



Raphaël Grisey in Hyde Park, London, 2011.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.

Figuring Fallow Time

Images Appear

We first met in the context of a community of images. You came to my mother's place for dinner. You ate little, and as soon as we had finished eating you were quick to set up the slide projector by the fireplace. You came once or twice each year upon returning from your trips to Mali. I saw your slides of the Bamako markets in Kayes, the cooperative, portraits of the founding members, children, women, the Senegal River, the irrigation system, fields of onions and okra, as well as banana plantations. You also showed us photographs of demonstrations, and of your friends in the workers' hostel on rue de Charonne and in the Pinel hostel in Saint-Denis. You made the images speak, and the images spoke to you. It was not just a travel story, and there was something in the complex arrangement of your images that was hard for my childish eyes to penetrate.

While your hand focused the lens for each new image that appeared on the living room wall, your voice described the relationship between the cooperative you had founded, and the everyday lives and struggles of immigrant workers in France over the past 50 years. Your narrative tied together the scattered places appearing in the images. It strove to fill the space between the slides, recreating and producing traces of your story, reconstructing its path, going from the condition of an immigrant worker from a farm to the future of the cyborg farmer, informed by the ancestors you will all have become.

Your return to France in the 1980s, after having founded the Somankidi Coura cooperative on the banks of the Senegal River, confirmed that your life and activities were now spread among several places. Here you had become the ambassador of the cooperative, of your project, for hostel residents and everyone else. Over there you were an occasional farmer, as well as the spokesman or image-man for the condition of immigrant workers in France, a smuggler. And this was done through the production and distribution of your photographs from hand to hand in villages and hostels.

One day — I think it was for my fifteenth birthday — you gave me my first camera, a Nikon FM2, the same one you had used to take your photos in the 1980s. A few years later, while studying at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris, I used your camera to take photos along the Canal Saint-Denis, not knowing that I was very close to the Pinel hostel in Saint-Denis where you had stayed after arriving in France in 1965, the place where you had caught tuberculosis because of the housing conditions, and where you had come to the brutal realization that an African consciousness needed to emerge among the immigrants. I made my way from the "center" to the "periphery", photographing and interviewing residents of Aubervilliers and Saint-Denis. That part of the world is a precipitate of the history of labor and immigration.



First images shot in Bouba' Touré's apartment, 2006.
Stills from *Cooperative* (rushes), Raphaël Grisey.

Bouba Touré going from his flat
to the foyer Charonne.
Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008.

I met a family from Portugal including a father who had grown up in a shantytown in La Plaine, a family of Algerian squatters who disappeared between two meetings, a homeless man retrained as a security guard who communicated with the world over the short waves of his CB radio, a West Indian who lived in his van and grew peyote to speak to his ancestors, a Tunisian father who was looking for other men in a wasteland at Porte d'Aubervilliers, Congolese Kimbanguist evangelists, as well as Romanians from the center of Epinay-sur-Seine. My political and social education was constructed in these return trips between Paris and its suburbs. Intuitively and naively, I tried to draw links between segments of the population that I thought were not speaking to one another, by trying to understand the paths taken by the people in front of me, and to see that this was an All-World.¹ It seemed to me that the suburbs were much less segmented than my privileged city center, whose residents' privileges included mobility and free circulation through territories.

In a seminar at the École des Beaux-arts in Paris,² I met Sophie Haluk, a photographer who was then working in immigrant workers' hostels. She had known you for a long time and you had done many programs together on independent radio. In 2000, I spent two months in Mali assisting a French artist in residence, Olivier Leroy. I was overwhelmed by the postcolonial situations that were persisting, by the expatriates around the swimming pools in Bamako, and by the French Cultural Center's power over the art scene. When I went to Sangha with Leroy and the Dogon artist Amahiguéré Dolo, an old man introduced me to a child and said the boy was his father. I had lost my own a year earlier. I tried to understand where I had arrived, to make sense of it. I vomited on the land of the ancestors on the cliff top, after drinking too much dolo, the local beer, right beside Germaine Dieterlen's house.

I returned from those two months feeling dumfounded and disappointed, somewhat like Michel Leiris's narcissistic experience in *Phantom Africa*, a book I would only read a few years later. During my trip I only read *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* by Marcel Griaule. I had come too soon and I was misinformed.

I got back in touch with you, wanting to take another look at your photos, which I could only vaguely remember, so that I could connect my experiences in the suburbs and in Mali with your images, and understand what had driven you to take them. I suggested that you come and show your photographs in that seminar. You were unsure of what to make of my enthusiasm as a young student. And then one day I decided to go to your place—or maybe you had invited me—to take a close look at the archives of your work and have a chat. I started filming in your small apartment on rue Trousseau. You left me to it, and started telling your stories.

1 Édouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-monde* (Treaty of the All-World), Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1997.

2 The seminar *Des Territoires* (1994–2005) at ENSBA, Paris.

You were born under the colonial regime, living with your mother, your grandmother, and your grandfather Soumaré who protected you from snakes. You grew up hearing stories about the roundups inflicted on earlier generations, recruited against their will during both world wars or sent to forced labor sites. Someone came to the village to record your birth year, which was all the information they needed if they wanted to recruit you in turn. After independence, this enabled you to get a French identity card, come to France and make several return trips even when new anti-immigration laws were becoming rife. You told me that future generations would no longer have that option, and would be forced to settle, in either the village or the hostel.

Your grandfather was taken to Verdun, and was one of the few to return. When he died, the elders recognized him in your boyhood face, and they called you by his name. Later, a traveler making his way along the Fankhoré River told you that you too would go abroad, but also that THIS TIME you would not be going to fight a war. You saw these things as signs of your earlier lives. While living in hostels and working in factories, you very quickly learned that you had not come here to reproduce the forced cooperation between France and Africa that your ancestors had suffered.

It was not long before you suggested going out instead of talking and being filmed. We went to eat mafé in the hostel on the corner of rue de Charonne, and visited your sons in room 111. You put me in the picture by taking me to the hostel so I would start to understand. I saw you doing portraits for anyone who needed them, for work or for family back home. You gave them photos you had taken of their village during your last trip. You offered advice to the youngest. You showed them images of the cooperative's fields and new crops, telling them about what you had achieved over there; you encouraged them to consider this as an alternative to hostel life.

You told me that during the hostel struggles of the 1970s, there were a lot of conflicts with elders who did not understand your anger, who could not comprehend having French friends and girlfriends. They wanted everything to go well with their managers and said you were there to work. Now you have taken the place of those elders, but you still reject the reproduction of emigration and the inevitability of the rural exodus that preceded it.

Bouba Touré and a friend in room 111, photographs of Bouba Touré on the walls, Foyer Charonne, Paris, 1993.
Photograph by Bouba Touré.



