



**Figure Intro.1.** Fatoumata Diabaté, *Sutigi*, Bamako, 2012.  
Courtesy of the artist and Patrice Loubon Gallery.

# Introduction

## A Poetics of Relation

But we need to figure out whether or not there are other succulencies of Relation in other parts of the world . . .

—Édouard Glissant,  
*Poetics of Relation*

A young man stands in an entranceway. His look is wary, serious; indeterminate. Dressed for a night out in a dark jacket, he wears a neck chain that glitters between the wide white collars of his shirt. The silhouette of an earring encircles his left earlobe; sweat gleams on his forehead and highlights the bridge of his nose. His collar creates a sharp line leading to his double-exposed self, a barely registered simulacrum, faint imprint over a basket of flowers hanging behind him on a bare wall. The barred shutters indicate a Bamako doorway. His head is framed tightly within the hallway as his shoulders push outward, confusing the eye and imbuing his figure with power and presence. His left side is ghosted out, yet half of his face is obscured in darkness.

*Sutigi, Bamako*, by Malian photographer Fatoumata Diabaté, from her series *The Night Belongs to Us* (*Sutigi* in Bamanankan), shows West African youth enjoying the licit and illicit pleasures of nighttime escapades—“the beautiful age of youth characterized by insouciance and freedom,” as the artist describes it (fig. Intro. 1).<sup>1</sup> The man pictured appears cosmopolitan, of the glo-

balized world, yet the double exposure serves to emphasize not only shadowy presence, darkness, obscurity (*dibi* in Bamanankan), and opacity, but also the tradition of doubling in West African portrait photography, a tradition borrowed from the influx of Yoruba studio photographers emigrating across West Africa in search of new business clientele in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s.<sup>2</sup> The contrast of darks and lights creates a sense of polyrhythmic Mande aesthetics, highlighting an asymmetry seen consistently in hundreds of studio portraits by famous Malian photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of poetic or philosophical photography—photography that asks the viewer to consider other meanings, other implications than what is immediately visible; what is called “art photography”—is a relatively recent phenomenon in Bamako, the capital of Mali. *Embodying Relation* describes how this art photography movement developed in Mali out of a lapsed black-and-white studio portrait tradition after a twenty-year lacuna. This book argues that Malian art photographs embody the concept of Relation propounded by Martinican philosopher, poet, and novelist Édouard Glissant (1928–2011). Unlike much contemporary photography now being produced in Africa, Malian art photographers tend to celebrate their culture, rather than focusing on social ills or the current exploitation of former colonial powers. Nor do most draw attention to the way that colonial rule violently and permanently changed the fabric of Malian society, or focus on the country's poverty; this art is not, in a word, overtly forming a postcolonial critique. Instead, Malian art photographs sidestep postcolonial considerations to potentially embody Glissant's exuberant notion of Relation, which embraces difference and diversity within wholeness or totality, encompassing both the recognition of others and their opacity, or unknowability. Photographs created by Malian artists, such as Diabaté's *Sutigi, Bamako*, speak to both local and foreign audiences, crossing cultural divides and allowing for interpretations on multiple levels, relative to one's knowledge and background. This is a manifestation of the Mande belief that knowledge is secret, precious, and never fully available; not everyone should or will have access to the same information.<sup>4</sup> In proffering newly configured images of contemporary Malian culture to non-Malian audiences, these photographs carry an optimistic potential to bring viewers into Relation, their imaginaries participating in an appreciation of Malian poetics that nevertheless does not straightforwardly offer Malian culture to the neocolonial consumerist gaze of the global art market.

*Embodying Relation* maps the genesis and dynamics of the Malian art photography movement. It shows how two Malian photographers' fame in New

York and Paris contributed to the founding of a photography biennial in their hometown of Bamako, which had dramatic effects both on local photographers and across Africa. Mali's new democracy, emerging three decades after independence from France in 1960, was the backdrop for the blossoming of this art photography movement. Democracy created the opportunity for international collaborative photography institutions and encouraged women's rights, and this study pays particular attention to the unprecedented debut of professional women photographers in this patriarchal nation. Through an understanding of these photographs as embodying Glissant's notion of Relation, I argue that Malian photographers contest globalization in the international interchange fostered by the biennale through a careful visual, cultural, and theoretical analysis of their works and the social and historical context of their production. Art photography in Mali is an example of a local aesthetics speaking both locally and globally, across different levels of cultural knowledge. This movement counters a homogenized contemporary art world through its difference and emphasis on Malian aesthetics.

The emergence of art photography began in the mid-1990s, when Bamako became famous as the home of renowned studio photographers Seydou Keïta (1921/3–2001) and Malick Sidibé (1936–2016). Exhibited anonymously in New York in 1991, Keïta was quickly “discovered” in Bamako by a French curator, leading to the subsequent “discovery” of his younger colleague, Malick Sidibé; their commercial portraits were soon shown abroad to great acclaim. Since that time, Keïta and Sidibé have become indispensable to an emergent canon of African artists.<sup>5</sup> The presence of Keïta and Sidibé in Bamako inspired the founding, in 1994, of the French-funded pan-African *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie* (African Photography Encounters), or Bamako Photography Biennale, which has been celebrated ever since.<sup>6</sup> The biennale was instituted shortly after Mali's 1991–1992 transition from a socialist dictatorship to a Western-supported, multiparty democracy. Mali's relationship to France, its colonizer from the 1890s until 1960, improved greatly after this political shift, and France, in a neocolonial extension of its former role as cultural benefactor, joined Mali in supporting and financing the efforts of French photographers Françoise Huguier and Bernard Descamps and Malian photographers Alioune Bâ, Django Cissé, and Racine Keïta in creating and organizing the first biennale.<sup>7</sup>

This French-funded event gave Bamako a reputation as the “center of African photography.” Yet the neocolonial power imbalance of the biennale enterprise, as well as the nature of the biennale itself as a pan-African ven-

ture, creates tensions between French influence and Malian endeavors. Still, the potentialities offered by the first biennale exhibition, and its subsequent, ever-larger iterations, ignited the imaginations of a small cohort of Malian photographers. The presence of the biennale as an ongoing institution also inspired foreigners and locals to collaborate in creating numerous photography institutions and exhibitions, thus contributing to the rise of a Relational art photography movement and sparking a revival of interest in black-and-white film photography, which had become commercially unviable by the 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

This blossoming art movement has given rise to a host of images that, like *Sutigi, Bamako*, creatively imagine older photographic traditions in the space of freedom enabled by the new notion that photographs can be art, rather than commercial portraits or journalism. Yet in contrast to African countries where art photography has gained a significant presence on the international market—South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Morocco, Senegal, Kenya, Ethiopia, Benin (the list is growing)—in Mali photographers have for the most part eschewed the reigning styles of global conceptual art or of critical documentary photojournalism.<sup>9</sup> Instead of following trends introduced by the examples of international art on offer at the biennales, the Bamako art photographers have remained close to the values of Malian studio portraiture, balancing Mande aesthetics with imaginative approaches to contemporary concerns.

