WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II

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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

33. Optical Self(s)

Métis Women's Authorship Regarding Conception of Self in Pre-Independence Senegal

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Visualizations of power dynamics did not begin with the invention of photography. Instead, photography served as an experimental technology that assisted in reinforcing preexisting associations and helped develop counternarratives—all grounded in perceived realities. The medium's development aided the need to see and hold images validating lives led by Senegalese people, but reflecting back on the country's preexisting sociopolitical landscape. Thus, when photography touched down in Saint-Louis, Senegal, studio practice swiftly favored depictions asserting middle-class identity, endowing photography, particularly portraiture, with a symbolic importance gesturing towards social status.[1] This included paradigmatic portraits taken in bedrooms and sitting rooms, advancing associations between the home, material wealth, and political value; commissioned portraits in homes became signals of both intimacy and specific economic dynamics. First becoming a "self-conscious group" in the mid-eighteenth century, métis people emerged from unions between signare women and European men.[2] Inevitably, descendants merged French bourgeoisie and local cultural customs, facilitating space for them to benefit in social, economic,

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1   Frédérique Chapuis, "The Pioneers of Saint-Louis", in *Anthology of African and Indian Ocean Photography* (Paris: Revue Noire, 1999), 48–63 (p. 52).

2   Hilary Jones, *The Métis of Senegal: Urban Life and Politics in French West Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 2.

and political arenas. The families balanced their networks between intracommunity members, varying French administrators, and the interior West African populace. Able to leverage a unique foundation of knowledge, métis people became instrumental for communication between varying public interests. Due to their evasive positions in Senegal and France, the métis community held federal and local gubernatorial and religious positions in colonial institutions. A trio of photographs (Figures 1–3) provide a space in which to consider how métis women exploited optical language to convey specific perceptions by claiming authorship over their likenesses. This paper will explore the techniques and historical contextualization that amplify the women's assertions through Adrian Piper's deviations between self-conception and conception of self.

A photograph, in its materiality, is a single object while the self is an amorphous entity that continually changes and adapts. A photograph's material existence reflects non-static social relationships and malleable purposes that evolve across sociopolitical contexts. Since self-conception and conception of self both change in response to the surrounding world, to understand three photographs of unidentified Senegalese women (Figures 1–3) requires aesthetic, historical, and theoretical regard. A one-directional perspective regarding photography's existence in Senegal does not permit an understanding that centers the women's agency. The images are not reflections solely of the critical moment of production but emerge from an extended relationship joining the medium, women, and their ancestors. This tract renders the women's conception of self as something existing beyond themselves, into a collective understanding of identity tethered to a culturally specific milieu. As family heirlooms, the photographs are entangled with past, present, and future kindred relations; and, when they move into public arenas, the images function as illustrations of power dynamics personal to the sitters and broadly relevant to photographic history. The presence of photography in Senegal commenced almost simultaneously to Europe in the 1840s, with the first daguerreotype studios opening in 1860 at the helm of Washington de Monrovée.[3] The region immediately folded the artistic

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3   Christaud Geary, "Roots and Routes of African Photographic Practices: From Modern to Vernacular Photography in West and Central Africa (1850–1980)", in *A Companion to Modern African Art*, ed. by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 74–95 (p. 74).

medium into everyday urban life, facilitating constructions of aesthetic forms specific to Senegalese imaginaries. The centralized photographs originate from Saint-Louis, Senegal, a city recognized for its venerable relationship with Europeans, dating to the sixteenth century. These three images of unidentified métis women reflect 1930s negotiations surrounding conceptions of the self, as it relates to the pre-independence Senegalese sociopolitical terrain and the positionality of métis culture. This conception of self is distinct from reading the photographs as representations of these women's self-conception. Although the photographer and sitters' specific identities are unestablished, it is possible to situate them within a particular historical landscape.

Utilizing Adrian Piper's meditation regarding the self, finding these photographs' malleable meanings as historical documents allows understandings that extend beyond a singular person or portraiture as a genre. Piper articulates that structures facilitate individuals' knowledge, requiring the division of the self into multiple forms.[4] Employing the image of a spool wrapped in thread, Piper writes:

> So successful social institutions draw your attention towards themselves and their successes, and further away from the sprouting spool at your center. They devour your awareness, filling it with their importance and the complexity of their functioning, and awakening your need to find your place within them.[5]

These societal expectations are projected onto individuals immediately following birth—the sprouting spool—and are maintained throughout their entire existence, forcing the self to adapt accordingly. This conceptual assertion has been present in Piper's entire artistic oeuvre, and *Thwarted Projects, Dashed Hopes, A Moment of Embarrassment* (2012)

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4   See: Adrian Piper 2018, 2013, and 1985. 2018's publication functions as a memoir-style text that elucidates Piper's experiences throughout her life leading to her emigration from the United States to Berlin. The 2013 text is a two-volume opus dedicated to extending Kant's definitions and examinations of metaethics, wherein Piper articulates that humans are fully capable of true ethics, but have created structures that privilege self-preservationist tactics over collective prosperity. Finally, the 1985 essay critiques Humean understandings regarding the division between self-conception and conception of self, while approaching Kant favorably, but fulfilling a contemporaneous extension surrounding his readings of two *selfs*.

