

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

TAKE ME HOME

The filmmaker Mati Diop turns her gaze on plundered art.

BY JULIAN LUCAS



The Musée du Quai Branly is a long ark of a building perched over a garden, whose foliage screens the museum from its busy namesake thoroughfare on the banks of the Seine. Literally overshadowed by the Eiffel Tower, it houses more than three hundred thousand pieces of art from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, most of them legacies of France's colonial empire. Its opening, in 2006, was billed as an enlightened departure from the practice of exhibiting non-European works as anthropological specimens; the building's architect, Jean Nouvel, described it as a place of spiritual regeneration, where the Western

curatorial apparatus would "vanish before the sacred objects so we may enter into communion with them." But the vibes within are less enchanting than uncanny. The cavernous main gallery is a maze of shadows and imitation mud walls, where masks look out from between oversized photographs of tropical vegetation. "I'll never be familiar with this space," Mati Diop said when we visited last month. "It's like 'The Matrix.'"

Diop, a French Senegalese filmmaker who won international renown for her debut feature, "Atlantics," seemed viscerally disturbed by the museum, describing its "mise en scène" as depress-

ing, manipulative, and, switching to English, which she speaks fluently, "fucked up." Everything was wrong, she insisted, from the folkloric condescension of the walls' earthy colors to the crowded shelves of musical instruments in visible storage, which reminded her of bodies in a morgue. Most troubling were the grim-faced security guards, nearly all of them elderly Black men. "Psychologically, what does it do to a person to spend an entire day in a space whose violent context"—colonialism—"has been completely effaced?" Diop whispered. "And yet it's everywhere." She indicated a man in a dark suit beside a colorful beaded crown from the kingdom of Dahomey, now southern Benin. "The presence of these men and of this patrimony in the museum are part of the same story," she continued. "It's dizzying."

Her new film, a fantastical documentary titled "Dahomey," chronicles the return of the so-called Dahomey treasures, comprising twenty-six of the many art works that French troops seized in the eighteen-nineties while subjugating the kingdom. (A newspaper of the time crowed that the vanquished natives, whose "painted gods" had failed to defend them, "wouldn't miss the wood.") Dahomean sculptures were placed in anthropology museums, where they were admired by Picasso and Apollinaire. But in 2018 decades of diplomacy and activism culminated in Emmanuel Macron's historic decision to repatriate the art works to Benin. Diop's film follows them from the Quai Branly to a hero's welcome in Cotonou, the country's largest city, where they are discussed by students at a local university after an exhibition at the Presidential palace. "I cried for fifteen minutes," one student says after seeing the show. Another declares, "What was looted more than a century ago is our soul."

Vexing questions shadow the jubilant homecoming. What does it mean for art works to "go back" to a country that didn't exist when they were taken? Can they have any meaning for a population alienated from their history? Or do they risk becoming mere tools of state propaganda? And what about the countless stolen objects that Western museums *haven't* returned? In

Diop's new film about art restitution has made her a French media fixture.

Diop's otherworldly conceit, these anxieties are voiced by "26"—a defiantly posed statue of the Dahomean king Ghezo, who speaks for the treasures in a fathomless, reverberant growl. (It's one of a trio of royal *bocio*, or power figures, depicting Dahomean sovereigns, and is attributed to the artists Sossa Dede and Bokossa Donvide.) "I'm torn between the fear of not being recognized by anyone and not recognizing anything," 26 frets in Fon, the kingdom's language, wondering, with something like survivor's guilt, why he's been chosen to "return to the surface of time."

We asked a security guard where the treasures had been exhibited before their removal from the museum. Diop had filmed there, but couldn't find where she'd set up her cameras; between the announcement of the works' deinstallation and their flight to Benin, she'd had only two weeks to prepare. "It was like commando operations," she recalled. The Quai Branly did not grant her request for access until Beninese officials, who wanted to record the handover for posterity, interceded on her behalf. Now, back at the scene of her cinematic heist, she gasped at the sight of a mask familiar from Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's "Statues Also Die," a film-essay on plundered art which France banned after its release, in 1953. "It's her," she said, retrieving her phone from a blue Telfar handbag to take a picture. "She's so beautiful. She's so beautiful."