Mande is a linguistic and cultural complex that includes a wide-ranging group of ethnicities and language-speakers in West Africa, including Bamana and Malinke, and is said to comprise about half of the population of Mali. However, about 80 percent of Malians speak Bamanankan, and Mande is culturally dominant in southern Mali, especially in Bamako, the seat of the government. There has been a strong nationalist drive since independence to promote Bamana culture in particular (as Bamako was originally a Bamana village) and Mande culture more generally. Historically, Mande-speakers descend from the thirteenth-century Mali Empire, and one major noticeable aspect of Mande culture is a strong sense of pride and awareness of Mande history, which has been passed down through oral cultural traditions, such as the *Sunjata* epic. Another notable aspect of Mande society (which is also present in non-Mande Malian societies) is the social division among nobles, former slaves, and the caste groups of oral historians and singers, blacksmiths and potters, and other artistic professions. These divisions in some cases determine people's marriage options and professions, especially in rural areas, but in urban Bamako caste and ethnicity are be-

coming less important than class; ethnicity is itself an especially complicated and somewhat fluid matter.

Aspects of Mande social practices and values are intimately connected to aesthetics and can be seen as enabling Relation in their respect for the difference and humanity of others, in accepting another's opacity, or inability to be fully known, and in their communality. For example, *badenya* is a Mande social value of cooperation, derived from polygamous family structures in which children of the same mother and father are not in competition, in contrast to *fadenya*, which describes a sense of competition among half-siblings for the father's attention. *Badenya* is considered the primary force within Malian society, and can also be described as social capital, whereas extreme *fadenya* behavior is reserved only for unusual individuals (usually young men) who must strive to bring honor and success to their family's name; they are called heroes. These aspects of competition and cooperation can be seen in studio portraiture, along with other aesthetic aspects more specifically related to the medium of photography, such as polyrhythmic pattern, asymmetry, decoration, embellishment, clarity versus opacity or obscurity, and theme and variation, also understood as repetition with small and subtle differences. As we shall see, the complex meanings of *dibi* (darkness, obscurity) in Mande society are similar in meaning to Glissant's use of the term *opacité* (French: opacity), in that both terms can refer to a sense of obscured knowledge, or of knowledge that cannot be known.<sup>10</sup>

Commercial portraiture always engaged the imaginary of its patrons and its viewers. The fact that Keïta lent his clients props, from eyeglasses to flowers, motor scooters to suit coats, meant that subjects could imagine themselves differently when pictured with signs of material success or cosmopolitan identity.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, portraiture always had communal reverberations—the earliest studio photographs were taken outdoors in courtyards, in front of the crowd of waiting potential clients. Photographs often commemorate family relations or friendships, shown not only in pairings and groupings, but also in the choice of wearing the same outfit to the photographer's studio, and in the way friends pose to mimic each other's movements. Studio portraits were aesthetic social documents, meant to be hung on the wall or kept in albums, or sent to family in rural areas to display the cosmopolitan sense of the urbanite away from home. Today's artists still tend to emphasize photography's social aspect by appreciating the beauty of the human body, which is understood as always already a communal body, while allowing individual creativity to flourish in ways previously unimaginable. Malian photography has thus retained a relatively autonomous local

identity in creating art that stems from a history of portraiture that *itself* has been repositioned as art on the global stage.

Because of its cultural, political, and aesthetic circumstances, this art photography carries a powerful potential to embody Glissant's notion of Relation. A prominent Caribbean philosopher and writer, Glissant has become an essential figure in postcolonial studies, but his work moves beyond this school of thought. Glissant, who studied philosophy and history at the Sorbonne and ethnography at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, was a contemporary of Frantz Fanon, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, as well as Malian photographers Keïta and Sidibé. Césaire's Négritude was influential on Glissant's thought, and he actively fought for Martinican independence. He shared intellectual circles and world experiences with these anticolonial philosophers and photographers.

The difference between Glissant and other postcolonial thinkers can be traced through a brief history of the field.<sup>12</sup> For many Anglophone scholars, postcolonial studies grew out of Edward Said's groundbreaking publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, which used a Foucauldian analysis to uncover and examine the prejudices inherent in the Euro-American study of North Africa and the Middle East. In turn, Said's work influenced other Anglophone writers from former British colonies, like Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha.<sup>13</sup> Recently postcolonial studies has begun to acknowledge a longer Afro-Francophone lineage of thought, tracing itself back to Négritude, a philosophy and poetics that originated in Paris in the 1930s with Martinican writer Aimé Césaire, Senegalese poet and eventual president Léopold Sédar Senghor, French Guianese poet and politician Léon Damas, and others.<sup>14</sup> Césaire was a teacher and mentor to the doctor, psychoanalyst, and philosopher Frantz Fanon, whose revolutionary texts *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) offer analyses of the psychological effects of racism and colonial rule.<sup>15</sup> A more capacious understanding of postcolonial theory includes Algerian-born French philosopher Jacques Derrida's emphasis on *différance* and his questioning of European hegemonies of thought in relation to his experience as an Algerian Jew under Vichy's anti-Semitic rule.