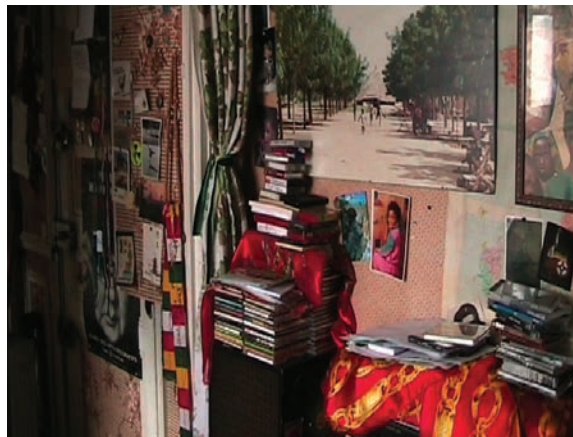
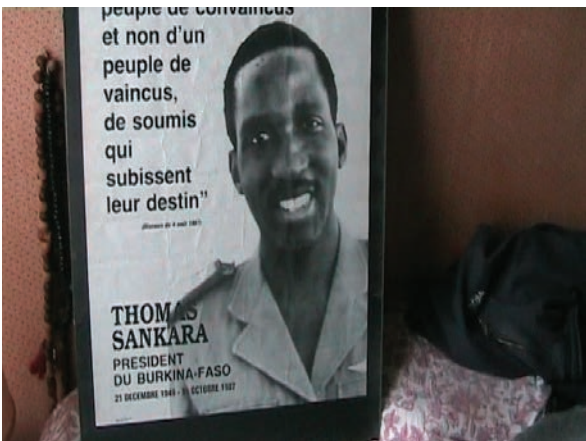
Image Migration Junction

Then after the hostels, you took me to the cooperative. Between 2006 and 2008, I accompanied you in France (Paris) and Mali (Somankidi Coura) to make a film, *Cooperative*. The film connects your everyday work as a photographer with that of the cooperative. I filmed hostels and demonstrations, the banks of the Senegal River, the cooperative, the village, the fields, the colonial ruins and the Kayes market. At that time, my understanding of the emergence of the cooperative was still elusive. Initially I perceived it as a radical break, after years spent in factories. But was it also the beginning of relationship-building and dialectics that had never stopped? At the cooperative, the founding members all told me the same story, with minor variations. It was a collective story that had already been written, reworked, almost established in advance, in order to be projected into the future, addressed to future generations as well as to your contemporaries both here and over there, defending a point of view and a perspective. Thirty years later, this position was harder for me to discern in view of the number of day-to-day problems and the intense pace of the work in the fields that I observed at the cooperative. How was one to understand the initial strength you had needed to escape from the immigration centrifuge, from the rural exodus, from the weight of the traditional system, to try and get beyond the contradictions and failures of the liberation movements in order to tackle that new battleground created by the drought and erosion affecting the Sahel? When you returned to Mali after the 1968 coup d'état, the people who considered themselves most revolutionary took this to mean that you were traitors. The villagers themselves thought you were madmen at first, not understanding why someone would want to return to poverty far away from their family, and your families complained about no longer receiving money.

When I was starting to edit my film, you bought a camcorder and shot your first moving images one morning in 2008 at your apartment on rue Trousseau. The same day, you gave me the cassette and asked me to look at it and make good use of it. In a single, one-hour sequence shot, you filmed your apartment, the walls covered with images ranging from posters of independence heroes to photos of the cooperative and letters from your father asking for money. Then you describe your life in Paris, meditate on your practice as a photographer, and comment on the hunt for foreigners that had just taken place in South Africa. You put on Indian music to accompany words you repeat, between laments and songs of revolt. Those words are like a breathing that enables you to bounce off another image that speaks, that speaks to you.



Still from *Cooperative*, 2008.



Stills from *Bouba Touré*, 58 rue Trousseau, 75011 Paris, France, by Bouba Touré, 2008.



That's because African consciousness is still asleep.
 African consciousness is still asleep. African consciousness is still asleep.

It makes me cry. It makes me cry. It makes me cry. It makes me cry.

One day Africa will wake up and say enough! Africa will wake up and
 say enough! Africa will wake up and say enough! Africa will wake up
 and say enough!

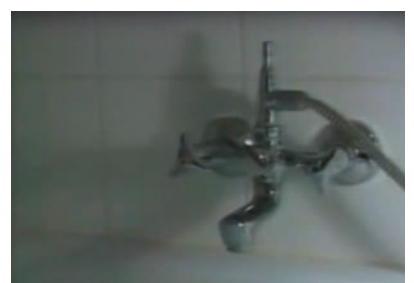
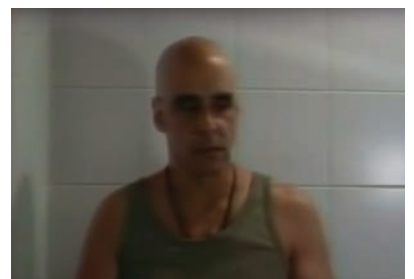
I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad. I'm sad.

The alarm clock has to ring. The alarm clock has to ring. The alarm
 clock has to ring. The alarm clock has to ring. The alarm clock has to
 ring. The alarm clock has to ring. The alarm clock has to ring.

Yes. The struggle. Yes. The struggle. Yes. The struggle. Yes. The struggle.

Life is a battle. Life is a battle. Life is a battle.

At the end of the video, you speak of the African women who live in France, of their courage in the face of the patriarchal system they confronted. If you were president, you would only have women as ministers. Your video is an introspection and a moment of attention that reaches out to the world in a multifarious, kaleidoscopic address through the prism of images. It reminds me of Robert Kramer's *Berlin 10/90*, which consists of a one-hour sequence shot confined to a Berlin bathroom after the fall of the wall. You gave me the responsibility of taking care of your video. I suggested doing a cut and calling it *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau, 75011 Paris, France*, and it became a film. I continued editing my own film with an eye on yours.



Stills from *Berlin 10/90*
 by Robert Kramer, 1991.



Stills from 8mm film by Monique Janson,
Somankidi Coura, 1977.



Apparition of Archives

In 2008, I exhibited our films, *Cooperative* and *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau, 75011 Paris, France*, at the art center in Chelles, France. Your film was presented on a monitor and the sound was played through several speakers. Your voice filled the exhibition room while my film was presented in the confined space of a black box. Side by side, through intersecting and vanishing points, the two films harmonized two points of view revolving around the same subjects: images, migration and the cooperative.

During this period, you received 8mm films by post containing images of the founding of the cooperative, and I was eager to see them. They were shot by Monique Janson, a French farmer with whom you had done your agricultural training in 1975 and 1976.

In the first amateur film from 1977, after a shot of the river, the crops and irrigation, one sees you dancing with a hunter's rifle wearing a t-shirt of the MPLA³ which you supported at ACTAF (Cultural Association of African Workers in France). You have branches on your hat, and you are wearing high rubber boots that suggest you have just returned from the fields for irrigation, along with shorts that end above the knees, the same ones that all of you wore, and that shocked the villagers. You are doing that futurist dance to threnodies that seem to come from a Fula flute. The film is silent and musical.

The second film from 1979 starts and finishes like a travel film: a tourist visit to Dakar, a tracking shot from a bus showing Fula villages, arrival at the cooperative, a visit to the fields with the group and the French farmers. Then the filming suddenly becomes very detailed, lingering over the work in the fields, the irrigation system, the location of the site, a members' meeting, women working on the banks of the river, the tea ceremony. These 8mm films are amateur films. They are amateur in Maya Deren's sense: affectionate, loving images that show the relationship linking the filmmaker to the subject.⁴

Later, you showed me a 16mm reel on your shelf. You had marked the date of the moment when you had been given the box, and added your initials, which you put on all of the objects you keep. Your grandfather had left few traces to guide you. You do it so those who follow you can more easily retrace earlier paths. This was the copy of *Nationalité: Immigré* that you had screened in hostels throughout France in 1976, before leaving in November that same year to found the cooperative.

3 Movimento Popular de Liberação do Angola (People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola).

4 Maya Deren, *Amateur Versus Professional*: "The very classification 'amateur' has an apologetic ring. But that very word—from the Latin 'amateur'—'lover' means one who does something for the love of the thing rather than for economic reasons or necessity."



Bouba Touré in Cinema L'entrepôt,
May 19, 1993, Bouba Touré archives.



Film still from *Nationalité: Immigré*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1975.



Bouba Touré in his flat
on rue Trousseau, 1984,
Bouba Touré archives.



Still from *Safrana or
Freedom of Speech*,
Sidney Sokhona, 1977.

You spoke of *Nationalité: Immigré* as a film in which everyone took part in the shooting and logistics in one way or another. The film was shot during the rent strike at the Riquet hostel, in which Sidney Sokhona lived at the time, and which you also visited regularly.

