

Hamedine Kane, Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro, Olivia Anani, and Lou Mo

# We Are the Ambassadors of the Blurred Mirages of Lands that Never Fully Materialized (About the School of Mutants)

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e-flux journal #114 — december 2020 **Hamedine Kane, Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro, Olivia Anani, and Lou Mo**  
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Around three years ago, Senegal announced the creation of a new oil and gas institute, in the unfinished buildings of the University of the African Future. Such a statement produces too many dissonant chords to be ignored. It asks to be explored with regards to what it relays to us about future politics.

Activists and civil society organizations in Senegal have continued to warn against recent large-scale offshore gas discoveries and the current government's exploration policy. Massive corruption scandals have already broken out at the highest levels of the state, signaling ominous prospects in the country's shift towards a predatory petrocracy. In addition to that sinister horizon in the future, this story brings back past complexities of now-forgotten grand visions proclaimed by the previous government at the turn of the century: a pan-African university with international outreach, that would be linked to leading global institutions via the new network technologies of the World Wide Web.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, as African countries declared their independence and became members of the United Nations, two different Chinas – the nationalist government of Taiwan and the communist government of mainland China – began a race for allies on the African continent. The University of the African Future (UAF), initiated as one of president Abdoulaye Wade's electoral promises, was co-funded by many African states and the Republic of Taiwan as part of these diplomatic efforts. Since the early 2000s, the brutalist campus has been left unfinished in the middle of the Sébikotane Baobab forest, in the rural outskirts of Dakar, with its inverted pyramid and enigmatic neo-Sudanese structures designed by Senegalese architect Pierre Goudiaby Atepa. The futuristic concrete pyramid, which would have housed the university's library, still acts like a spell charming many Senegalese people.

Like history, geography stutters, repeating itself.

The spectral constructions of UAF sit next to another ruin of past pan-African idealist futures: the William Ponty Normal School, which was transferred from Gorée Island to Sébikotane in the 1930s. William Merlaud-Ponty was a French colonial governor: the colonizer's academic instrument to train local administrators. Some of the brilliant students, recruited across all of West Africa, would become independence leaders, heads of state, and radical pan-Africanists – colonial mutants, in a sense. It has been said that their revolutionary mindset caused the school's exile out of Dakar. However, Gorée, the slave island – a place of geographical efficiency, natural beauty, and indelible suffering – remained a harbor for

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The uncompleted campus library of the University of African Future. Copyright: Hamedine Kane & Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro.





École Normale William Ponty. Film still. Copyright: Hamedine Kane & Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro.



Lighthouse built by inhabitants and activists of the Notre-Dame-Des-Landes, ZAD. Film still. Copyright: Hamedine Kane & Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro.

African unity and the political elaboration of futurity. In the late 1970s, towards the end of Léopold Sédar Senghor's presidency, which lasted twenty-one years, the University of Mutants was founded on the island. Today, in the derelict colonial palace that housed this short-lived pedagogic experiment, dusty reports on various cultural and political matters written by researchers from all over the continent and Europe bear witness to Senghor's promise of a "dialogue between cultures." The building is now occupied by people of Gorée, which echoes the repurposing of the Ponty School ruins by a local beekeeper who installed his beehives in the theater hall: gestures of pragmatic appropriation more eloquent than any commentary on the politics of palimpsest.

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To build its legitimacy, each government ridicules the programs of prior administrations. Through such a practice, they erase and rewrite the urban landscape. They multiply the "ruins of utopia."<sup>1</sup> A few kilometers away from the UAF carcass, the current government has started building another university, as part of a new "smart city" powered by speculative private-public investments. This gigantic neoliberal construction project is causing the mass eviction of community farmers and the ecocidal destruction of the Sébikotane forest. Construction has been halted for months, breaking the promises made to the Senegalese youth who demand better access to higher education. That youth seems fated to yet another obsolete future.

### Filming in a Dominated Land

The School of Mutants is a multidisciplinary, collaborative platform that set out in 2018 to revisit and amplify these interwoven histories. Through archive research, fieldwork, and public assemblies, our investigation into intertwined structures of knowledge, power, and architecture in post-independence Senegal attempts to grasp the inaccessible and indefinite time and space of postcolonial futures. It does so in alliance with the territory and the inhabitants of Sébikotane and Diamniadio, by gathering under the "palaver tree" to share past memories and present-day concerns about the privatization of land and the struggles against it. From this starting point, ruins become vehicles to collect counter-narratives of resistance and anti-imperialism, and connect with other post-Cold War peripheries.

Who mutates, and where? Beyond Senghor's vision, the pattern of mutation – the sudden, discontinuous appearance of a new genetic feature, a novel character within a group –

irrigates postindependence literature. Nigel Gibson traces the appearance of "radical mutation" in Frantz Fanon's late writings as part of a broader, emerging reflection on the postcolonial.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ki-Zerbo, coauthor of the *General History of Africa*,<sup>3</sup> called on Africans to "mutate or perish" by means of a nonaligned crusade against "the golden calf of quantitative productivism,"<sup>4</sup> linking mutation to ecological concerns. Almost contemporaneously, Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik traveled across Brazil to meet activists and autonomous groups, encountering what they called "collective modes of enunciation" that actualized "mutant virtualities."<sup>5</sup> At the sci-fi end of this literary spectrum, mutants recurrently appear in Octavia Butler's novels, as ambiguous agents of incomplete liberation. Mutating theories for mutating worlds.