While Glissant is often described as a postcolonial theorist, his philosophical notion of Relation exceeds the pessimism and the negative sense of "aftermath" effects often present in postcolonial theory, while posing a theoretical opposition to globalization in his concept of *mondialité*, often translated as "worldliness": an appreciation of respect for all people in their cultural and individual differences.<sup>16</sup>

If art historians have been slow to take up postcolonial theory, Glissant's work has proved an exception, at least among curators. In the past several decades his ideas have been actively discussed in contemporary art venues, including the platform "Creolité and Creolization," held in St. Lucia as part of Okwui Enwezor's Documenta 11.<sup>17</sup> In this exhibition, Enwezor drew on Glissant's notion of creolization for its Caribbean platform. The Swiss-born curator Hans Ulrich Obrist has been particularly important in bringing Glissant's ideas into the art world. Obrist recounts that Glissant's idea of Relation inspired his groundbreaking curatorial project "Utopia Station" in the 2003 Venice Biennale. Obrist later explained, in a small book he cowrote with Glissant for dOCUMENTA (13), which included several of Glissant's writing with drawings, "In his novel *Sartorius* (1999), Glissant described the utopian Batouto people, which derives its identity not from its own genealogy, but solely from being in constant exchange with others."<sup>18</sup> After Glissant's death Obrist curated an exhibition in Brussels dedicated to him, called *Mondialité*. Glissant himself was active in the art world. As a prize-winning novelist and poet, he was intimately aware of aesthetic concerns and the role of art in society; his friends included prominent modernist artists Wifredo Lam and Robert Matta, designer agnès b., and many others. Significantly, Glissant wrote an introduction to an exhibition catalog for agnès b.'s photography collection that includes prints by Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, so it is certain that he knew their work.<sup>19</sup>

Glissant explains the concept of Relation in two key texts, *Poetics of Relation*, published in French in 1990 and in English in 1997, and *Philosophie de la Relation* (*The Philosophy of Relation*), in 2009. Relation developed out of Glissant's earlier theories of creolization and "Caribbeanness" (*Antillanité*), which was specific to Caribbean identity. As a Martinican, Glissant was at first influenced by, but later critical of, Césaire's theory of Négritude, with its emphasis on blackness and Africa as its origin.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Négritude, Glissant's conception of creolization emphasizes the distinctiveness of the Caribbean as an archipelago, a loose collection of islands connected to each other by history and geography, but separated by the sea; for each, the ocean's horizon is a constant reminder of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the colonizer's journey from Europe. Creolization acknowledges that each island is culturally distinct and specific, but shares some general characteristics with the others—each distinctiveness is created by a different mixture of specific African, European, and Asian cultures that replaced the wiped-out civilizations of indigenous people. Crucially, building on fellow Martinican philosopher Frantz Fanon, Glissant



understands creolization rhizomatically, borrowing from French and Swiss philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The rhizome is a plant form with many roots that spreads horizontally, in contrast to the vertical hierarchy of a tree with a single root. Because of the variety of mixed cultures and ethnicities (*métissage*) which all came from elsewhere, the “rootlessness” or rhizomatic nature of Caribbean society contributes to the identity and process of creolization. As Caribbean author Maryse Condé explains, Glissant was the first philosopher to celebrate Caribbean identity *as such*, as a rootless or rhizomatic identity created and re-created in exchange with others, as in Glissant’s famous maxim: “I change, by exchanging with the other, without losing myself or distorting myself.”<sup>21</sup>

While African identity is important in Caribbeanness, it is not the *only* identity—the multiplicity of cultural identities in the Caribbean is pointedly acknowledged.<sup>22</sup> Creolization becomes Relation when Glissant’s theories open up from the Caribbean to address the world.<sup>23</sup> Yet Africa is still of primary importance as a facet of Relation—the first essay in *Poetics of Relation*, “The Open Boat,” begins with the African slave trade.<sup>24</sup> For it is in the Middle Passage that Relation is born—in the communal experience of the existential and literal abyss: a past and present despair and a terrifying, unknown future. One’s survival of the Middle Passage enables totality: “Not just a specific knowledge, appetite, suffering, and delight of one particular people, not only that, but knowledge of the Whole, greater from having been at the abyss and freeing knowledge of Relation within the Whole.”<sup>25</sup> For Glissant, the experience of suffering brings a humility that enables empathy, and thus Relation. Both creolization and Relation offer alternative ways of confronting the violence and lingering effects of colonial oppression. Relation in particular offers an alternative method for opposing globalization and for understanding the world separate from the structures demanded and produced by capitalism. The concept of Relation, supported by corresponding neologisms and notions of creolization, opacity, errantry, chaos-world, echo-world, and *mondialité*, emphasizes process and exchange, going beyond postcolonial theories that reiterate static notions of mixed yet rooted cultural identities suggesting violence, negativity, and loss. Glissant’s Relation posits identity as always in a communal (and thus unpredictable) process of becoming through exchange with other cultures and communities: a process in which everyone might potentially participate. But while a respect for fundamental difference is central to Relation, a local community must also be aware of the wider world; and, indeed, it is through interactions with others that one changes, without loss of self.<sup>26</sup> An inward-looking com-

munity, or one that holds itself separate from or superior to its neighbors, cannot participate in Relation. Nor can a culture heavily indebted to capitalist structures enable Relation to flourish.

In the epigraph to this introduction, Glissant suggests that Relation may exist in pockets throughout the world. But it is in the Caribbean's inheritance of Africa, through the centuries-long transatlantic slave trade, that Relation flourishes: according to Glissant, "Africa (for us a source and a mirage, retained in a simplified representation) has, therefore, its role to play."<sup>27</sup> The importance of conceiving of not just the Caribbean but the world as an archipelago, as Glissant explains in his essay "Archipelagic Thinking," is crucial to understanding Relation and to seeking its resonances in West African photography. For Glissant, the history of the Caribbean archipelago created societies of composite cultures with multiple origins in which tribalism is impossible. Understanding West Africa as an archipelago means understanding the Sahara desert, historically an important conduit of trade and other forms of exchange, as a kind of oceanic space linking Mali to North Africa. It means understanding how West African nations bear many similarities to the Caribbean islands where Glissant developed these theories, including effects of the transatlantic slave trade and their complicated postcolonial relationships to colonial powers.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, while Glissant's work drew on his Martinican heritage and theorized the Caribbean particularly, his work has also been influential on the African continent. Glissant's friendship with the Malian filmmaker, scholar, and writer Manthia Diawara especially speaks to the pertinence of his philosophy with regard to Malian photography. Diawara's 2009 documentary on Glissant, *Édouard Glissant: One World in Relation*, explains key aspects of Glissant's theories and has been widely screened at conferences and museums.<sup>29</sup> Noted Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe dedicated an essay for the 2011 Bamako Biennale catalog to Glissant. In 2014, the Dak'Art Biennale of Contemporary African Art's theme was "Producing the Common," inspired by Glissant's notion of the *Tout-monde* ("Whole world," closely related to "worldliness"); and in 2015, the Pérez Art Museum in Miami hosted an exhibition curated by Tumelo Mosaka and Tobias Ostrander, titled *Poetics of Relation*, that directly engaged Glissant's philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