Diop, forty-two, is a slight, poised woman with delicate features and a coolly vigilant bearing. Often seen, much to her chagrin, as "cute," she has wavy, center-parted hair and a beauty mark in one corner of her feathery eyebrows, with doe eyes that leaped, as we wandered the galleries, from vitrine to vitrine. She can be almost aggressively reserved; at one point, when another museumgoer blundered into her personal space, she reacted with mute pique. Yet, when she speaks about her work, it's with a zeal that propels her outward. At times, she gesticulated so emphatically that she touched my shoulders without seeming to notice. "I need to have a sensual and physical relationship to ideas," Diop said. "It's hard for me to create without the

idea of transmitting at the same time."

"Dahomey" arrives in American theatres buoyed by its critical success in Europe. (Later, it will be available on the streaming platform MUBI.) This February, it won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale, on the heels of Germany's decision to transfer ownership of its Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. Its premiere in France, last month, reignited a moribund national debate around the issue, transforming Diop into a fixture on radio and television and landing 26 on the cover of the leftist daily *Libération*. "She's already had an effect," Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese intellectual and the co-author of the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report, which guided France's restitution of cultural heritage to African countries, told me. "This question was framed in terms of the Western debate. 'Do you have museums? Are you able to take care of the objects? Are you emptying Western museums?' Now, with the film, we are hearing the voices of the people who are supposed to be mainly concerned."

"Originally, I'd planned to write a fictional epic, the whole journey of an art work from the moment of its pillage to the moment of its restitution, which I imagined to be in the future," Diop says of "Dahomey," explaining that it became a documentary only after she read that the treasures were about to be returned. Before its release in France, the film premiered in Benin and Senegal, where Diop recently established a production company, punningly named Fanta Sy. (Fanta and Sy are common Senegalese names.) Restitution has become her synecdoche for creatively empowering African youth. As she put it to me, "I wanted to make a film that would restore our desire for ourselves."

The filmmaker's fervor is inspiring, if occasionally self-serious. Who else would speak, as she did at a recent press event, of restitution as an "irresistible march" that promises to shake the very "order of the imaginary"? Yet Diop's work justifies such auteurial pronouncements. Hers is a yearning, nocturnal cinema of ambiguous adventures and impossible returns, shuttling between intimate loneliness—a statue's, a has-been actor's—and vast issues like decolonization and the mi-

grant crisis. She made "Dahomey" after passing on multimillion-dollar projects in Hollywood. It was hard to doubt her when she said that she became a filmmaker because it was her "only possible path to liberation."

Applause broke out on Lyon's Rue du Premier-Film as Diop, with an obliging flourish, pulled a red cloth from the "Wall of Filmmakers" to reveal a plaque inscribed with her name. A small crowd took pictures. Thierry Frémaux, who runs the Cannes Film Festival and the Lumière Institute—where this impromptu ceremony unfolded last month—clasped her in an avuncular embrace. Soon, dozens of students, many of them Black or brown, had gathered around Diop under the street lights. A young woman with oversized glasses invited her to visit her film school. Another, in a kaffiyeh and fingerless gloves, asked the filmmaker to sign her DVD of "Atlantics."

Diop's début is a gothic romance, a political fable about labor and migration, and an homage to Dakar, Senegal. A group of young men helping to build a luxury tower fall victim to wage theft and resolve to seek a better life in Spain. Like thousands of others, they perish at sea. But then, impossibly, they return, possessing the bodies of the young women they left behind. Inexplicable fires and fevers strike the city; Dakar, at continental Africa's westernmost point, is depicted as a sprawl of dust-choked motorways and ghostly beaches edging into the Atlantic's dark expanse. In one of the final scenes, the boys force their boss to dig graves for them at a seaside cemetery. "Every time you look at the top of the tower, you'll think of our unburied bodies at the bottom of the ocean," one says.

Diop cast nonprofessional actors from across Dakar. Amadou Mbow crossed her path at two in the morning in the chic Almadies neighborhood, where he'd been out clubbing. "Me, I believe in destiny," he told me; though he had never considered acting, and feared religious backlash for the sex scenes, he ended up starring as a young police detective—and occasionally interpreting for his co-star, Mama Sané, who spoke no French. The film was shot in Wolof, Senegal's

lingua franca, which Diop herself labored to understand. But her determination was a language all its own. “If she had to do the scene fifty times, we did the scene fifty times,” Mbow said, recalling an instruction to be “exhausted within an inch of your life” during an interrogation scene. The shoot went on all day: “With Mati, there is no ‘timing,’ only searching until you find.”