If mutation is a nighttime journey of traveling theories,<sup>6</sup> we also try to shed light on what appear as dead ends and to see through wandering dreams by filming. In his novel *Écrire en pays dominé* (Writing in a dominated land), Patrick Chamoiseau asks: "How to write when your imagination is fed, from morning until dreaming, with images, thoughts, values that are not yours?"<sup>7</sup> But what can images do? What can a camera do?

In the ruins of UAF, Ponty, and the University of Mutants, our cameras wobble, they flicker. Such sensors are not equipped to surprise the magnetic trace or the elemental force – though it is a natural thing to be caught, seized by an external presence. We humans interact, construct, and speak of worlds according to our dispositions and the effect of others on ourselves. This trait of ours, which is sometimes called charm, is not restricted to living beings, whether human, plant, or animal. The vestiges of a past that does not entirely pass away are full of darkness; ruins confront us with the unfathomable.

The desire for new narratives, as well as for reconnection with sources from precolonial Africa, is perceptible among young people in Senegal and in Sébikotane in particular. They are opting and organizing to stay in Senegal, to keep inhabiting the territory, despite being confronted by all sorts of dangers that threaten, crush, and deny life every day. It is this permanent revolutionary future that we try to capture on film.

### Was Bandung All a Dream?

During the Jin Dynasty (fourth century CE), poet Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) imagined Peach Blossom Land: a utopian community sheltered from the world. In 1902, historian and philosopher Liang Qichao (梁啟超) wrote "The Future of New China"

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Assembly of African Futures. Copyright: Elise Fitte-Duval.



The forest near abandoned buildings of the National Taiwan Ocean University Campus in Keelung. Film still. Copyright: Hamedine Kane & Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro.



(□□□□□), a half-fictional, half-political story that predicted a prosperous, democratic New China would emerge in 1962. To try and change the social conditions of the present, the poetic mind invents and inhabits future worlds. But when parts of the present world become uninhabited by the mind, are they discarded to the oblivion of the past? As Taiwan's diplomatic history with African countries fades out in the blur of post-Cold War history, Africa recedes into an invisible geography in the Taiwanese popular imagination. With the percussion of Black Lives Matter protests resonating widely, it seems more important than ever to discuss race, Afro-Asian unity, and international relations instead of simplifying them to trivial cultural differences or claiming noninterference.

As the School of Mutants travels to the Taipei Biennial, our archeology of utopia continues. Comprised of archival materials, film, wood engravings of the Mutant Manifesto, and fabric pieces created by Nathalie Muchamad using traditional Indonesian batik techniques which became the famous African "wax" during the Dutch colonial period, our installation reactivates the UAF connection, and revisits the legacies of Afro-Asianism more broadly: Afro-Asian solidarity, the Tricontinental and Bandung conferences, and nonaligned trajectories.

Relations between Africa and Asia have been ongoing for a significant amount of time, with records of commercial interactions and intercontinental travels dating to as early as the eighth century.<sup>8</sup> The Chinese text *Youyang Zazu* (□□□□), an 853 CE compilation of short stories by the Tang Dynasty official, writer, and poet Duan Chengshi (□□□), contains what some believe to be a description of East Africa. Like many texts of the period, *Youyang Zazu* is an interesting amalgam of facts and hearsay, the result of research expanded with imagination. It is a collection of anecdotes from daily life and customs, fantasy (an early version of *Cinderella* is present in the text), and notes on nature and pharmacopeia. The observation that the earliest accounts of diplomatic encounters between the two continents can be found alongside fairy tales makes one think about the fictional nature of history, past, and present, on a global scale. Still today, nations, countries, and communities create fictional accounts of a mythical time ("make America great again"), or justify chasing after an idealized future (the end of class). The average "good" citizen lives in the fictional world of the "family" or "national values" of the past (Why can't we all get along?), while the activist marches for justice for Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and a future in which *All Black Lives Matter*. Was Bandung all a dream?

## Endless Mutation

When we began unravelling the rubble of the University of Mutants and other experiences, we could have never imagined that another mutant community, of the coronavirus family, would lay bare once more the anxious drive of the West and its fantasy of separation from the living world. Again, we face Western universalism's claims to frame possible futures, using the pandemic as a global shock doctrine to accelerate towards the dematerialized commodification of social and economic relations. Learning and practicing a "mutant becoming" is not only about self-organizing a collective response and a diplomatic cohabitation with the virus, but also about exposing ourselves to the beautiful trouble of plural ways of inhabiting the world arising from plural pasts, presents, and futures.