The acknowledgment of differences that cannot be grasped or reduced to particulars is crucial to Relation.<sup>31</sup> Celia Britton finds that Glissant's idea of Relation underlies all of his writing and can be found not only in his theoretical essays but also in his literary works.<sup>32</sup> She explains: "The starting point for this concept is the irreducible difference of the other; 'Relation' is in the

first place a relation of equality with and respect for the Other as *different* from oneself. It applies to individuals but more especially to other cultures and other societies. It is nonhierarchical and nonreductive; that is, it does not try to impose a universal value system but respects the particular qualities of the community in question.”<sup>33</sup>

Although Relation can potentially exist anywhere in the world, Glissant insists that it can be found only within cultures that acknowledge the importance of others as well as themselves. He notes, “Peoples who have been to the abyss do not brag of being chosen. They do not believe they are giving birth to any modern force. They live Relation and clear the way for it.”<sup>34</sup> Glissant’s use of “the abyss” here specifically references the horror of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>35</sup> Yet the West African colonial experience may be understood as a different kind of abyssal experience—vicious, violent, and dehumanizing. In both instances, Relation emerges through a sense of chaos and fluidity, evading the violent constraints of slavery and colonialism to create a system of relations, what Britton calls “a fluid and unsystematic system whose elements are engaged in a radically nonhierarchical free play of interrelatedness.”<sup>36</sup>

Glissant’s idea of the nonhierarchical free play of relations is used here to consider the images and imaginaries of Malian art photographs, rather than as a description of real human relationships. Yet in many ways relation does apply to personal relationships, not least through its accounting for language.<sup>37</sup> *Poetics of Relation* is composed as a series of essays that were first presented as talks; a sense of orality is felt in the rhythms of speech used within the text, wherein Glissant addresses the reader as one might speak to a friend. Relation, however, not only exists among French-speakers but “is spoken multilingually. By going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent.”<sup>38</sup> The oppression of any single language is connected to the domination of a rooted culture for Glissant—consider the Roman imposition of Latin throughout Europe during the Roman Empire. By contrast, Relation evades this parochialism and evokes a multivocal difference. In this way, as in others, Relation differs from hybridity, in which elements of the colonized and the dominating cultures are identifiable and contribute to a synthesis of meaning.<sup>39</sup>

The tension between orality and writing that informs Creole as a vernacular language is part of creolization. Similar tensions exist in Mali, where an important fluctuation between oral and written cultures is noticeable, for literacy rates are low and oral traditions are still strong. Such differences in-

form how societies think about and imagine the world.<sup>40</sup> Art photographers tend to be highly literate and well-educated, sometimes speaking French at home, but they have also been surrounded by their country's rich oral culture and heritage; this familiarity with different forms of knowledge informs their photographs.

While Glissant was fascinated with language, his concept of Relation is also wholly physical and embodied in lived experience. Glissant criticizes the Sartrean existentialist idea of free will because of the historical experience of slavery and colonialism; instead, the mind is always rooted in the physicality of its body. J. Michael Dash, Glissant's biographer, writes: "The dismantling of the individual consciousness as free spirit has led Glissant inexorably toward the reinsertion of mind in body. Mind is always incomplete without body, and it is through the body that mind encounters outer reality. The body is then a vital zone of interaction between private and public, individual and collective."<sup>41</sup>

Glissant's emphasis on the relationship between mind and body comes from a distrust of the body's ability to escape the physical constraints it is subjected to. It also derives arguably from the body's inescapable *visibility*, and thus from racial identity, though this visibility is simultaneously the site of opacity and a racial imaginary. This connection of the body to visibility and racial identity links Glissant's ideas to those of Fanon, with whom Glissant's writings are in dialogue. Instead of conceiving of a bodiless mind knowing the world, the world and others are known through the inseparable experience of the body *and* mind, together.<sup>42</sup> The individual body is also important in its communal relation with others—as Dash notes, the communal identity is key to creolization, and thus to Relation.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Malian art photographers emphasize the human body; their aesthetics and focus emerge from the history of studio portraiture to become a contemporary art that almost always takes the social body as a point of departure. The notion of the body as always already communal occurs in virtually all of the Malian photographers' work and is often emphasized.

Although Relation could potentially exist anywhere in the world, specific affinities with Bamako's history, cultural diversity, and geography set the stage for art photographs to embody Relation.<sup>44</sup> While of course Malian society has literally been postcolonial since 1960, when the country gained its independence from France, "postcolonial" is not merely a temporal demarcation. It also acknowledges how the cultures and ways of life that existed in precolonial societies were permanently affected by violent oppressions perpetrated by the culture of colonial domination. In Gyan Prakash's words,

“The postcolonial exists as an aftermath, as an after—after being worked over by colonialism.”<sup>45</sup> Though Mali, unlike Martinique, is now an independent nation, it remains politically and economically yoked to France. The persistence of French governmental structures, including national borders, the educational system, the status of French as the official language, Mali’s continuing economic dependence on France, and even to some extent culture and social attitudes: all attest to the continuing presence of colonialism in Mali. This dependency became particularly visible when France intervened to quell the 2012 coup and prevent civil war; the division between the North’s desert nomadic lifestyle and the South’s agricultural and urban cultures was created by French colonial boundaries. Mali’s postcolonial situation created a culture of hybridity that places equality in doubt, demonstrating the legacy of one culture’s domination over another’s, and accordingly a sense of wreckage, destruction, and continuing *effects*.

Yet postcolonial theory does not account for the aesthetic approach and optimism of Malian photographs, conveyed through contemporary approaches to Mali’s heritage and culture. As an impoverished West African nation with a remarkably rich culture and history, Mali is a logical place to begin seeking “other succulencies of Relation,” especially as Glissant favored “small” (lightly populated) countries. Scholars ascribe a relationship of descent from Mali to Martinique, asserting that many enslaved people sold to Martinican plantations were of the Bamana ethnicity from the region that is now southern Mali.<sup>46</sup> In the film *One World in Relation*, Glissant remarks on this genealogy as a positive affiliation, although he also cautions that a focus on ethnicity leads to genocide and that the importance of the connection is not genetic but attitudinal: “Family is the same manners, the same way of responding to the world.”<sup>47</sup>

This sentiment coheres with the Malian tendency to treat strangers like family, as seen in *cousinage* (*sanankuya* in Bamanankan), or joking cousin relationships. This practice is said to have been started by the Emperor Sundiata Keïta in the thirteenth century and is considered a remarkably successful way of encouraging peace and cooperation.<sup>48</sup> Different last names, of which there are a relatively small number, have associated joking cousins, so that anyone named Sidibé will be treated as a joking cousin by anyone named Kanté, for instance.<sup>49</sup> Joking cousins cannot be insulted by each other, must never harm each other, and must always do what a joking cousin asks. As Drisdelle and Pye-Smith note, “Cousinage exists not only between ethnic groups, but between different castes within each cultural grouping.”<sup>50</sup> Thus

in Mali strangers are already in relation to each other and can invoke such obligations as necessary, based on family names.