We did not have a 16mm projector. I managed to access the film through the Cinémathèque Afrique at the Institut Français. I was expecting to see a film similar in tone to the activist films made at the time, but instead I discovered a film that criticized these, and it was the first time I had seen a film made by an immigrant worker about his own condition. Then I discovered *Safrana or Freedom of Speech*, Sidney Sokhona's second film.

While I was filming at the cooperative, you spoke to me of someone who had never contacted you again after filming, and you said you had felt betrayed by him. I did not think much about it at the time, since I was more interested in filming my own images.

Could you have been talking about Sidney Sokhona and *Safrana*, which you were unable to see when it was released? You were already working your fields when the film came out in cinemas. When you got back to France in 1981, Sidney Sokhona had made his own return to Mauritania, with a new project for a film, one that he would never make after getting caught up in the political power game. The script for *Safrana* was based on the story of your departure project. Should you have been credited as a co-writer? Was that also the reason for the dispute?

Safrana or Freedom of Speech recounts the everyday lives of four immigrants, and their experiences in factories through flashbacks, as they head to the countryside to meet French farmers in preparation for a return to Africa, where they will do some farming themselves. In other words the film is more or less a reinterpretation of your own story.

The activist journalist Catherine Ruelle, who was Sidney Sokhona's girlfriend and the film's producer at the time, later told me⁵ that the shoot in the countryside had been done in Côte d'Or with farmers from her family's village. The farmers questioned by the four characters are critical of new production tools, agricultural machines, intensive farming and the endemic rural exodus. The rural farm world that the protagonists discover is pervaded by ancestral practices; a water diviner does a demonstration for an actor, who is taken aback. New technologies are evaluated for their use-value and durability, as well as from an ecosystemic perspective. The history and concerns of this farming world resonated with the irrigated subsistence agriculture you wanted to implement when you returned.

Your experience in Champagne and in Marne was rougher: some farmers wanted to make you work hard (delighted to have low-paid labor, I imagine). Most of them practiced forms of intensive farming that were not easy to translate for your project, and then there was the pervasive

5 Interviews with Catherine Ruelle in 2015 and 2016.



After the theoretical agricultural internship, members of the ACTAF (Cultural Association of the African Workers in France) with their hosts, Haute-Marne, Courcelles-sur-Aujon, France, May 1976.

Bouba Touré, Ibrahima Camara, Mady Niakhaté, Bangaly Camara, members of the ACTAF in their dormitory, agricultural internship in Haute-Marne, France, May 1976.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.

racism and conservatism. This generated heated discussions, and though they were less idyllic than in Sokhona's film, they were certainly productive. In 1976, a drought hit the French countryside, and you observed how the authorities and farmers organized their response. With the farmers you forged relationships that were perhaps more intense and substantial than those you had established with activist leftist groups and others during your stays in France. These encounters yielded results. Farmers of the agricultural association ACCIR,⁶ who financed your training, continued to support you for many years, and came to visit you in Somankidi Coura. These are the same people who filmed you in 1977 and 1979. Like *Safrana*, you would only see those images thirty years later.

As these archives emerged, I got a sense of how the founding of the cooperation had been preceded by a slow process of learning images, politics and farming. To understand, I needed to take a detour through the fiction in films by Sokhona, who focused on the creation of subjects through the experience of the struggles in France's public realm. The departure plan had been based on knowledge acquired while struggling to improve living and working conditions in France, with the help of training in labor jobs and the French language provided by the hostels' night courses; you learned how to find your place in the multitude of radical left political movements, how to spot incomprehension, misunderstandings, and paternalism; you had taken this knowledge gained from many locations and placed it in perspective within your association, ACTAF, to project yourselves further.

Watching Sokhona's films and the amateur footage by French farmers, I had the desire to screen and present them alongside our own. It was an assemblage of films, of actors, that matched each other and echoed the assemblages you had made, unmade and remade with your images on bedroom walls in the hostels and other places you had inhabited.

Every point of view had changed through intersections with other people's perspectives. The variations and motifs of one single story were recast through different methodologies, mediums and technologies.

Nationalité: Immigré clearly and virulently responded to a certain type of paternalistic activist cinema existing at that time, and entered into dialogue with Med Hondo's films. *Safrana* was a cinematographic reiteration of your return project. The 8mm films echoed your first photographs of the founding of the cooperative. My own film *Cooperative* started with a consideration of your photographs, and was then edited with an eye on your film *Bouba Touré, 58 rue Trousseau, 75011 Paris, France*, which you had perhaps made out of a desire to respond to my production.

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– Part Two

6 Association Champegnnoise de Coopération Inter-Régionale.



Bouba Touré in the Photolab King Stars, Belleville, Paris, 2006, Stills (rushes) from *Cooperative*, by Raphaël Grisey.



Sorting out negatives for digitalization, Pantin, Paris, 2015.

Figuring Fallow Time [Part Two]

Cine-geographies and Infrastructures

I wanted to understand the networks, friendships, affinities and institutions that had made up the cine-geographies⁷ of those first assemblages. What did the digitization and redistribution of previously undigitized images and archives imply in terms of the divergences needing to be reduced, or on the contrary emphasized, between those actors, those producers, and those generations? In this research, how could one avoid “*lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial, real connections,*” keeping in mind that “*some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination.*”⁸

Finally, what can be done so that the divergences in these new connections between images and narratives and their placement back in circulation can assume the form of a regeneration rather than a catalogue?

The chronology of the production and (re)appearance of the archives, images and narratives becomes so complex that it starts to twist and diffract. The heterochronies of the connections, emergences and returns has led me to view my research as a speculative practice. Seriously taking these heterochronies into account makes it possible to translate the cooperative’s experience in time, newly projecting it as a possibility, just as its initial movement was. Thinking of these images and narratives in terms of relations between infrastructures of different scales also reveals a deep time, that of the soil, climate and plants.

Farm Films

Sidney Sokhona was often at the University of Vincennes, and he worked as Med Hondo’s assistant on his film *Wogs and Negroes, Your Neighbors*, and also attended workshops given by Serge le Péron.⁹ Serge le Péron was a member of the Cinélutte group, which made some of its films amid the strikes and struggles of immigrant workers.¹⁰ Sidney Sokhona’s *Nationalité: Immigré* was a response to those activist films on the immigrant workers’ cause. One of them, *Journée Porte Ouverte à Drancy*, on the 1971 hostel strike by immigrant workers in Drancy, was

7 The term is taken from Ros Gray & Kodwo Eshun’s text, “The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography”, *Third Text*, vol. 25, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–12.

8 Donna Haraway: “A Cyborg Manifesto” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During (ed.), Routledge, London, 1993, p. 281.

9 Interview with Sidney Sokhona in Dakar, January 2017.

10 Cinélutte : *Jusqu’au bout*, 1973 – *La grève des ouvriers de Margoline*, 1973.



Poster of *Kaddu Beykat* [Letter from My Village], Safi Faye Archives.



Viewing *Kaddu Beykat* [Letter from My Village] in the Arsenal Cinema Archives, Berlin, 2014.

made by Richard Copans for the neo-Trotskyist group *Révolution Afrique*. Richard Copans told me that a few years earlier in 1969, he had gone to Senegal with Madeleine de Beauséjour — one of the founders of the group *Révolution Afrique* — to film the agricultural cooperatives. The plane tickets to Dakar were paid for by the Black Panthers. They strayed towards Tambacounda and ultimately did not find an agricultural cooperative. They filmed in the villages, but the rushes did not match the utopia they were seeking, so the film was never completed.¹¹ They had come too soon in search of an example like Somankidi Coura. In their revolutionary haste, they were too impatient to show the dramas of the region's peasants.

In 1976, the year when Bouba Touré and his associates left to found the cooperative, several films were released in which the main protagonists were farmers, soils and arable lands under the sway of colonial history and the governments in power after independence.