“Atlantics” debuted at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, where Diop was the first Black woman ever to compete as a director. Her invitation came as a shock. The film was not only a debut but a genre fantasy in which nonprofessional actors delivered their lines in an African language. Yet it took home the Grand Prix. (It was subsequently picked up by Netflix, breaking the diaspora language barrier to join a Black film renaissance in the United States.) For Diop, who until then was largely known for starring in Claire Denis’s intimate father-daughter drama “35 Shots of Rum” (2008), its victory was an “LSD experience.” The vertigo was evident in her acceptance speech. Four minutes in, and not yet through with her solemn expressions of gratitude, Diop was escorted offstage by Sylvester Stallone to the tinkling strains of Camille Saint-Saëns’s “Aquarium.”

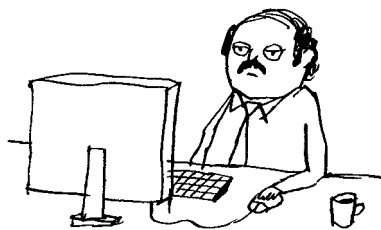
“I was impressed by this woman—so young, looking so cute and fragile—but so strong and so precise in conversation,” Frémaux recalled over drinks. We were at the institute’s café, just across from the hangar where some of the world’s first films were created. The menu specializes in wines made by filmmakers; we had Francis Ford Coppolas. “Atlantics” had a “Senegalese essence” that transcended Diop’s mixed origins, Frémaux went on, characterizing the filmmaker as “a pure artist, a pure poetess, and a great politician, too.” In 2022, she directed and narrated a campaign ad for La France Insoumise, a left-wing party. It zooms in on the faces in a movie theatre, celebrating the diversity of a country where the Lumière brothers invented cinema as we know it. “In every genre and color, we laugh, we ponder, we cry,” Diop intones.

The filmmaker joined us midway through drinks, having just left a screen-

ing of “Dahomey” in one of the institute’s theatres. “The sound was perfect,” she told Frémaux. (In Marseille, where she’d just held another *avant-première*, it had been far too low.) She’s exacting about audio, especially 26’s voice, which is meant to resound like a tremor from below. “The presence needs to be disturbing and provocative,” she said. “The film isn’t a ballad—it’s a journey.” She conceives of “Dahomey” as an opera with two choruses: the students, representing Africa’s future, and the treasures, trailing history’s ghosts. “It should be fundamentally strange to experience such traces of coloniality, which are here in France, as over there.”

Lyon, a tidy provincial capital, feels worlds away from West Africa. Yet not far from the institute was the Catholic Society of African Missions, which owns, and is expected to return, Dahomean works. Nearby was the university where Frantz Fanon wrote “Black Skin, White Masks.” The hidden afterlives of empire are a through line in Diop’s films. “Dahomey” opens, in Paris, with a nocturnal scene of flashing Eiffel Tower tchotchkes, sold by an undocumented African street vender just offscreen. It’s a characteristically oblique touch; as Judith Lou Lévy, who co-produced the film, told me, “Mati has a special relationship to the invisible.”

Sensory precision is crucial to her films, because they leave so much to



the imagination. “Atlantics” evokes the spectral presence of its drowned migrants with little more than tinted contact lenses—to change the eye color of the possessed—and a soundtrack of austere electronica, by the Kuwaiti composer Fatima Al Qadiri. (The director wanted a score that conveyed the feeling of being possessed by a djinn.) “Dahomey” owes much of its atmosphere of elemental futurism to the synths of

the pioneering French Beninese keyboardist Wally Badarou. “Some directors are musicians who make films, and I feel like one of them,” Diop explained. “Before it does anything else, a film ought to emit a frequency.”

Her evocative minimalism is partially motivated by a desire to accord her subjects a degree of autonomy. Inaudible conversations recur in her films. In “Atlantics,” the young migrants resolve to leave Senegal in a scene without dialogue. Their deaths occur offscreen; we learn of their last moments only when Sané’s character, Ada, briefly reunites with the anguished ghost of her lover, Souleiman. “It puts the spectator in an active position, because it’s she who has to imagine the shipwreck, make the journey,” Diop says. “It’s not something that you consume.”