As a modern, urban capital, Bamako is a site of *métissage*—a mixing of castes, cultures, heritages, and diversity, which creates a cosmopolitan society. With Bamako as the seat of government and the political-cultural center of southern Mali (Mali south of Timbuktu), there has been a focus, especially politically since the 1990s, on the acceptance of difference, tolerance, and appreciation of other cultures, which helped it remain a peaceful democracy for two decades.<sup>51</sup> The Bamako art world is a Relational community that appreciates irreducible difference and interchanges with the global world through images and various foreign collaborations without losing itself. The Bamakois art world is also like an archipelago in that it consists of different institutions and associations in the city that have all sprung up without being rooted in past notions of art and that virtually all consist of Malian and Euro/American collaborations.

Relation enables an imaginary that contradicts and confounds globalization and its totalizing propensity through emphasis on the local in exchange with the global. The idea of art and literature as creating a potential imaginary for future possibility and change is something that Relation borrows from *Négritude* as well as the Harlem Renaissance; notably, both were literary and philosophical movements. This imaginary illuminates the peculiar circumstances of the Bamakois art photography movement, which was fanned into existence by the influence of the biennale. The arguably neo-colonial entity of the biennale itself—a nexus of interchange between the global and the local—and the institutions it has encouraged have generated an imaginative space within which Bamako photographers are creating the new cultural form of art photography. And it is precisely this dialectic between local identity and global reception that gives photographs by contemporary Malian artists the potential to enact Relation through opacity as an aesthetic preoccupation. A “Glissantian strategy which highlights the relation to the global, while at the same time affirming the particularity of the local” is the notion of opacity, as H. Adlai Murdoch explains.<sup>52</sup> “Opacity” for Glissant is how a culture or an individual keeps its secrets to itself; it is in opposition to the required transparency and publicness of people’s innermost selves (in this Glissant was prescient regarding social media). Most Malian art photographs incorporate opacity in some sense; their meanings and aesthetics are rarely, if ever, immediately clear to a non-Malian audience. Yet they are still appreciated for their seeming engagement with rec-

ognized, indeed, codified, tropes within global contemporary art; only on closer engagement with their aesthetics and meanings does their opacity become noticeable. The circulation of these opaque images in the context of the African Photography Encounters allows for Malians to actively contest the neocolonial agenda of its French directorship.

While Mali is one of the poorest nations in the world economically, it is culturally one of the richest, internationally famous for its sculpture, masks, and performances, as well as music, textiles and cloth, ceramics, and architecture. The biennale intercedes dramatically across this axis of poverty and culture, which is most blatantly visible when Western curators stay in luxury hotels and participants from neighboring Niger sleep on local roofs. Caught between French funding and the logistical difficulties of their nation's economic hardships, the Malian hosts, administrators, and photographers mediate between global wealth and local poverty. The art photographers in Bamako also mediate between older traditions and modernity, a tension that many countries and societies face in this rapidly accelerating age but that is especially key in Bamako, where traditional cultures are inseparably intertwined with the arts, and cultural mores and rituals are rapidly eroding. Art photography participates in international exhibitions and yet retains local meanings for a Malian audience, who may not always appreciate its aesthetic but who will certainly comprehend its content.

Photography in Mali has always embodied contradictions deriving from the colonial situation and its aftermath. With their conquest of the region in the 1880s, the French brought cameras, the devices of soldiers, colonial administrators, anthropologists, and Christian missionaries.<sup>53</sup> African photographers with close connections to the colonials opened Bamako's first studios in the 1930s, and portraits of the aspiring bourgeoisie became highly popular by the late 1940s. Since Mali's independence from France in 1960, studio portraits and press agency photographs have offered competing histories of how the citizens of Bamako envisioned themselves in opposition to how the socialist dictators allowed themselves and their citizens to be portrayed. Under the multiparty democracy that was shakily reinstated after the 2012 coup, hundreds of studios operate in the capital.

With the rise of digital technology, photography has become even more fluid. Images are sent around the world in milliseconds, leaving aside the need for expensive printing materials, framing, or paper. In Mali, where internet access is becoming more common, photographers are now learning digital technologies and beginning to exploit opportunities provided by the internet; as recently as the mid-2000s, by contrast, film photography and

traditional black-and-white printing techniques were still primarily being taught and used. Indeed, film photography may have had its last hurrah in Bamako, as old materials and technologies in France were sent or donated to Bamako's photo institutions. This shift may contribute to the end of the movement or another beginning: the obsolescence of those techniques and the cheap, cast-off materials found a ready home in Bamako, but as supplies have petered out, so have opportunities. Two photography schools that opened in the 1990s in Bamako show such signs: a school for women called Promo-femme closed in 2009 for lack of funding, and the private school Cadre de Promotion pour la Formation en Photographie (CFP) has changed its focus from art to advertising photography. It remains to be seen whether the art photography movement, beset first by the expense of digital technologies and second by the political uncertainties of the coup, will survive, although the return of the Bamako Photography Encounters in 2015 and 2017, after a hiatus due to the coup, was an exciting start, especially as Bisi Silva, the 2015 curator, was the first African woman living on the continent to direct it.

Unlike the forms of long-practiced arts in Mali that have changed over time but continue richly into the present, like music, puppet theater, or dancing, sometimes absorbing non-Malian influences in their richness, art photography is itself a new art form emerging out of studio portrait photography. Commercial portrait photography was an art form of modernity that thrived during and after the colonial era and was introduced through colonial contact, although it quickly adopted Malian meanings and aesthetics. The art photography that has grown out of commercial studio photography's art world fame mixes global influences with local meanings, and for this reason, it moves beyond the ambivalence of postcoloniality to potentially embody Relation, engaging the imaginaries of viewers and carrying a sense of optimism and equality.

Photography—as a network or force of social and technological practices—is the medium par excellence for embodying Relation; for telling a visual history of Mali and for showing and producing Malian identity. In fact, photography can be understood through Glissant's notion of the *écho-monde* (echo-world) as showing the resonances and appearances of things in the world. Malian art photographs capture aspects of Malian culture in transition and transformation, with uniquely Mande or Malian aesthetic force. These photographs are irreducible to transparent aesthetics or conceptions, or to colonial or postcolonial thought; they are not “simplified representations,” to refer back to Glissant's comment on how Africa figures in cre-



olizing thought. Neither are they conceived through fidelity to a culture's rootedness or illustrations of an abstract rootlessness; their rhizomatic nature transforms Malian cultural scenarios through aesthetic or conceptual influences from international sources.