To film *Harvest: 3000 Years*, Haile Gerima travelled from Los Angeles to Ethiopia, his country of origin, which was then in the grip of a civil war after the overthrow of Haile Selassie, who had failed to resolve problems linked to the 1973 drought and famine. Gerima presented the landless farmers of a valley in the grip of a tyrannical landowner. A former farmer, one of the wretched of the earth, who had become “the village fool,” speaks of his participation in the liberation struggles against the Italians, and encourages the peasants to rise up against the landowner.

The film is punctuated by close shots of land turned over by the farmers' ploughs, and long panoramas showing the farmers making their way through the fields in the valley, up into the heights where there is a road (built by the Italians) leading to the city where the landowner lives. The film ends with the landowner's murder by the village fool, who takes his own life before the soldiers arrive.

At the cooperative, you would have said “the land belongs to the people working it.” But as founding member Bakhoré Bathily said, “The land isn't permanently given to the member. We give it to you if you work it. If you don't work it we take it back and give it to someone else.”

Safi Faye released *Letter from My Village* a year earlier. She filmed her father Fadiat's native village in southern Senegal (later returning there to shoot many other films¹²). The film illustrates a letter from a farmer's daughter addressed to the world. It opens with work in the fields and a Serer proverb: “The land doesn't lie.” To make the land fruitful, sacrifices are offered

11 Richard Copans first discussed the subject with Aïssatou Mbodj-Pouye in 2015, then I reconfirmed it with him in 2016.

12 Including *Fadiat* (1979), *Goob na Nu* (1979), *Selbe* (1982) and *Mossane* (1996).



Film stills from *Mirt Sost Shi Amit* [Harvest: 3,000 Years] by Haile Gerima, 1976.

to the Pangool ancestors. Children under a palaver tree mimic government agents coming to collect taxes from farmers who are penniless after a poor harvest. One farmer is tortured and killed by being doused with DDT, in order to make an example of him. The peanut monoculture implemented during the colonial era and continued by the Senghor regime after independence has eroded the soil and dismantled the village's system. When the price of peanuts falls, or the drought's effects are felt, the farmers are no longer able to pay their taxes and feed themselves. The acidity of the peanuts renders the land infertile. There is a drama that runs through the film, about two characters, a young man named Ngor and his sweetheart Coumba. Ngor has to go to Dakar to work and earn the marriage dowry. The job-search scenes are reminiscent of the Paris scenes in *Nationalité: Immigré* in which Sidney Sokhona is repeatedly turned away. When Ngor returns, the wedding can finally take place, as the radio broadcasts its propaganda: in 1970, the state forgives the farmers' debts and distributes free peanut seeds and fertilizer. But as Safi Faye tells us: "Peanut farming erodes the soil, exhausts the land. We need diversified farming." "The letter is from me, the rest from my farmer parents."



Film stills of *Kàddu Beykat* [*Letter from My Village*], by Safi Faye, 1975.

Safi Faye's insistent filming of her village reminds me of that insistent photographing of the Somankidi Coura cooperative and of the hostels in order to take care of, and feel responsible for, a plot of land, a community and ecosystem. This is just like your care and responsibility for your archives and for the land in Somankidi Coura, the same care I would like to bring to the set of images and narratives I am reconstructing.

You could have said: "The photos are from me, the rest from the cooperative".

During a conversation with Safi Faye, I learned that Haile Gerima was the distributor of *Letter from My Village* in the United States when it was released. For several years, Safi Faye and Haile Gerima screened *Letter from My Village* and *Harvest: 3000 Years* side by side.

Safi Faye and Sidney Sokhona associated with each other in the 1970s at the Museum of Man, in its cinema along with Jean Rouch. Had Safi Faye influenced Sidney Sokhona's decision to make a film about farmers?

You yourself screened *Letter from My Village* at the 14 Juillet Bastille cinema and the Entrepôt cinema, and looked after the reels.

At the time, these two films showed the urgent need — which is just as glaring today — to question the colonization of soil, not only that of abstract geopolitical territory, but that of the farmer who walks the land and that of

the humus. In those films, soil is no longer a nationalistic territorial theme, but a way of relating to the world, a fair-use principle within ecosystems. These films suggest that independence movements forgot to decolonize lands and farmers, that the dismantling of colonial forms of ownership and the transition to national ownership failed with regard to the users of the land, those who work it.

Safi Faye's film condemns while trying to preserve and leave traces. Though she did not grow up in the village she films, it is her family's village. She filmed it with wide shots, showing places from a certain distance. Is this distance her own or an anthropological distance accompanied by a desire to encompass a whole?

Haile Gerima's *Harvest: 3000 Years* calls for revolt and joins forces with the protagonists and the humus, but with no possibility of acting from a distance. These films make a return to a place of origin. But this return is not an essentialist one, and is only made through a diffraction, the distorted mirror of a disappropriation, and a distancing of the author before the films are written.

I see your return — after a detour through Europe — as an Afrofuturist one. You had not originally planned a return to your homes, but rather a pan-African return to an emigration junction; it was a return to ancestral practices, to customs, those of subsistence farming, but all of this was also diffracted and transformed. In short, it was a return to the future in forms needing experimentation and regeneration. Your return was undertaken in a heterochronic, multi-situated relationship to technologies and was not positivist or exclusively local. No spacecraft was needed to leave. A few plane tickets and a canvas-covered Peugeot 404 were quite enough. Nor did you need a tractor to work the land; you could initially make do with animal traction and pairs of Hồ Chí Minh sandals to walk the land and not damage the soil. You had to assess what could be done so that the cooperative project could self-regenerate and remain neither a revolutionary utopia that is constantly postponed nor the dystopia of planned rural exodus. Could we speak of a realistic Afrofuturism, if this is not an oxymoron?

The flashbacks in *Safrana* while you are on your way to the countryside, and the wait for your departure once you were with the farmers — which did not appear in the film — reinforce this dual projection into the past and future. The fictional account of the cooperative was written based on a reconsideration of your past as immigrant workers and farmers, in order to navigate into future.



Film stills from *Trop tôt, trop tard* [Too Early, Too Late] by Danièle Huillet & Jean-Marie Straub, 1980.



Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

Irrigating and Filming

During an interview conversation with Elke Marhöfer and Mikhail Lylov in 2012 about the film *Trop tôt, trop tard* [Too Early, Too Late], Jean-Marie Straub¹³ spoke of how it was possible to link irrigation to the moment in filmmaking when one finds one's point of view for a take.

“This phrase, ‘the viewpoint of the take’, bothered me. The take is the result, and the viewpoint is what one searches for in order to achieve that result. And that involves driving around the village a lot, going up and then going down until one finds that spot from where one can simply see something. Where one sees something. It’s important to repeat that. And then one discovers that in a village the search often ends where the water tower stands, for needless to say the water can be fed to the entire locality. And the standpoint from where the locality can be supplied with water just also happens to be the filmmaker’s standpoint, who is likewise attempting to show an entirety. Hence the take of a village then operates like an irrigation system. And Brecht would say: What one films then belongs to the irrigators. What one reveals belongs to the irrigators; the world belongs to the irrigators. But that is humbug.”

The image ecosystem, the kaleidoscopic geometry of viewpoints and filming technologies connect and find affinity with the riverside ecosystem and with irrigation technologies. You were told that here, never in human memory had the river run dry or overflowed its banks.

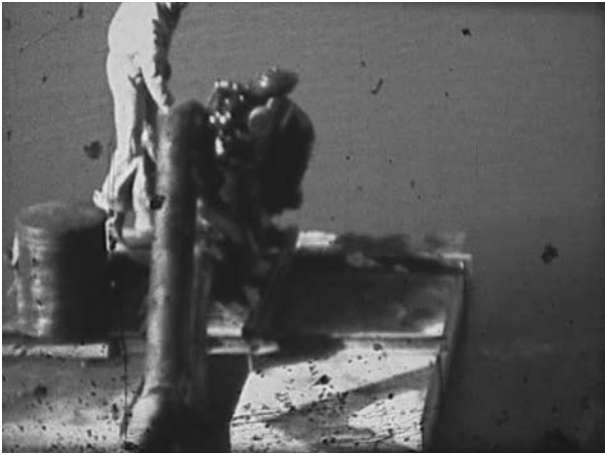
In images produced at the Somankidi Coura cooperative, one finds an intersection between the viewpoint of the take and the irrigation system. The collective pump on the riverbank and the redistribution basin seem to attract all of the image producers who visit the cooperative. The irrigation system supports and structures its partisan's filming process. The partisan must change his production system to support the irrigators. Instead of an affiliation and a take, it is a mutual affinity that links their perspectives to the irrigation.