Bruno Latour argues that we do not live on the same planet, that ideological differences have grown so wide as to imply the "*démultiplication*" of the world. At the School of Mutants, we've been discussing how to draw maps of imaginary and real worlds, to include them all in relation to one another, so that we can navigate from one utopia to the next. Maybe the only routes between one dream and the next are the people carrying them. Just like diplomatic encounters today, a new diplomacy implies an encounter between people, with the key difference that this time, the nations and worlds they represent could be appreciated for their "true" nature: that of places which do not exist.

In the opacity of our inner universe, as Édouard Glissant pointed out, in the shadows that writer Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (□□ □□□) described in his essays, we mutants are the ambassadors of the blurred mirages of lands that never fully materialized, or rather, that exist in a constant state of flux between fairy tale and naturalist study: a *creolité perpétuelle*, an endless mutation.

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**Hamedine Kane**, Senegalese and Mauritanian artist and director, lives and works between Brussels and Dakar. Through his practice, Kane frequents borders, not as signs and factors of impossibility, but as places of passage and transformation, as a central element in the conception of itinerant identity. After ten years of exile in Europe, his practice now focuses on the themes of memory and heritage. This aspect of his work is taking shape with the research project *École des Mutants / The School of Mutants* in collaboration with Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro. In Kane's works, these themes intermingle with the past and the future, transgressing and irrigating the limits of space and time. In 2020, Kane will participate in the Taipei Biennial, the Casablanca Biennale, and various exhibitions as part of the Africa2020 season in France. His film *The Bleue House*, which had its world premiere at IDFA in Amsterdam in November 2020, received a special mention from the jury.

**Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro** is an artist, environmental engineer, and curator. His work develops land-based strategies that explore communizing and ecologies of care. In 2018 he initiated, in collaboration with Hamedine Kane, *The School of Mutants*, an artistic investigation into land struggles and political utopia in Dakar, with exhibitions and programs in Dakar, Oslo, Taipei, Nantes. He is lecturer at École Centrale Paris, curator at NA Project, associate researcher for the European program "From Conflict to Conviviality" at Ensad Paris, and researcher at Unbewitch Finance Lab. He has had curatorial collaborations with Inland (Madrid), Institut Kunst (Basel), Technê Institute (Buffalo), Science Museum (London), and Documenta (13) (Kassel).

**Olivia Anani** is a writer, curator, and art-market specialist based in Paris. She has a background in Asian studies and contemporary art spanning three continents. As a writer and curator, she is interested in art from a global perspective, working with the Dakar and Kampala Biennales, Zajia Lab in Beijing, France's Institut national d'histoire de l'art, Centre Pompidou, Fondation Gulbenkian, and the Columbia University Center – Reid Hall in Paris. In 2014, she curated "Fast Forward: Video Art from Africa and Beyond" at Zajia Lab in Beijing. The exhibition was revisited in 2020 at Centre Pompidou in Paris. Her ongoing research project *A Compatibility between Value Systems* seeks to explore precolonial aesthetics in the arts, as a link between Africa and Asia, touching on concepts such as *wabi sabi*; *kintsugi* and repair; the philosophy of *qi*; and the concept of *force vitale* in the work of philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne. The project also investigates the politics and modes of conservation and display of works of art and how these concepts find their way into contemporary art practice today. *A Compatibility between Value Systems* has already touched on Benin, Congo, Japan, Mainland China, and Korea.

After studying art history and biology, **Lou Mo** has worked for museums, an auction house, and an international gallery in Canada and in France. She is interested in investigating current issues related to themes such as diaspora, identity, and perception through contemporary art, especially in regions previously considered as non-centers. She is invited curator of the 14th Dakar Biennale. Originally from Montreal, she now lives and works in Taipei as an independent curator.

<sup>1</sup>  
Ferdinand De Jong, Brian Quinn, and Jean-Nicolas Bach, "Ruines d'utopies: l'École William Ponty et l'Université du Futur africain," *Politique africaine* 135, no. 3 (2014): 71–94.

<sup>2</sup>  
Nigel Gibson, "The Oxygen of the Revolution: Gendered Gaps and Radical Mutations in Frantz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*," *Philosophia Africana* 4, no. 2 (2001): 47–66.

<sup>3</sup>  
*UNESCO General History of Africa*, ed. Joseph Ki-Zerbo (University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>4</sup>  
Joseph Ki-Zerbo, "Muter ou périr," *Le Mutant D'Afrique: Trimestriel D'information Culturelle Et Scientifique*, no. 2 (1982). Trans. Stéphane Verlet-Bottéro.

<sup>5</sup>  
Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik, *Micropolítica: Cartografias Do Desejo* (Vozes, 1986). Translated as *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* (Semiotext(e), 2008).

<sup>6</sup>  
Edward W. Said, "Travelling Theory Reconsidered," in *Reflexions on Exile* (Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup>  
Patrick Chamoiseau, *Écrire en pays dominé* (Gallimard, 1997).

<sup>8</sup>  
Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (University of Washington Press, 1994).