While Relation could potentially flourish anywhere, it is enabled here through the combined aspects of photography as a medium, Mande aesthetics, Malian cultural values, and the Bamako art world that has emerged due to the biennale's existence. Valérie Loichot notes, "Glissant's aesthetic practice and philosophy consists in highlighting connections between artistic production in geographically discrete parts of the world."<sup>54</sup> The specific context of art photography's emergence in Bamako and Mali's history, cultures, diversity, and geography all contribute to art photography's potential to embody Relation. While Relation may be conveyed by art produced in other nations in Africa and elsewhere in the world, Malian art photography's embodiment of Relation emerges from the Relational attributes of Malian culture as conveyed through the aesthetics of art photography.

From the circumstances of this Bamako art world, Malian photographers are forging new aesthetic approaches that can be perceived by the global art world, yet also remain resolutely attentive to a specific Malian particularity. The aesthetic qualities of Malian photographs, and the context of their production and exhibition, are what enable an affinity with Relation—indeed, that enable a poetics of Relation. Malian art photography is a new form, a poetics, that embodies an imaginary particular to Mali. As Betsy Wing explains, "For Glissant, the imaginary is all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world. Hence, every human culture will have its own particular imaginary."<sup>55</sup> Although Malian culture could be seen as rooted (although historical analysis shows it to be less "rooted" than often thought, considering the great waves of migration across the region after the end of slavery and during several jihads), art photography draws on contemporary culture. It is open to and embraces difference, yet speaks in its own cultural aesthetics. It conveys a sense of process and change, rather than stasis, and is optimistic and Relational.

For example, Alioune Bâ's photograph *Corps habitable* (*Livable Body*) resonates with different valences according to one's culture and knowledge. It shows a woman's body cropped from the waist down, her hand suggestively reaching to presumably untie her wrap of mud cloth (*bogolan*), with the words *CORPS HABITABLE* written in white capital letters on her bare bent leg, mimicking the white designs on the brown bogolan (fig. Intro. 2). The woman's midriff is in shadow, impeding visibility and making her ac-



**Figure Intro.2.** Alioune Bâ, *Corps habitable (Livable Body)*, from the *Body Writing (Corps écriture)* series, 2008. Courtesy of Madame Bâ Alima Togola and Perlman Teaching Museum, Carleton College.

tion opaque. A further visual difficulty or obscurity is caused by the upside-down writing; it is perhaps written for the woman rather than the viewer, or for someone (an absent presence, either person or culture) standing on her other side. There is an obvious sexual intimation with the gesture and pose, and a reference to pregnancy (fertility is an extremely desirable aspect of womanhood in Mali) but also more abstractly the idea of a woman's body as anyone's original home is also at play.

But the image also refers to bogolan's meaning—traditionally, and still in some Bamana villages, the dyed mud cloth holds important personal power, or *nyama*, for a woman who wears it in relation to her first menstrual blood or to a birth. This reading is tempered by the scandalous way the cloth is worn, revealing the woman's legs (for which she would be chastised on the street), and the fact that the cloth is not traditionally dyed mud cloth; its deep color and sharp white lines suggest it is quickly made for the tourist market. In the international world, where it became popular especially in high fashion through Malian designer Chris Seydou in the 1990s, bogolan has come to symbolize "Africanness," especially in the United States. The written French words (rather than in the Fulani or Bamankan language) are juxtaposed with the bogolan markings. In the traditional context, such

designs compose a personal and private visual language of abstract symbols, Sarah Brett-Smith has argued. Yet just as the French language text might be incomprehensible for a rural woman in Mali, here the bogolan pattern meanings have been scrambled and made incomprehensible in a purely decorative cloth designed for tourists. Others might see the photograph as a man's view of a woman's sexual objectification, but I argue that its deliberate symbolism complicates that reading. The image might suggest a critique of the commodification of both the female body and the tourist cloth, but its emphasis on the woman's relationship to her own body, or on the idea of sexuality and love—for a livable body is presumably not just sexual, but involves a sense of living *with*—paradoxically conveys other meanings as well.

Thus, the photograph offers a range of interpretations, from the quick glance of a simplified celebration or objectification of an African woman's (hetero)sexuality, to a more complex and nuanced reading based on one's knowledge in relation to bogolan's meaning in Bamana culture, or to tourist bogolan's sale on the world market. Ultimately the work resists a cohesive, singular understanding: its very ambiguity and mystery, as well as its incorporation of a poetic fragment, thus potentially create Relation for the viewer.

In this book, my methodology takes account of the conflicting sociopolitical and historical forces operating on photographers, as well as individual personalities, bodies of work, and institutions. It includes visiting studios and conducting interviews, attending exhibitions, and incorporating research from a range of disciplines including art history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science, postcolonial studies, and theories of photography. I also participated in this art world tangentially through curating an exhibition on Malian photography in 2012 at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, that traveled back to Bamako in 2015.<sup>56</sup> While this book attempts to describe a photography art world in Bamako, surveying institutions and artists and paying attention to power dynamics, I am also interested in the photograph itself—in what an image *is* and *does*. I examine individuals' professions, their artworks and projects, and various confluences of events within the broader sociohistorical context of contemporary Mali. As a social history of art, this study includes a discussion of the broader institutional framework operative in Bamako, yet views that framework as constructed by individual personalities and ambitions acted on by historical and political forces. The text incorporates formal and contextual analyses of single photographs, yet its broader purview is informed by postcolonial theory and incorporates a feminist approach. Considerations of class, caste,

ethnicity, and gender are included where relevant and possible. As art photography is a new cultural form in Mali, I situate the art photography movement within the broader context of photography in that country and trace its genealogy through traditional arts, modern art, and studio photography.