French farmers visiting the cooperative in 1977 — the same ones who hosted ACTAF's 14 members in Champagne for agricultural training before their departure to Mali — filmed the irrigation system, the canal and the collective pump with their 8mm camera similarly to how I was to film it thirty years later: one sees the same analytical shots following the trajectory of the water from the Senegal River to the pump, from the pump to the distribution basin, from the basin to the canal, from the canal to the furrows, from the furrows to the seeds. You also photographed these same places year after year: the German Lister 3 pump that Ladjji Niangané brought back from Dakar, the distribution basin that you built with Siré Soumaré, the canal made of termite mound soil making the first irrigations possible, the banks and riverside inhabitants, the water. Your images have a duration that the others lack. Your shots accompany the time of the seasons through the years.

Is the complete take evoked by Straub a panopticon? It entails responsibility on the part of the photographer, like that of the irrigators. But although this take is partial, producing a partial perspective,¹⁴ the linking of several takes produces diffractions. And in the absurd game evoked by Straub in reference to Brecht, belonging is always postponed and recomposed. Would the world not belong to the light-diffracting water rather than to the irrigators?

13 *Standpunkt der Aufnahme/Point of view*, edited by Tobias Hering, Archive Books, 2013.

14 Donna Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges : The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspectives,’ *Feminist Studies* 14.3 (1988).



8mm film stills from 1979, *Somankidi Coura*, Mali, by Monique Janson.



Video stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

Figuring Fallow Time – Part Two



The Senegal river and the collective water pump of the agricultural cooperative of Somankidi Coura, Mali, 1989. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Video stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.



Irrigation of the gardens, Somankidi Coura, Mali, March 1979. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

Transitional Infrastructure

The village of Samé, across from the cooperative, was founded in 1906¹⁵ on the Diakhandapé sisal plantation during the colonial period, to accommodate forced laborers from Haute-Volta. After independence, a Rural Group was built on its ruins. Under the dictatorship, this was turned into an agronomic training center. The UNDP invested a few years there. Fula herdsmen and their cattle cross the ruins to reach the river, using some of them as enclosures. Temporary peasant-workers find refuge there for the season. You were given lands on the other side of the river.

Well before independence, the cooperative movement had long been discussed as a potential driving force for the economic and social development of future socialist African nations.¹⁶ It was based on the idea of a proto-socialism in the very organization of the villages.

The new independent states attempted to break up the cast system that had been manipulated by the colonial power, which had appointed “indigenous” chiefs as intermediaries between the colonists and peasants, trying to establish a direct connection with the producers — yourselves, the peasants. This gave rise to the Rural Groups in Modibo Keïta’s Mali. These state cooperatives represented a desire to perfect “cooperation, a path to a regenerated African humanism” (Mamadou Dia, 1952), a form of socialism with no labor class.



Film still from *Happiness*
by Aleksandr Medvedkin, 1935.



Film still from *Trop tôt, trop tard* [Too Early, Too Late] by Danièle Huillet & Jean-Marie Straub, 1980.

I like to think that the cooperative, whose founding members were originally from Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mauritania, was an association-scale reconstruction of the transitional infrastructure of the short-lived Mali Federation, which, in 1960 at the time of independence, only existed for a few months before being dissolved. It included Mali, Senegal, Benin and Burkina Faso. It was a tangible if ephemeral product of the pan-Africanist project. Independence elites were themselves unable to regenerate pan-African themes and resist nationalist models. Your project was aimed not at one specific country, but at a rural Africa that knew emigration, drought and rivers.

When you arrived in Somankidi in 1976, Modibo Keïta had been in prison ever since the military coup orchestrated by Moussa Traoré in 1968. He was to die a few years later. The state had started withdrawing the application of agricultural policies even if food self-sufficiency continued to be invoked as a reason of state. This withdrawal became even more brutal and accelerated when democracy returned with the neoliberal policies of Alpha Oumar Konaré and the IMF. However, in the beginning, the cooperative benefited from Modibo Keïta’s agricultural infrastructure and the socialist solidarity that had endured under the dictatorship. You told me that some of the few agricultural trainers who came to give you a hand at the very beginning had been trained in eastern countries.

15 See the 2008 interview with Ousmane Sinaré in this volume.

16 Mamadou Dia wrote his contribution to the study of the cooperative movement in black Africa from 1952.



F.A.O. billboard in the ruins of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation, 2017.



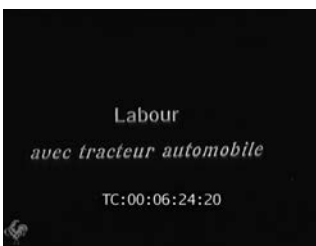
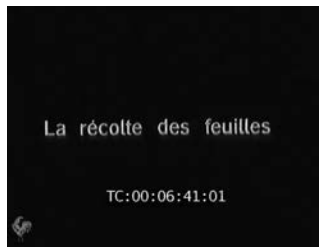
Termites in the ruins of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation buildings.

Children playing in the ruins of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation.

Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.



Mali Federation stamp, 1960.



In 2017, the private archive company Pathé-Gaumont, that owns the most significant French colonial film archive, demanded fees of 200 €/min. (for films over 5 min.) and 300 €/min. (for films under 5 min.) to screen them without a time-code in an educational context.

The Drought's Image Factory

The drought in the Sahel and the images it produced, contributed to accelerating and developing new forms of solidarity, humanitarianism and governmentality disconnected from political states.¹⁷ This was before the IMF's reconstruction plans and the NGOs' neoliberal models of the 1980s. I looked into this production on the sidelines of my research. The TV images coming from the Sahel, combined with the letters and stories of your close relations, had accelerated the decision to return. In those images, I saw the continuity of colonial infrastructures, but also the emergence of a range of farmer alliances and attempts to decolonize the new developmentalist paradigm in the context of the emergence of a radical ecology.

A 1919 colonial propaganda film entitled *Géographie* contains a few shots of the Diakhandapé sisal plantation,¹⁸ across from the current cooperative. The film inspects regions of French West Africa the way one inspects subordinate troops, or components of an assemblage before creating a montage, going from picturesque sites and local festivities to industry and transport infrastructures, in order to promote the “modernizing mission” of the colonial project. A panoramic shot shows an expanse of agave crops. Does this also correspond to the irrigation system's redistribution point on the plantation? A tractor conspicuously passes in front of the camera, then we see the painful, barehanded harvest, the drying and defibration of the plant by forced laborers. The intertitles reinforce the already palpable intentionality in the shots. We see these same images in a variety of other colonial promotion films, framed by other intertitles, none of which references the filming site in this case.

The sisal seeds were imported to Africa from Mexico by German and French biologists in the late nineteenth century. After being dried and defibrated, the sisal from the plantation was sent to Saint-Louis by river or to Dakar by train, then turned into rope by laborers in factories in The Havre. Another film by Pathé,¹⁹ taking the same approach of describing a production process, revealed the female laborers' working conditions, which were similar to those of the plantation's forced laborers.

The colonial film archive and the 8mm films shot by French farmers at the cooperative in 1977 and 1979 share certain features: their travel stories, their picturesque quality and the exoticism of certain shots. Also similar is their descriptive analysis of technology — the production of the sisal plantation on the one hand, and that of the irrigation system on the other, both recorded on celluloid.