A different approach reigns in most Western films about Africa. Last year, Matteo Garrone ventured into territory not dissimilar to that of “Atlantics,” with “Io Capitano,” loosely inspired by the true story of a West African boy who attempted to reach Italy. Garrone’s Senegalese protagonist endures torture in a Libyan prison, crises at sea, and a harrowing Sahara crossing that features C.G.I. mirages and sumptuous aerial photography. Diop avoided the film until it was offered as an in-flight movie. In her view, Garrone’s Dakar is too sanitized, his narrative too sentimental, and his migrants so touchingly naïve as to defy credibility. “If it can help white racists to have a bit of empathy, maybe it’s good,” she said. But it’s “the antithesis of my approach.”

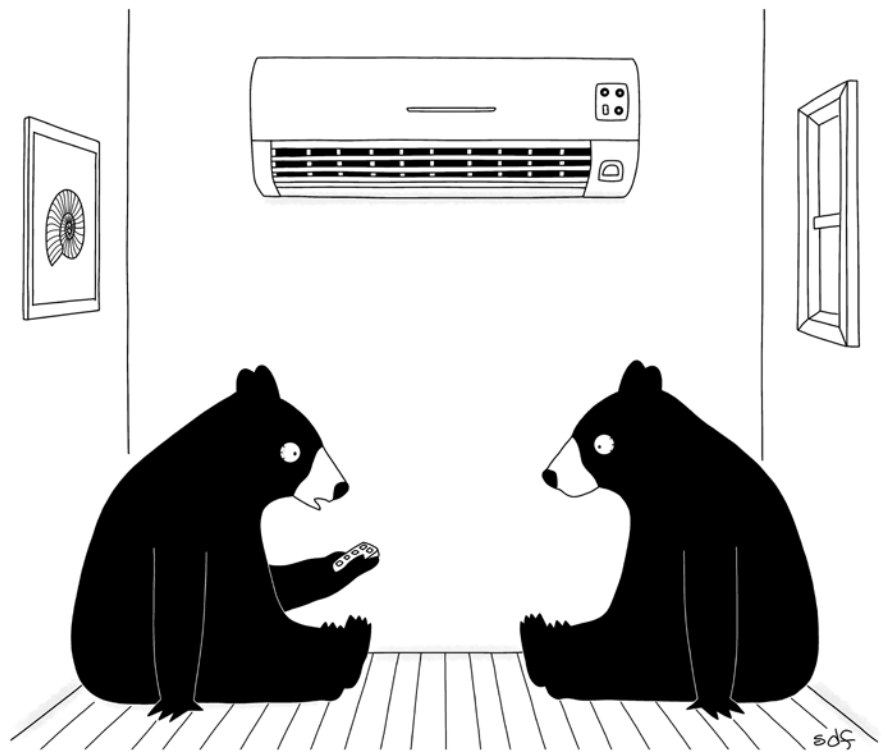
Diop feels that her own work is often misunderstood in Europe. “France is too much,” she complains. “They don’t get it. ‘She’s a filmmaker, but she looks like an actress. She’s French, but her films are so strange, hybrid and talking Wolof. There’s zombies.’” She observed that she hadn’t appeared on a single magazine cover in the country since winning the Grand Prix. The audience that Diop really wants to reach is in Africa, but she sometimes wonders if that’s a realistic aspiration. She was gratified by the response to “Dahomey” in Benin, but the entire country has just one movie theatre—which, in a further irony, belongs to a chain con-

trolled by a right-wing French billionaire known as the “King of Africa,” Vincent Bolloré. “I’m addressing this film to these youth, who don’t go to the theatres,” Diop said. “Sometimes I question the pertinence of the medium I chose.” But she had little time to explore those doubts before she was whisked off to a Q.&A. A glass of red wine remained full on the table. Diop had left her Coppola untouched.

The next morning, Diop and I rode the high-speed train from Lyon to Paris. We took two seats in the café car, where she neatly quartered a croque monsieur as fog-shrouded countryside raced by. Her mother, Christine Brosart, was born in Paris, and worked as a photographer—and once as a Sahara guide—before pursuing a career as an art director in advertising. Mati’s father, Wasis Diop, is a guitarist and composer, who emigrated from Dakar to Paris; his jazz-rock fusion band, West African Cosmos, helped to establish the city’s world-music scene. (Father and daughter recently collaborated on a video.) The marriage of sight and sound would have been obvious enough without the addition of Diop’s uncle, the legendary Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty.

