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To restore = to connect, to live

Felwine Sarr's cosmopolitan thinking

« Habiter ce monde, c'est partir d'un lieu certes, un lieu-matrice,
mais dont on apprend à se déprendre pour l'articuler à d'autres lieux. »
(Felwine Sarr, *Habiter le monde*, p. 42)

"To live in this world is to start from a place, a place-matrix,
but one that you learn to unlearn to articulate it to other places. »
(Felwine Sarr, Inhabiting the World, p. 42)

Felwine Sarr is best known for the publication of his report in favor of the restitution of African art objects, *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, co-written in 2018 with Bénédicte Savoy.[1] To the great displeasure of several French actors in the cultural and commercial field, concrete proposals for permanent restitution were considered for the first time – causing a major media scandal. Less well known is the theoretical and literary scope of Sarr's work, which is multiple, protean, ecological, poetic and intensely political. It sheds light on his positions on restitution by inserting them into broader thoughts on relationships on the one hand, and on the way of inhabiting places on the other. Above all, it allows us to give full weight to the gesture of "restitution": it is not only a question of translocating objects from one country to another, but of transforming these objects into bearers of culture, both by accepting the multiple layers of meaning they have accumulated over the course of their history and by making them the bearers of new imaginations yet to be born.

Restitution and relationship

To take seriously the positions defended in *Restituer le patrimoine africain* is to expand its philosophical, ecological and literary aspects. In *Habiter le monde, Essai de politique relationnelle*[2], Sarr writes that we are living in "a profound crisis of relationality." We are caught up in a necessarily economic logic where everything is only a question of struggle, extraction and profit. Today, there is no longer room for a way of thinking where exchange could be beneficial for both parties. Yet this is Sarr's conception of the work of art: the work nourishes the viewer and it also fertilizes the imaginations of the future. Hence the drama of the widespread looting of works of art during the colonial period: not only were the works of art extracted from their cultural context in which they made sense (the statues are "dead", to quote Alain Resnais and Chris Marker), but they were also unable to feed the imaginations of generations and generations of African audiences. This very broad conception of the relationship – resonating with Édouard Glissant's thought – is not only aesthetic, it also has ecological aspects: today, nature is only seen as a resource to be exploited and therefore not really taken care of. It is only a question of thinking in terms of yield and extraction, and not in terms of inclusion of living things, of interrelationships between humans and non-humans. Finally, this conception of the relationship also has a political side. With the invention of the "crime of solidarity", the migrant is necessarily perceived as trying to exploit a portion of the relationship. In contrast, Sarr defends a quality of interpersonal relationship that can be "a mutual enrichment, a game with a positive sum." This multiple declination of the "relationship" underlies the drafting of his text on restitution. For him, the works of art that were looted are to be understood as part of a mechanism of intentional deculturation and systematized appropriation, known as colonization. The "objet-repère", torn from their context of meaning, arrived on another continent and fed the imaginations of French artists and writers. Accordingly, this history, inherited by Surrealism, among others, now also forms part of these objects. They have "incorporated several regimes of meaning." In this sense, they have become "places of the *creolization* of cultures and are thus armed to work as mediators of a new relationality. Bringing objects back to the African continent means making them

bearers of this multiple history and, above all, bringing them back to life in creolised imaginary worlds. There would occur something that could be called an “infusion” of the work of art, porous to the universe that surrounds it, charged with a long history, infusing in return the spectators who contemplate it.

A place-matrix to think about the world

Like the work of art, places are also the object of *relations*. In this respect, we must turn first and foremost to the poetry and short stories of Sarr to better understand what he means by “inhabiting the world” in his theoretical essay. Originally from Niodior – which he never fails to mention in the back covers of his works – Sarr constructs a singular mental geography around the island of Senegal that structures his work and his thinking. Yet this poetic geography is neither curled up into itself nor regionalist. In Sarr’s texts, it is constantly connected to other points of the planet, to multiple literary memories, to globalized references, which in turn come to populate the place of departure. The place of origin is above all the matrix for thinking about the world. It is from the local that places, thoughts and encounters take shape. The region of Saint-Louis, where Sarr teaches, is a source of inspiration and regular meditation. The collection of poems and songs *Ishindenshin*[3] is a good example of this – signified by its very title. Literally “from his mind to my mind”, the term is translated from Japanese to refer to an unspoken interpersonal relationship and covers a concept of Zen, also present in the martial arts. It is a typical borrowing from Sarr’s work: making a Japanese concept mean something in a Senegalese geography, giving it meaning, and feeding on it in a cosmopolitan way in order to bring it into dialogue with other forms of the world. By listing the cities and places through which the poet passed like Bakary Diallo[4], Sarr’s description of the surroundings of Saint-Louis borrows from the Serer or Peule poetic tradition of praising the territory. The poem functioning as a map-itinerary, while also connecting it to other places, other conversations, other mental universes.