But between these two approaches, there is a transition from the glorification of an intensive, dominant colonial monoculture based on forced labor, to support for diversified subsistence agriculture; a transition from a developmentalist propaganda subjugated by colonial industrial capitalism, to a form of partnership in a development process that attempts to become

17 Gregory Mann, 2015. *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel. The Road to Nongovernmentality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

18 Gaumont Pathé Archives 1920PGHI 00461: *Géographie, sous la direction de Maurice Fallex Professeur agrégé au Lycée Louis le Grand – Afrique Occidentale Française / Zone soudanienne / Le Haut Sénégal*.

19 *La ficelle pour moissonneuse lieuse* / Gaumont Pathé Archives PR 1924 52 1.





Dry bed of the Senegal River, Somankidi Coura,
Mali, January 1977. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

decolonized and durable. We see the transition from death technology to creolized technology, from the so-called educational films of a paternalist state to loving amateur film.²⁰ Between these two sequences, missionaries from the colonial period turned into reformed Third-Worldists.²¹ In the 1970s, points of agreement on action strategies emerged between these Third-Worldists and certain anti-imperialist movements. “They are working in concert, with a common goal: to help demonstrate the links between the countries of the North and South, and above all, to devise forms of intervention that provide fulcrums to effectively change the course of events here and over there.”

The history of the cooperative’s collaboration with its partners stems from these convergences. Perhaps your partnerships with the La Cimade, the CCFD and ACCIR, whose members were to film you, would never have come into being without your shared interest in the new battlefield presented by the drought, with all its political, ecological and logistical consequences here and over there.²²

You were convinced that the 1973 drought and famine in the Sahel were a direct consequence of colonization and its continuation through cooperation between France and Africa. You were not alone. Sally N’Dongo, UGTSTF and the group Révolution Afrique held the same view.

INA archives show post-drought cloud seeding by the French army over the Sahel under the aegis of the ministry of collaboration. The commentary has the same tone as the colonial propaganda film.²³ This time, it explains the process of cloud seeding with sodium chloride over the Sahel. Whereas the United States and other countries reacted to the drought quickly through the soft power of NGOs like USAid, Africare and Rains (Gregory Mann, p. 175), in France only left-wing solidarity groups like AFASPA did the same, not, however, without paternalism. The filming of cloud seeding was a communication gesture by the French authorities that was late with regard to the famine.²⁴

In response to the promotion of geoengineering in time of crisis, new necropolitics emerged, that of images of famine orchestrated by directors of mass-media publications. Images of undernourished children (the same type of iconography used during the Biafran War of 1967-1970) and of columns of refugees were to be the stock in trade of many of the NGOs that have come into being between then and now. This pornography of misery,²⁵ the return of an infantilizing narrative about the continent’s populations after the liberation struggles, rekindled the anti-colonial war on the territory of images.

20 See note 4.

21 France’s most progressive Third-Worldist organizations were La Cimade, which had supported Algerian independence, and the CCFD (Comité Catholique contre la faim et pour le développement / Catholic Committee Against Hunger and for Development) founded in 1961, which had produced a multiform critique of several reasons for the drought and famine in the Sahel.

22 Philippe Malvé, *La naissance du “Tiers-mondisme” en France, campagne contre la faim et solidarité avec le Tiers-monde* / Revue Tricontinental, Famines et pénuries, 1982, Maspero collection. p.107.

23 See note 18.

24 Cloud seeding was first tested by the United States before the Second World War in secret military programs, with the goal of potentially using it as a weapon. France was promoting war weapons as development tools after decades of soil exhaustion through intensive farming on plantations in the colonies.

25 Luis Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, Film *Agarrando Pueblo*, 1977.



Our Africa, Debates on the Third World, by The General Union of Senegalese Workers in France (UGTSF).



TV news from the ORTF, April 6, 1974, INA archives.



Still from *Ici et Ailleurs* [Here and Elsewhere], by Jean-Luc Godard, Anne-Marie Miéville and Jean Pierre Gorin, 1976.

You told me that these images upset you, but not in the same way as the family in *Ici et ailleurs* [Here and Elsewhere] by Godard, Miéville and Gorin. I would argue that it was against this image regime that you, Bouba, fought with your camera and your very few rolls of film, in order to open the possibility of other images of Africa in the time of famines, single-party governments and civil wars.

I would mention a third archive in this production of images of the drought: amateur 8mm films again,²⁶ this time made by Larzac farmers during the 1974 Harvest Festival, organized in “solidarity with the Third World”. This was the largest demonstration held on the Larzac Plateau in the movement’s ten-year existence from 1971 to 1981. The Larzac struggle is the story of a farmer alliance that succeeded in aggregating a broad spectrum of other struggles in France and abroad, a loose conglomeration of leftist groups — LIP laborers, immigrant workers, conscientious objectors, and budding radical environmentalists²⁷ — to stop a military base from expanding onto agricultural lands. This movement shared the immigrant workers’ view that the 1973 drought and famine were a consequence of post-colonial cooperation between France and the Sahelian countries. The wheat collected during the 1973 Harvest Festival was taken to a country in the Sahel by farmers from the Plateau. You preferred to grow it yourselves. Yes, this symbolic gesture was clumsy and paternalistic. This same plateau was where the farmer confederation was launched in 1987, a farmers’ union that would later ally with landless farmers in Brazil and jointly organize the first anti-globalization and anti-GMO demonstrations in the 1990s. You were on the plateau in 1973 with three other members of ACTAF. You had jumped on the bus with the Communist Party delegation. Your friend and ally Sally N’Dongo gave a speech to the dense crowd covering the plateau. Were you there as representatives of the immigrant workers’ struggles, or already as activist farmers?

I like those images because they remind me of the amateur footage by the French farmers who filmed the foundation of the cooperative. Also because Larzac’s climate, topology, soil and vegetation remind me of those in Somankidi Coura. This is nothing like the revolutionary fable *How Yukong Moved the Mountains*, cited by Mao in his speech and by Joris Ivens in his film on the Cultural Revolution. We are more in the territory of *Nos peuples sont nos montagnes* by Amílcar Cabral. The geological strata of the karstic plateau are visible on the dolomitic peaks that loom up from the site where the conglomeration of groups and protestors have assembled. The plateau becomes a stage just as much as it stages the protestors. Its fragile soil becomes the center of a political activity. The state did not appreciate the value of this land and wanted to claim it in order to shock it with bombs and artillery. The farmers of the plateau wanted to care for it, plough it.

26 These archives were used in the film *La Lutte du Larzac*, 2003, by Philippe Cassard (<https://archive.org/details/La.Lutte.du.Larzac>).

27 I am thinking of the group *Survivre et Vivre*, co-founded by mathematician Alexander Grothendieck.



"Decolonize the earth"
 "Peasant, laborers, french, immigrants, united in the struggles..."
 "Peasant workers"
 "The soil to the ones who cultivate it."
 "Peasants = Life. Army ???"

Stills from 8mm amateur films shot by Larzac peasant activists during the Third World Harvest in 1973 (excerpt from *La Lutte du Larzac*, 1996).



Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008,
by Raphaël Grisey.

Termites

You used termite mound soil to build the cooperative's first irrigation canal. An instructor had suggested using it. Was that a regional practice, a situated knowledge, or was it a multi-situated knowledge and technology, repeated and validated in training from state instructors? The termites' galleries live alongside the irrigation systems, the infrastructures of the ancestors' world, the former networks of the state agricultural cooperatives and the more autonomous ones that you were in the process of spreading in the region. This cohabitation was not without unexpected developments, and it became complicated when the termites ate your first houses.

During my first shoot for the film *Cooperative*, I wanted to show the destruction of a termite mound by a peasant-worker on a banana plantation, with permission from the owner of the field, in order to capture the things you had done when settling. The peasant-worker did not want to dig to the bottom. At that moment, you emerged from an adjacent field to tell me to stop. We decided to film our discussion next to the termite mound.