Because I wanted to examine how Malian photography has been influenced by international exchanges after the founding of the biennale, most of the photographs by Malians that I discuss were published or exhibited, almost always with French financial support in some form, either from the French Cultural Center and/or the French Cultural Embassy, to that branch of the French government that organizes the biennale (currently called CulturesFrance; formerly Association Française d'Action Artistique). I refer to photographs published in biennale catalogs and monographs coordinated by either Antonin Potoski, who was active in such publications from 1996 to 2002, or by Amadou Chab Touré for Galerie Chab.<sup>57</sup> This handful of books, and *carnets* published by the French press *Éditions l'Oeil*, were all supported by the French embassy, except in the case of Mohamed Camara, some of whose books were published in France with the support of his gallerist, Pierre Brullé. Two more recent books incorporated photographers and their works into larger cultural purview on Bamako or Mali.<sup>58</sup> Available for sale in Mali's National Museum bookstore and in several Parisian bookstores, in most cases these publications were made for a foreign audience, and they are written in French. Sometimes they are also translated into English, but none are in Bamanankan or any other Malian language, except for the title of the 1998 biennale, *Ja Taa! (Snap the Photo!)*.<sup>59</sup>

The absence of materials in local languages clearly shows that the publication or exhibition of these images was for a foreign audience, or a French-educated audience within Mali. Although I viewed hundreds of photographs in studios, this book mostly focuses on published or exhibited images because they have been brought into circulation and sent forth into the world to create effects and enact Relation with the multiple viewers who encounter them. The act of publishing or exhibiting these photographs rendered them visible to a larger audience, and activated their Relational potential, endowing them with meaning in a reciprocal aesthetic Relation between viewer and photograph and sharing their imaginaries with the world.

Thus the formal and/or conceptual qualities of these photographs appeal to an international audience, yet the images were made by Malian photographers in a context that was usually local. I examine their formal qualities from the perspective of someone trained in contemporary art history and photography history, as well as in African arts, in wanting to understand

why these particular images were chosen. At the same time, through my interviews with photographers in Mali, I try to consider the *cultural* qualities of these forms—their localized meaning and interest—from what I understand of a Malian perspective.

While *Embodying Relation* focuses on photography in Mali, and specifically on developments in Bamako, the capital, whose urban culture differs quite strongly from that in other areas of the country, it is problematic to celebrate art within the context of nationalism or to make positive, uncritical claims for a “national” art. Wanda Corn notes, with regard to American art, that “exceptionalist studies today are considered forms of cultural aggression, compelling conformity of behavior and belief and asserting political claims for American national superiority.”<sup>60</sup> Although I do not want to celebrate nationalist sentiments uncritically in the Malian context, national pride takes on a different meaning when operative in one of the poorest and least politically powerful countries in the world. Indeed, “Malian” identity is a concept that has only formally existed since independence in 1960, although notions of “nationalism” were operative in the struggle for independence. The forced institution of borders to create the French Sudan means that various ethnic polities’ areas of habitation naturally spilled over the new national boundaries. But after a century that encompassed colonialism, the liberation struggle, independence, socialist dictatorships, democracy, and a recent coup that enhanced civil strife between the North and the South, nationalism has acquired an important resonance in contemporary Malian life, and culture in Mali has been a powerful means of reinforcing nationalist feelings.<sup>61</sup> Malians also look back to their history of great empires—in particular the thirteenth-century Mali Empire, for which today’s nation is named—with great pride. In fact, Malians cite their cultural heritage, adherence to tradition, and pride in their past as reasons for becoming, until recently, one of the few peaceful democracies to survive the postindependence ethnic violence that suffuses most of West Africa.<sup>62</sup>

As nations are composed of many factions—ethnicity, class, profession, gender—it is inconceivable that a single photograph or body of work can articulate a definition of “identity” that will apply to the whole population. However, the “imagined community” of the nation is a strong force in people’s views of their own self-constructions.<sup>63</sup> It is clear that among photographers working in Bamako—those who call themselves artists, those who exhibit internationally (or hope to), and those who work in the photographic institutions—that issues of cultural, political, historical, and national identity inform and often drive their production. As it is through Malian por-

traitists Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé that “African” photography has become popularly known, photographers working today may also be aware of the power of “Malian identity” as a promotional quality in the view of the international art world. However, most photographers whom I interviewed denied that a qualitative “Malian” photography exists, instead suggesting that each photographer works according to his or her own style. Paradoxically, this willingness to allow for difference is a highly *Malian* characteristic. This book, which necessarily unfolds under national parameters, thus takes account of the complexities of nationalism and urbanism, and their contributions to photographers’ work.<sup>64</sup>

As a white, feminist North American researcher writing for an English-speaking audience about an African, Muslim, patriarchal culture in an economically disadvantaged country, I am deeply aware of and attentive to the necessity of self-reflexivity regarding my position in Western hegemony. This is an irresolvable contradiction, as any scholar who has managed to publish in the academic circles of the hegemonic West is obviously a beneficiary of the very structures of institutional and class power that the theory seeks to expose.<sup>65</sup> As part of my self-reflexive practice, I acknowledge the specific subject positions as well as what Glissant would call the opacity of the individuals discussed in this book. All of the artists and administrators whom I interviewed in Mali wield varying but definite amounts of cultural, social, economic, and, in some cases, political power, both in their local community, and in their ability to produce images that can “speak” to both local and international audiences while at the same time remaining opaque at different levels to these audiences. While this study focuses on photographers who work in and construct an imaginary of the liminal space between “the West” and “Mali,” I acknowledge that my subject position inevitably influences my work.<sup>66</sup>

A few points about terminology must be explained. While I use the term “traditional” to refer to “precolonial” African arts, I use it with the understanding that traditions are transmogrified by social and local practices over time and are not fixed, static, and timeless entities. The use of the term “precolonial” can overemphasize the recent history of European conquest, as if thousands of years of struggles for conquest among various cultures and peoples within Africa itself were of lesser importance. I do not mean to make this presumption. But there is no term that easily designates “the area in West Africa that was to become the nation of Mali in 1960,” since various empires had different boundaries. Therefore I sometimes use the word “pre-colonial” as a shorthand way to refer to the time before the French entered

Mali in the 1880s. As this book focuses specifically on the colonial and independence eras and on the technology of photography, introduced by Europeans who did not arrive in the French Sudan until the 1880s, infrequent usage of the term is acceptable in this context.

“Modern art” in this book refers to art made between roughly 1900 and 1950. It can be Malian or American or Japanese, but I would differentiate Bamana carvings for ritual use from modern art; the primary definition would be “art for art’s sake”—or, in Adornian terms, the autonomous art object (usually but not always abstract). Modern art photography would include photographers like Aaron Siskind as well as earlier photographers like László Moholy-Nagy. While scholars like Okwui Enwezor argue that Keïta’s photographs constitute modern art, I argue that they were vernacular portraits in the 1950s and became contemporary art (not modern art, although they shared some aspects of modernist photography aesthetics) in the 1990s. Similarly, I sometimes describe certain Malian photographers as utilizing a modern aesthetic—these are formal photographic aesthetic practices that contribute to abstraction, such as the close-up, stark contrasts, slantwise framing, or a bird’s-eye perspective.