> « *Sur le quai de Pire, une peine roule vers Ngaye aux larges hanches*
> *Kébémer en habits de lumière et le Cayor reverdit*
> *Ciel-en-arc*
> *Un troupeau de vaches ondule*
> *Dos d'ânes de Mpal*
> *Un téléphone sonne, sonne et gronde*
> *Confidences sous un ciel capricieux* » (p. 37)

> "On the quai de Pire, a sentence rolls towards Ngaye with wide hips
> Kébémer in light clothes and the Cayor turns green again.
> Ciel-en-arc
> A herd of cows undulates
> Mpal donkey backs[5]
> A phone rings and rings and rumbles
> Confidences under a capricious sky" (p. 37)

All the place names refer to towns in northern Senegal, in the Saint-Louis region, and the poem describes a journey probably in the middle of the rainy season, when the vegetation comes back to life and the herds are brought to graze. Heavy, waterlogged skies provide the backdrop for a telephone conversation that suddenly interrupts the description of the landscape to suggest an off-place. Similarly, in other poems, Kigali (Rwanda), the Zulu songs of Nataal (South Africa), Fouta Djalon (Guinea), Kilimanjaro (Tanzania) rub shoulders with the ancient Senegalese kingdoms of Cayor and Bawol: Senegalese toponymy regularly connects with a mental geography that integrates the whole African continent, Afrocentric in a way, resolutely cosmopolitan in any case.

By "place-matrix", we do not necessarily mean a unique place of origin, but rather a place where we grew up, where we read, or which we liked to contemplate or to visit. Orléans and Pantin also appear as places of origin in the texts of Sarr. When he was an economics student at the University of Orléans, Sarr, like all students,

regularly took the tramway to cross the Loire – which is very wide there. Fadel, one of *Dahij*'s[6] characters, describes what has long been called the river of kings: "Every morning he would practice contemplating the river for a moment. The first day he saw nothing. Then little by little he noticed its different colours, its floods, its diet, its small islands that were born and died, the paths that lined it, the violence of the walls that contained it, its torpor on rainy days, its changing vigour, its impermanence. Grey, dark, greenish, languid, impetuous".

In Sarr's work, these places gradually become paintings for meditation, itineraries that are very similar to the route taken by the hoopoe in Farid al-Din Attar[7]'s *Le cantique des oiseaux*, regularly quoted by Sarr. It is about the inner *jihad*, the journey towards God. *Dahij*, the title of Sarr's first collection, is nothing other than "*jihad*" in reverse. It is a rosary of short stories that are meditations on the links between the Koran and other secular texts, from Strabon to Quignard, via the *Sufi* and *Zen* masters, and between humans and the land they inhabit. When he returns to Niodior, his island in Sine-Saloum, *Dahij*'s narrator scratches out the names that run through his itinerary: "*The Diamniadio crossing. The gendarmerie. Before that, the quarry. Diass, Gandigal, Sindia, then the road to Mbour. At this time of winter, the savannah is green and lush. The asphalt road looks like a red vein running inland. The path to the origins, the way back to the source. A few lonely, majestic baobabs. The "we" calls, the "I" aspires to the source and tries to blend in. The red vein that irrigates the green meadows. The ears of millet that already raise their heads. [8]*"

Seen in this way, places become supports for meditation, access doors to oneself and others. It is easy to see in this passage how the text attempts to render the density of the landscape it passes through, where layers of memories and the recollection of family – of community – vibrate with the description of a nature in full maturation. The collection *105 rue Carnot* – as its title suggests – is also built above all around memories of cities, places and streets, at the crossroads between individual (openly *Sufi*) journeys and collective belonging.