I learned that a local belief prohibited digging to the bottom of a termite mound where the queen lives; as long as the queen has not been destroyed, the termite mound can be regenerated. Mady Niakhaté, the owner of the field, was unconvinced that this regeneration was useful in his field. In your view, the fact that termite mounds are inhabited by djinns, and that one therefore does not touch them in practice, was an example of the ecological foundations of local knowledge. In our discussion, there was no clear line between what belonged to the realms of life and nonlife, and initially I did not understand this ancestors' ecology. I had been mistaken in naively believing that a recreation of the destruction of a termite mound in front of the camera could become a motif in the film evoking the technological interdependence with termites, with the small lumps of impermeable soil that Bakhoré Bathily had mentioned to me in an interview a few days earlier.

Mady Niakhaté later explained to me that termite mound earth is alive because nothing grows on it. Termite mound earth comes from the depths, below the thin layer of arable earth on the surface. It is a clay soil that lives, unlike dead soil made of decomposing matter, humus. The man who had authorized me to destroy the termite mound saw life in the clay soil without mentioning that of the termites.

People from neighboring villages recognized that you had powers which enabled you to touch the termite mound, to settle amid the djinns. You had shifted the line between life and nonlife, merely in the time it had taken you to settle between a geosystem and an ecosystem.

It is on this line that Elizabeth Povinelli defines a *geontological power*,²⁸ a power that, beyond or through biopower, defines, in its own interests, the strict limit between life (ontology) and nonlife (geo), enabling a distinction to be made between those who believe and those who know. A distinction of colonial authority. "*The attribution of an inability of various colonized people to differentiate the kinds of things that have agency, subjectivity, and intentionality of the sort that emerge with life has been the grounds for casting them into a premodern mentality and a postrecognition difference.*"²⁹

28 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism*, Duke University Press.

29 Ibid p. 5.

It is this *geontological* power that validated the exhaustion of plantation land, and at the same time relegated all situated knowledges to the realm of beliefs during the colonial period. You used it carefully when considering various agencies.

You uprooted all of the trees on the 25-hectare savanna you had developed. Then you proceeded to plant fruit trees around the fields and along the banks. You transformed a savannah ecosystem into an ecosystem of gardens and fallow land. A satellite view of the cooperative shows an oasis of green along the river. One would need to travel a long way downriver to find others. The cooperative is fighting against deforestation. The lack of trees is accelerating erosion along the river during the rainy season, but most importantly it is impoverishing the soil. Trees prevent desert dust and sand from accumulating in the fields. It is that same Sahelian dust that the winds carry to the Amazon in drought years, fertilizing it with phosphorous particles.³⁰

The cooperative's plan was to get distant geosystems and ecosystems to play off one another on interconnected local levels—those of struggles, images, plants and soils. I am not in a position to quantify them. I do not wish to define their value based on their quantity or scarcity, but rather attempt to present them in an intensity regime in the public realm, and include their quality in a total value.³¹

Regeneration

One morning in 1982, the cooperative experienced a pepper strike. Goundo Kamissokho, Ndiaye Diaby, Souaré Samassa Diaby, Dado Niangané, Fune Niakhaté and the women of Somankidi Coura refused to harvest peppers as long as they were not given their own plots to cultivate. Goundo Kamissokho was delegated the task of negotiating with the president of the cooperative. The members gave them plots of land to develop, as well as full member status. But the cooperative was not providing them with the forum for dialogue they needed³² so they preferred to become autonomous, organizing themselves into a women's association while continuing to collaborate with the men. Goundo Kamissokho, who is now a representative of Mali's female farmer associations, told me that the vast majority of the members of the cooperatives, groups and associations that now make up the Union régionale des coopératives agricoles (URCAK / Regional Union of Agricultural Cooperatives) are women. The women's association in Somankidi Coura has collective fields, and it jointly manages its finances and harvests. They have adopted the practices that the unmarried founders used upon their arrival, but abandoned after starting families.

30 Comment le Sahara nourrit l'Amazonie (2015, March 2). Available here: https://www.sciencesetavenir.fr/nature-environnement/comment-le-sahara-nourrit-l-amazonie_14856

31 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "(life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value" in *e-flux journal* #79 – February 2017.

32 See interview with Goundo Kamissokho Niakhaté in this volume.



Magasin of the cooperative of Somankidi Coura in the market of the city of Kayes, Mali. Stills from *Cooperative*, 2008, by Raphaël Grisey.

The irrigated farming that you were among the first to practice became commonplace, and the technique was shared throughout the region. This transmission was helped by Radio Rurale de Kayes, the region's first free radio station, which you founded in 1988 through URCAK. It also broadcast in Senegal, Mauritania and Mali.

Seed farming, one of the cooperative's main activities, became necessary in the war against the patented seeds of multinationals, which proliferated in the 1980s. URCAK became one of the region's main producers of seeds for farms, ensuring that seeds were diverse and accessible. Some of you got involved in regional and national chambers of agriculture as representatives or coordinators. Others became active defending farm seeds in the Sahel against GMOs, their patents and the seed legislation supporting them.

A principle of regeneration defined the cooperative. It was necessary that the pattern could be seen, multiplied and reappropriated, from different connected partial perspectives, carefully and without hasty reproduction.

Public Spaces and Species

The images, the situated knowledges that I discovered and that were appearing to me, became part of my experience and understanding. This might explain my enthusiasm and my urgent desire to show these reservoirs of images and narratives, and to extend it to the consideration of other films, other archives (whether activist or colonial). This also made me understand your composure, Bouba, the composure of someone who has been circulating these images from one close friend to another for a long time, in a fluid group of transmission spaces.

But there was a trap in this urgency. The very principle of collections and archives is also tangled up in colonial history, in taxonomy, typology and racialization, all of which required attention. The categorization systems, terminologies and vocabularies needed to be redefined.

These soils, these images could not be cared for through hasty seeding that would destroy the systems. Fallow time had to be considered. Fallow time is not a time of rest, waste or abandonment, but one of regular plowing, which is at the heart of agropastoral farming. This was the misunderstanding that underpinned colonial agronomy and its intensification of production through the concentrated use of artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Its negation, its exclusion from the colonial universal value, and from the ecologies giving rise to images, generated the demand for life to spring from the soil—a selected, exclusive life—and for the accelerated circulation and hypervisibility of images.³³

When a photographic emulsion or a soil has been overdeveloped or poorly developed, it darkens and becomes impoverished. The black box of digital image processing and its algorithms, the patents of GMO seeds, can

33 But plowing also has to be carried out in relation to the qualities of the soil.

Overplowing led to the *Dust Bowl* in North America in the 1930s, plunging the world into its first major economic and ecological crisis.

reproduce colonial development myths if one is not paying attention. One must open those boxes, find farm seeds in them and do the painstaking work of understanding, redefining and transforming the technologies.

The contents of those reservoirs called for attention to their fallow period. Digitizing archive images was not the equivalent of making them hypervisible and accelerating their circulation. Thought needed to be given to the form and conditions of their apparition in public space.

Public space as defined by Hannah Arendt is a space of deliberation and action, free from subjection to necessity.³⁴ But freeing oneself from subjection to necessity in order to achieve “pure” action is no easy task: it is a matter of intervening in public space and having a hold over it. Sidney Sokhona’s two films accurately portray how difficult it was for immigrant workers to situate their struggle in this space.

Public space is subject to an appropriation and a doxa. It is not easy to find the public space that suits us, a common space where one can take action without being relegated to the status of an immigrant in your case, or in my case without inadvertently finding myself in the position of the positivistic philanthropist showing solidarity, the country priest. This requires soil, reservoirs and refuges, which one must take care of in the fallow ecology.