5   Adrian Piper, *Escape to Berlin: A Travel Memoir* (Berlin: Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin, 2018), p. 15. Also, beyond traditionally defined "metaphysics", this concept relates to writing on DuBois's double consciousness and José Muñoz's disidentification.

displays Piper's active attempts to reject these expectations. A black and white self-portrait has been digitally altered, giving Piper's skin a grey hue and the edges of her face an orange outline. Below her face, text overlays the image where Piper declares a "change" to her racial and national assignments. Her website reports, "Adrian Piper has decided to retire from being black. In the future, for professional utility, you may wish to refer to her as "The Artist Formerly Known as African-American."[6] With an obvious nod to the musician Prince, Piper's decision is not a rejection of the people or communities that are categorically designated "black". Instead she denies the category itself—an abstraction rendered real via imperialism and reclaimed by communities. The use of portraiture centralizes her bodily self, and the digital alteration confuses normalized perceptions surrounding racial morphology. Opposing the expectations placed upon her by these constructions, Piper's photographic manipulation unsettles racially based presumptions and aspirations projected onto her work and scholarship.

Both métis women in Figures 1–3 centralize their bodies in the photographs as a means to convey their conceptions of self, asserting their independent and historically layered existences. Through the process of layering family photographs behind them, the women become more than individuals and morph into matriarchal inheritors advancing their lineage, not only through the photograph's creation, but also, its afterlife—collapsing the distance between the past, present, and future. The two women centered in Figure 1 are the living result of their ancestors' choices and desires for maintaining sociopolitical power. The image assists in mythologizing the family and fabricating a projected identity, highlighting strength through material objects—such as photographs, clothing, accessories, and East Asian prints. The body becomes material, not because these women are not real, but because they activate their figure to harness visual language and transmit specific significations. Acknowledging the métis women's mental processes shifts the photo series from monotonous representations of self into schemas, mapping fluctuating conceptions of the self. Unlike Piper, these women do not reject their categorization; instead, their bodies operate within image indices to transmit specific information, but this

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6   "News – September 2012", Adrian Piper Foundation, http://www.adrianpiper. com/news_sep_2 012.shtml.

does not mean the pieces cannot be considered together. The differences between Humean and Kantian ontological explorations become a point of focus for Piper's philosophical scholarship, influencing *Thwarted Projects*. Piper recognizes that a cohesive self that reconciles both self-conception and conception of self is a human aspiration deeply tied to rationality and social norms. She writes, "[a]s we do to other natural phenomena, we respond to the phenomenon of the self by trying to make it rationally intelligible to ourselves in socially conditioned, norm-governed terms."[7] Bearing this in mind, the métis women are enacting cognitive dominance over their image, producing photographs that express unique relationships to power. Prita Meier argues that "[w]hile photography was and is a technology of empire, it is also a technology of self—a site of embodied performance."[8] This expansion beyond photography's evidentiary nature into intra-African and global power dynamics allows for the expansion of a photograph's lifespan. As photography holds an inherently reductive relationship to self-conception, considering an image as a "site of embodied performance" imparts a liminal space rearticulating the role that photography plays within discourses of the real and authentic. Situating these two unknown métis women as performers allows us to reject minimizations of their carefully crafted images and aesthetic understandings. Just as social identity is staged, a photograph becomes a way to perform the conception of self.

By recognizing photographs as "socially salient objects", reading the trio of images as intellectually driven, rational pieces of evidence becomes a logical conclusion.[9] The women pose in manners similar to some of the photographed figures hanging behind them on the wall. Contrastingly, the tradition of posing with an entire wall filled with images is rendered modern since no image behind them carries the same formal quality. Layering traces of the past upon one another provides a glimpse into the subjects' familial and photographic lineage. The viewer gains a mini-formalist lesson on how métis families' conception of their

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7 Adrian Piper, "Two Conceptions of the Self (1984)", *Philosophical Studies*, 48/2 (September 1985), 173–97, republished online at http://www.adrianpiper.co.uk/docs/Website2ConceptionsOfTheSelf(1984).pdf (p. 21).

8 Prita Meier, "The Surface of Things: A History of Photography from the Swahili Coast", *Art Bulletin*, 101/1 (2019), 48–69 (p. 48).

9 Elizabeth Edwards, "Thinking Materially/Thinking Relationally", in *Getting Pictures Right: Context and Interpretation* (Köln: Köppe, 2004), pp. 11–23 (p. 15).

self(s) changed over time, rather than how their self-conception(s) may have evolved. Obscuring some photographs behind them, both subjects embody, relate, and place themselves in direct engagement with the images framing them. Not overpowering their ancestors' images, the women, instead, seem to reassert their familial power, gesturing to unseen social, political, and economic worlds beyond the photograph's two-dimensional frame.

