produces recursive attempts to disentangle from epistemic violence that are condemned to fail. How can we not fail?

In the final part of the essay, I sought to look at the works of photographers who explore urban environments by establishing an intimate relationship with a place through its aesthetic representation. This approach opens avenues for dealing with 'what we see' in an African metropolis, defeating developmentalist and simplistic ways of looking at a city in a 'low-income country,' introducing a personal side of visual research where the writer/photographer has an intimate relationship with the place that is photographed. This connection enables multiple ways of seeing. Central to this working practice is the sense of belonging to a place that becomes both key and instrument to overcoming preconceptions and stereotypes. This more sensitive than theoretical approach makes room for a variety of gazes

that overcome the binary dichotomies of belonging and non-belonging, indigeneity and coloniality. It allows one to travel from the 'normality' of an anti-photogenic gaze to the unfixing of ideas and images. This aesthetic turn opens African landscapes and places to a multitude of gazes. This personal dimension also allows photographers to overcome objectivity and go beyond epistemic violence based on the opposition of 'right' and 'wrong.' The intuitive and contemplative work of various photographers embodies different forms of investigating facets of the city seen beyond the visible. Contemplation of the city occurs both in thoughtful relation with the self and with the surrounding environment. This cohort of photographers intimately connected to the continent, pursuing their own visual and conceptual research lines, is inventing a new image of Africa through intrinsically non-violent artistic practices.

1. Few countries in West Africa—and even fewer among former French colonies—made radical education reforms after independence.
2. It is important to state that not only European photographers and ethnographers created the 'image' of the continent. There were a number of African photographers and ethnographers working in West Africa during the colonial period. African pioneers of photography (working in the nineteenth century) produced a significant body of work that is now mostly lost or hard to access. Neglecting the intellectual contributions of Africans would merely reinforce the same 'epistemic violence' that this essay seeks to address. At the same time, the aim of the essay is to reflect on the idea of 'epistemic violence' and its production, as well as the ways contemporary photographers disentangle from epistemic violence by producing novel images of the African cities.
3. Even the photographic archives of the former colonies themselves, for example, the iconographic archives of Senegal, where I conducted research, are full of images (in the form of postcards, research photographs, etc.) produced by the colonizer, in this case, France.
4. Recent literary production, for instance, Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's novel *Kintu* (2014), deliberately does not talk about colonialism and British presence in Uganda. 'Then I came to Britain and saw how, in Western media, Africa was presented as "mental" and the idea of a "mad" family, mad nation and mad race was formed. But along the way, the inspiration to write Uganda before Europe occurred. Later, I made the decision to shift my focus away from colonisation' (Cooper 2017).
5. The process of labeling some places, not exclusively Africa but also, for example, Eastern Europe, is a way to reduce them to a stereotypical vision and understanding, stripping humanity from these places. This is a common Western-Eurocentric approach that needs to be defeated.
6. In his seminal work discussing documentary photography, Allan Sekula (1984) writes: 'Against violence directed at the human body, at the

environment, at working people's ability to control their own lives, we need to counterpose an active resistance, simultaneously political and symbolic, to monopolise capitalism's increasing power and arrogance, a resistance aimed ultimately at socialist transformation' (p. 255).

7. I am a Russian-born female writer and researcher currently living between Dakar, Senegal and Bologna, Italy.
8. The impact of the film was so significant that Sternberg Press published a volume of reflections and essays on it, edited by Anthony Downey (2019).
9. For a critical discussion of assistance, intervention, and the NGO-ization of Africa, see Demos (2013).

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Author's bio

The author of this article chose to remain anonymous.