Once, over a meal, you told us a story about being questioned by the police in the Paris metro. A policeman asks for your residence permit. You reply that you do not have one. The policeman is insistent and you confirm you have no residence permit. He asks you to follow him to the police station. You comply. In front of the station, the officer rephrases his question: so you don’t have your residence permit? Again, you reply that you do not. “You have no papers? No papers at all?”. You reply: “Yes, I have my identity card. But that’s not what you asked for”. The policeman is surprised and disconcerted. You press the point: “You asked for my residence permit and not my identity card, right?”. You often tell many variations of this story, which draws uneasy laughter from your listeners. You grab the police’s ordinary racism by the horns and take it to the police station to explain yourself. I hope the policeman remembers you. We have not forgotten him because he is still there, representing order and moral values in the racist and insidious public space.

This reminds me of the struggles in the hostels, and especially the temerity and logic of your resolution to return. You had confidence in the future and there are always ways to awaken people’s consciousness. You forwent all of the action modes preached by the left, following a trajectory that no one was expecting. Your work’s public space is the kind in which this type of action is possible. It is an action that redefines migration in the migrants’ own words, and reveals the brutality of migration policies and structural racism. I am once again thinking of Hannah Arendt and her text *We Refugees*, and of how the racialization of your skin complicated the possibility of action in public space.

³⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, 70.



Bouba Touré, antifascist demonstration, Berlin, May 1, 2011. Photograph by Raphaël Grisey.



Celebration of the communist federation of the Gard region, 1981, Le Vigan. Photograph by Bouba Touré.



Demonstration in support to the Nationalist Liberation Socialist Kanak Front (FLNKS) with Jean Marie Tjibaou, Paris, February 1985. Photograph by Bouba Touré.

You abhor the word “*sans-papiers*” [“person without papers”], and when talking about hostel residents, you refuse to make any distinction between those who have papers and those who do not. You are all together; some people just have administrative problems to resolve, and need a hand. This category, which appeared when migrant policy was being toughened, only atomized the migrant struggles. You also noticed that the history of these struggles was being transmitted neither in migrant communities nor in the villages. When spokespeople for *sans-papiers* received their papers, they often abandoned the coordinated effort, the collective. New arrivals reproduce the gestures of the generation that fell silent.

Similarly, the sub-Saharan immigrant workers’ movement was often dissociated from that of the North African immigrant workers, because they were staggered over time as a result of migration policies that segmented struggles and categorized identities that had already been established by colonial policies. This reservoir and archive constituted by your images and by those films are also a refuge from which one can criticize systems of national belonging and insistence on integration and assimilation, as well as deadly reproductions of paternalist systems.

As you say in your film, you join all kinds of demonstrations, all kinds of struggles: every year you support Gay Pride, attend the political meetings of the African opponents you defend, and support the struggle against raising the age of retirement. We ran and hopped over the low walls of Berlin’s Schrebergarten alongside hooded anti-fascists dressed in black to try and stop a neo-Nazi march on the first of May. You spent a lot of time at the Nuits Debouts, which piqued your curiosity. At *sans-papiers* occupations everyone knows you. You were an enthusiastic supporter of the Kanak independence movement. And for some time you have been going to see the refugees at La Chapelle every day, trying to penetrate the language barrier.

How can all the encounters along your path be characterized? Ours and the many others that have punctuated the return journeys of your life? As Jared Sexton said on the subject of coalitions, to speak of alliance means to take the risk of always returning to “a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition.” Does that mean it is necessary, as Wilderson says, “to shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun we”?³⁵

You have had a variety of experiences of this *we*: first that of ACTAF, itself part of the *we* of the solidarity movement against the Portuguese colonies. The radical Left’s alliance with immigrant workers was sometimes more complicated than it appeared. The pervasive paternalism, indeed the racism of French laborers prevented the emergence of a lasting *we*. Was ACTAF’s use of premises belonging to the CGT an act of pragmatism or an alliance? As Fred Moten asked in a very different context, was it about pillaging critical institutions?³⁶



“A police state does not advance France” Pantin, France, 2013, still (rushes).

35 Jared Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word,” in *Rhizomes* Issue 29, 2016. <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue29/sextton.html>.

36 Fred Moten / Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, London: Minor Compositions, 26.

You recently criticized me for placing too much emphasis on the ambiguities within solidarity movements. Sidney Sokhona's radical analysis in his films and interviews made me pay attention to this, and it reflected the risks that my own practice could encounter. You instead stress the transformative encounters that shaped you at every stage of the path you followed: the stranger by the river who told you that you too would go to France but differently from your ancestors, the French laborer at Usines Chausson with whom you compared pay slips, who convinced you of the need for common political action demanding "equal pay for equal work". They were regenerated affinities defined in words that were your own, which did not reproduce oppressive categories. In your relationship with the French farmers in Marne, was *ours* a question of kinship, filiation, friendship or affinity? There was a spirit of cooperation, and emotions that went beyond mere alliance. A duration, a permanence also — a permaculture.

Filiation does not correlate with transmission. Some things are unsaid and you are well-placed to know it. Friendships and affinities make possible a transmission, a refuge, a "*debt without creditor*," without intercessor, "*debt as its own principle*."³⁷

This is surely where our practices in this project intersect: moving forward with the knowledge and debts of past struggles, so that certain conclusions can be drawn, and errors avoided. If nothing is left behind and everything is left behind, how can this observation make the lines move? The fugitive day-to-day lives of *sans-papiers* and of many migrants, their resistance to migration management policies recall the preservation of the ontological totality³⁸ that the salve system was unable to include, the runaway, the liberated slave, what remains, the irreducibility and sensuality of social noise.³⁹ It would also be a mistake to think of these alliances in terms of simultaneity and synchronization. One cannot consider the decolonial project without examining its heterochronies, the conflicts of one generation and the question of whether or not they were taken into account by another generation.

The patriarchal colonial system, migration management and its counterpart in the traditionalist system reproduce oppressions and allocated roles (the child sent to migrate, the girl married too young, etc...). Your photographic practice and the cooperative create transmission spaces where (agri)culture and education advance together without severance, without division. Your reservoir irrigates memory to link gestures and temporalities, echoing the irrigation of the fields, the collusion between the river and the people. Its permanence, its insistence reflect the continuity of oppressions and of these resistances in a twofold movement. As Denise Ferreira da Silva says,⁴⁰ your practice endeavors to escape modernist thought's triad

37 Ibid, p.66.

38 Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism – The Making of a Black Radical Tradition*, UNC Press.

39 Fred Moten & Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*, Minor Composition Press.

40 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "(life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value" in *e-flux journal* #79, February 2017.

of *determinacy*, *separability* and *sequentiality*, to escape the violence inflicted on racialized people in the indifferent ethics of public morality. Your recent images of refugees who have spent years sleeping on the streets of La Chapelle in Paris provides us with an insistent reminder of this.

The creativity produced by migration must be placed at the center of political practices, constitutions and jurisprudence, shielded from migrant management and forced labor. We try to do it in our infrastructures of affinity. We must try to do it without idealizing, without minimizing or equating the different types of violence that can precede and drive a certain type of migration. Placing multi-situated knowledges at the heart of one's attention can produce relationships with people, connections that make it possible to redistribute these linguistic, racial, religious, national and class categories, to make them complex, multifarious and inseparable.

Action in public space is limited if it only concerns humans or life. To this *ontological totality*, the people of the river add a consideration of a decolonized agronomy, of knowledge that connects understanding of both plants and soils, the worlds of life and nonlife, with a view to a regenerated permanence. The cooperative's project contains the idea of the work to be done so that the earth endures. It defines a project based not on the principle of extracting nonlife and life, but on that of building and taking care of new connected geosystems and ecosystems.

» See Page 31 for
Figuring Fallow Time
– Part One



Bld de La Chapelle, Paris,
October 11, 2016.

Avenue des Flandres,
October 31, 2016.

Photographs by Bouba Touré.