Historically, as photography became a nineteenth-century commonplace in Saint-Louis, Senegal, images held an essential role in everyday home spaces.[10] As technology advanced, portraits became symbols of social status, thereby tethering the medium to Senegalese class dynamics. Frédérique Chapius writes, "Elegance and a pronounced taste for self-representation were part of daily life. People adored having their photographs taken."[11] By the time these sitters were photographed, Senegalese families had engaged with photographers for over fifty years. Rather than reading the images as different manifestations, they emerged from a unique and specific "aesthetic vocabulary", as described by Giulia Paoletti and Yaëlle Biro.[12] Photography had become an economic enterprise for practitioners and a symbolic form of power for sitters. As image economies have demonstrated, photographs are not divorced from broader economies and cultural assertions. Figures 1–3 serve to reflect the métis women's active agency in developing both a unique aesthetic model and conception of self. Ultimately, it would be unethical to articulate less because it would presume that the métis had not constructed a unique, three-dimensional, visual language. And considering them solely as having circumvented Euro-originating visions would maintain the centralization of imperialist optical attitudes surrounding what photographic production could emerge in Africa at large. Since photography first appeared in early 1840s Senegal, there have been numerous local visual negotiations, both known and unknown. Inevitably, a century spent designing a signification system influences practice, including métis photographic operations and the creation of aesthetic forms that hold multiple purposes. Signs of

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10   Christaud Geary, "Roots and Routes of African Photographic Practices", 84.
11   Chapuis, "The Pioneers of Saint-Louis", p. 56.
12   Giulia Paoletti and Yaëlle Biro, "Photographic Portraiture in West Africa: Notes from 'In and Out of the Studio'", *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 51 (2016), 183–99 (p. 184).

power in the women's clothing, poses, and choice of which objects to include are calculated and deliberate, escorting the viewer towards particular conclusions. As the women merge their political reality and understanding of sensory experience, they are performing their conception of self each time the snapshot is displayed, privately or publicly. In their afterlife, the photographs are actively supporting the women's perpetual reclamation of authorship over the socio-politically permitted freedom of expression.

Figures 1–3, through aesthetically informed performances, become atemporal commemorations for both women's conception of self. Serving as their distinctive image and images of images, the photographs' layering of familial archival materials provide a glimpse into specific families' photographic lineages. There are different poses, dress styles, formal layouts, framing techniques, and sitters' ages, each articulating layers of familial history and experience. Jean Borgatti warns against Euro-centric understandings of how the self is represented in images, writing, "[t]he context of portraiture is memory."[13] She distinguishes between modernism and African artists, articulating that photography must be divorced from merely Christian, positivist representational understandings. For Figures 1–3, the two women demonstrate an active consideration of memory via their desires to be remembered in a specific way, while simultaneously remembering their own predecessors. A singular self is not emphasized, but more precisely the recognition of a collective body being strategically advanced, both socially and politically. As it is not possible to recover the sitters' memories, the photographs reflect sociohistorical negotiations and remembrance. Hilary Jones describes the fact that "[women helped shape] a vision for modern Senegalese politics that differed from that imagined by the colonial state."[14] Despite the métis grasping power provided by French colonialism, métis women assisted in creating this "vision", engaging their nuanced understanding of public and private life in Senegal and France. This knowledge constituted the overarching threat that métis women posed to French imperialists, solidifying their role as irritants

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13   Jean Borgatti, "Likeness or Not: Musings on Portraiture in Canonical African Art and Its Implications for African Portrait Photography", in *Portraiture Photography in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 320.

14   Jones, *The Métis of Senegal*, p. 65.

to white colonial agendas. Figures 1–3 provide only a calculated insight into a conception of self, defined by the sitters' relationships to their families and early thought around Senegalese nation building.

When considered as historical and social documents, the photographs become intertwined with aspects of broader Senegalese existence, rather than merely images within a family album or private collection. While it would be easy to articulate an argument that the images discussed in this paper serve as a personification of opposition to European domination, this would deny their three-dimensionality. Instead, the photographs act as performances of two women's conceptions of self within early twentieth-century Senegal. Despite the unidentified photographer, it seems the women maintain a sense of authorship over their representation, conveying flagrant messages regarding their familial power. Almost one hundred years after their production, these photographs have a presence in both public and private spheres— scholarly writing, family archives, and private collections. By sustaining the optical presence of these photographs, the optical messages both women sent while performing for the camera are still relevant, intriguing, and present.

Fig. 1 *Untitled*, unknown photographer from Saint-Louis-du-Senegal (ca. 1915–30), courtesy of Revue Noire.

Fig. 2 *Untitled*, unknown photographer from Saint-Louis-du-Senegal (ca. 1915–30), courtesy of Revue Noire.

Fig. 3 *Saint-Louisienne assise dans une chambre*, unknown photographer from Saint-Louis-du-Senegal (ca. 1915–30), courtesy of Revue Noire.

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