The term “contemporary” here refers to the chronological present and recent past. While I try to avoid making the distinctions of Western (usually French or American) versus Malian, sometimes such broad categorizations provide a useful shorthand. When I use them, I mean to refer to broad cultural attitudes or to people who may lack familiarity with art. Suffice it to say that Afro-pessimism as a visual economy is alive and well in the United States.

The first chapter, “Unknown Photographer (Bamako, Mali),” introduces the history of photography in the French Sudan (now Mali) and discusses its relationship to power as wielded first by the colonials and then by Africans. I follow this history through Mali’s independence from France in 1960 until the transition to democracy in 1991–1992, showing how the history of photography is imbricated in the nation’s political history, and making a case for understanding this history through postcolonial theory and Mande aesthetics.

The second chapter, “Malian Portraiture Glamorized and Globalized,” examines the reception of Keïta’s and Sidibé’s works in the West (primarily focusing on the New York art world but briefly glossing Paris and London), arguing that the changed context of circulation and display of these reprints *constitutes* contemporary art in the New York art world, but can equally be understood as an emanation of Mande aesthetics. I also examine the effect

of the globalization of Keita's and Sidibé's works on their own practices, in fashion shoots and Sidibé's art project *Vues de dos*.

Chapter 3, "Biennale Effects: The African Photography Encounters," focuses on the institution that gave birth to the Bamakois art photography movement. I discuss the *Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie* from its founding to the present. Malian effort and effects are visible in various projects, images, and practices; I connect the Malian democratic state's emphasis on discussion, stemming from Bamana *ton* associations, to the biennale's emphasis on discourse and Relation.<sup>67</sup> I consider the importance of the biennale to photography throughout Africa, and the biennale's reception in the Malian, French, and American press.

In the fourth chapter, "Bamako Becoming Photographic: An Archipelagic Art World," the effects of the biennale are examined on the Bamako art world in terms of institutions, individuals, and photography education. Using a Foucauldian analysis as well as Bourdieu's description of an art world as a social field, this chapter examines the discursive practices and institutional histories that have surrounded the rise of art photography in Bamako in terms of Glissant's notion of an archipelago.

Chapter 5, "Creolizing the Archive: Photographers at the National Museum," explores bodies of work that stem from archival influences made by photographers who work or worked at Mali's National Museum, another important institution in the Bamako art world. The projects of Alioune Bâ, Youssouf Sogodogo, and Joseye Tienro tangentially apply the museum's mission to important aspects of contemporary culture. These projects *creolize* the archive, in Glissant's phrasing; their cultural relevance and aesthetics create imaginaries that enable Relation.

The sixth chapter, "Promoting Women Photographers," examines the issue of being a woman photographer in the Bamakois art photography world, considering feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray's theory of sexual difference as a way to account for Malian gender difference in connection with Glissant's notion of the irreducible difference of Relation. I discuss the work of five female photographers whose careers have been made possible by the biennale and its offshoots; in the career of rising star Fatoumata Diabaté, in particular, one can see the most benefits stemming from democracy, feminism, and the biennale.

The seventh and last chapter, "Errantry, the Social Body, and Photography as the *Écho-monde*," examines the diversity of ways in which Relation has been embodied in the practices of contemporary Malian art photographers. I show how the photographic practices of Mohamed Camara, Fa-



toumata Diabaté, Seydou Camara, Alioune Bâ, Bakary Emmanuel Daou, Mamadou Konaté, Harandane Dicko, Amadou Keïta, and Django Cissé convey concepts of errantry, opacity, and the social body through reference to Malian culture and imaginative aesthetics. Finally, I suggest that photography in Mali can be seen as an *écho-monde*, a Relational medium par excellence.

*Embodying Relation* tells several stories. It documents how two African photographers' fame in the art centers of the US and Europe had unprecedented and widespread effects, in Bamako and across Africa. It shows how Mali's shift to democracy in 1991–1992 (threatened but not ended by the March 2012 coup) enabled an art photography scene to blossom in Bamako that continues today, despite political instability. This book also analyzes the unprecedented emergence of professional women photographers in a patriarchal nation. Most importantly, the book argues that Malian art photographs contest globalization. Art photography in Mali provides a fascinating instance of a local aesthetics speaking both locally and globally, across different levels of cultural knowledge, without losing its emphasis on Mande aesthetics and meaning: instead of emphasizing a process of globalization and the homogenization of cultural forms, Mande aesthetics and Malian cultural values incorporate modernist or postmodernist aesthetics, forging new cultural forms yet retaining their Malianness.

Glissant believed that, to change a mentality, it is first necessary to change an imaginary. The Bamako art movement's importance lies in the fact that it is a locality in dialogue with the world—it entices viewers to experience Mande aesthetics. In the vein of scholars arguing for a more complex understanding of contemporaneity and local aesthetic values, *Embodying Relation* offers an example of a different form of contemporary art practice that functions on the global scene, yet relies on indigenous social and cultural values.<sup>68</sup> This is, in a sense, shifting the terms of not just what is valued as contemporary art, but what is *meant* by contemporary art.<sup>69</sup> If scholars are to give credence to notions of contemporaneity, then they must also be willing to reexamine views of what contemporary art is. An art photography informed more by Mande aesthetic and social values—which are intertwined—will look different than avant-garde American art; but as is known now from decades-long experiments with abstraction and conceptualism, what an artwork means is as important as what it looks like. The point is to recognize and legitimize other forms of visual discourse that might be more relevant to local populations than the global discourse of contemporary art: these works

hold local meaning and also carry significant meanings within the global art discourse, thereby embodying Relation.<sup>70</sup>

Glissant says that it is first in the efflorescence of art (poetry, literature, music, dance, photography) that irreducible difference can be acknowledged; in this poetic imaginary the way to equality can be discovered. I argue not for the direct political efficacy of this art, but rather for its possibilities in offering a vision that might not otherwise exist—and within this vision, circulating around and through it, touching its viewers and its makers, circulates Relation. This vision is not utopian; or if it is, it is not utopian in the conventional sense. For Glissant, utopia is change through exchange with others without losing one's self—it is not static but is “quivering” or “trembling,” an ongoing process that is a “continuous dialogue.”<sup>71</sup> Its imaginary plays on the surface of the photograph, which itself is contingently connected to reality, and is therefore irreducible. In bypassing the paradigm of the conceptual photography generally celebrated on the global circuit, Malian photography does not earn broad acclaim. Yet it is precisely in these modest overtures, quiet gestures, and specific Mande aesthetics that Relation beckons.