Thought of places, thought of art: Africa as the utopia of a new universal

In any case, the "place-matrix" is what Sarr uses to think about the world. It is an anchoring point, a fulcrum from which resounds a way of thinking that is resolutely outward-looking, resolutely cosmopolitan. This does not mean that it is deterritorializing to only create meaning around other points of the globe. On the contrary, it is nourished by a deep anchorage in loved, cherished places – which are not just geographical or fantastically ethnic in origin – to embrace the world to come. The project of the "ateliers de la pensée"[9] in Dakar was no different. It's goal was to think the world from Africa, to write Africa-world.[10] Here, Sarr's thinking is similar to that of the philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, in trying to think of a new form of universality, which would not be ethnocentric. In *En quête d'Afrique(s)*,[11] he proposes to take up Merleau-Ponty's notion of a "lateral universal" distinct from universalism, which is Western by default. This new universalist notion would no longer be merely the point of view of a conquering Europe onto the world, but, on the contrary, a way of thinking from various points of the planet, respectful of linguistic diversity, founded and tested in the permanent translation of cultures among themselves, particularly in minority languages. The solution developed by Sarr to this question of the universal – let us also call it lateral – is to be found in the way he describes and inhabits space.

Decolonizing minds, finding new metaphors for the future, tackling the ecological crisis that primarily threatens the poorest countries and in particular a large part of the Sahel – the political keys to Africa's future are not to be found in the mimicry of a growth policy imposed from outside with rules of the game established by foreign actors. It must be based in and designed for the places concerned. And here we find a fundamental trait of Sarr's thinking: these new political utopias will be established thanks to culture, thanks to African novelists who help to develop new imaginations, thanks to musicians and designers, thanks to repatriated works of art that will feed

the stories of the future. Understood in this way, the work of art is inserted into a whole, within a global thinking of the imagination. The missing work of art is a void in the future imaginary that Africa will produce of her own. Above all, art, the imaginary, fully participates in the construction of places. Hence this inspiring call to invest stories with utopias: "*Afrotopos* is the *atopos* of Africa: this place not yet inhabited by this Africa that is coming. It is a question of investing it through thought and imagination."

To return objects is therefore to connect, and it is also to inhabit, for at least two reasons. Firstly, because the future African utopia depends on a global conception of culture and the imaginary, in which the work of art plays an equally important role as the novelist, the designer, the stylist, and the film-maker. Secondly, because the work of art, fundamentally, has an impact on the place where it is located, Fertilizing the imaginary and making us rethink our links to the places we love.

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Footnotes

[1] Felwine Sarr, Bénédicte Savoy, *Restituer le patrimoine africain*, Paris, Philippe Rey / Seuil, 2018.

[2] Felwine Sarr, *Habiter le monde: essai de politique relationnelle*, Collection Cadastres, Montréal, Mémoire d'encrier, 2017, p. 12.

[3] Felwine Sarr, *Habiter le monde: essai de politique relationnelle*, Collection Cadastres, Montréal, Mémoire d'encrier, 2017, p. 12.

[4] Bakary Diallo (1892-1978) is a Fulani shepherd known to be one of the first Senegalese riflemen to have recounted in French his experience of the First World War in his novel *Force-Bonté*, Dakar, Nouvelles éditions africaines, 1926. See : Mélanie Bourlet, Franck Guillemain, Bakary Diallo, mémoires peules, [en ligne] CNRS, 2016, disponible sur www.canal-u.tv

[5] Translator's note : In French, « donkey bag » can mean « speed bump »

[6] Felwine Sarr, *Dahij*, Paris, Gallimard, 2009, p. 33.

[7] Farīd al-Dīn ʿAṭṭār, Leïli Anvar-chenderoff, *Le cantique des oiseaux*, Paris, Diane de Selliers, 2016.

[8] Felwine Sarr, *Dahij*, p. 59.

[9] See https://www.lesateliersdelapensee.com

[10] Achille Mbembe, Felwine Sarr (éd.), *Écrire l'Afrique-monde: Ateliers de la pensée, Dakar et Saint-Louis du Sénégal, 2016*, Paris, Philippe Rey, 2017.

[11] Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Jean-Loup Amselle, *En quête d'Afrique(s): universalisme et pensée décoloniale*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2018.