Mambéty, who made only two feature-length films, earned a permanent place in the pantheon of world cinema with “Touki Bouki” (1973), a picaresque adventure set in and around Dakar just after independence. The city is saturated with color and dizzy with life. A young couple gallivants around on a motorcycle with the skull of a zebu between its handlebars, managing to scrape up enough cash for passage to Europe. Then, when the time comes to embark, the two are separated—the man balks and the woman boards. Mambéty’s camera never leaves Senegal, but the film is pervaded with a fantasy of elsewhere, conveyed through the hypnotic repetition of Josephine Baker’s “Paris, Paris, Paris.”

His niece’s longing ran in the opposite direction. Mati Clementine Diop was born in 1982 and reared in Paris’s Twelfth Arrondissement, a quiet residential area whose Haussmannian architecture and lack of diversity felt stultifying. Christine and Wasis, who



“Now we can hibernate whenever we want.”

separated when she was eight, nurtured her creativity but neglected the peculiar challenges of her identity. “My parents were very out of it,” she recalled. “They seemed to romanticize the idea of me being mixed, as if it meant the end of racism.” Diop has been described as “African film royalty,” a phrase that conjures up a Sofia Coppola of the Sahel, but neither cinema nor the continent was an inevitable discovery. At first, she wanted to become a singer-songwriter, training her voice on Aaliyah songs and learning bass in emulation of Meshell Ndegeocello.

By eighteen, she wanted to direct. One culprit was a scene of Gena Rowlands dancing in John Cassavetes’s “A Woman Under the Influence,” which showed her how camerawork could expand a performer’s range of self-expression. “I was moved by the space that was made for that woman to be,” Diop recalled. She became similarly infatuated with the work of American filmmakers like Larry Clark and with the photography of Nan Goldin. Diop briefly enrolled in a self-directed film course at Le Fresnoy, an art school and

institute, in 2007. But staying behind the camera proved a struggle. “I felt myself to be prey very early,” she told me, recalling the overtures of male filmmakers who wanted to cast her in their projects. Directing was a preemptive rejection of being objectified on-screen. Diop said of her thinking, “I’m going to control my narrative. I’m not going to become the ‘cute’ mixed actress of white cinema, only directed by old white men.”

Ironically, it was her role in “35 Shots of Rum” that set her course. After a few months at Le Fresnoy, she was alerted by a friend, the actor Grégoire Colin, about an open role in a new film by Claire Denis. She was thrilled. “I wanted to be in a film like ‘Trouble Every Day,’” she told me—Denis’s erotic thriller, starring Vincent Gallo, about a man obsessed with a female serial killer. “This was my fantasy, to do something rock.” She’d long idolized a “white trash” aesthetic associated with directors like Harmony Korine. But Denis’s new film was about an aging Black train conductor living on the outskirts of Paris, who gently pressures his too dutiful

daughter to leave their apartment and live her own life.

"When I read the script, I was so disappointed," Diop recalled, burying her face in her hands. "This is so uncool!" She admired Denis but had no desire to appear in a "social Black French film." Then she learned that another biracial woman considered for the part had been unwilling to stop straightening her hair. Diop, who then wore her hair similarly, was jolted.

"I had read Fanon, I knew that it was fucked up," she explained, but she hadn't truly confronted her own self-avoidance. At their first meeting, she told Denis that she wanted to be a director, not an actress. But when Denis saw her opposite Alex Descas, who played the father, and Colin, who played her character's paramour, it was clear that they had chemistry. "When I finished," Denis told me, "the link with Mati was very strong."

Denis had no idea that her young lead was the niece of Mambéty, whom she'd once met, and whose "Touki Bouki" was one of her favorite films. Nor could she have known that, for

Diop, appearing in "35 Shots" would mean coming to grips with her African roots. "She told me that she never saw herself as Black before my film," Denis recalled. "I thought she was joking." Diop told me that playing a Black man's daughter was a "huge coming out," and said it confirmed her belief in cinema's power to emancipate. "I went through the mirror, and not just as a director-actress," she said. "Something had actually changed."

After "35 Shots of Rum," Diop visited Dakar for the first time since her late teens. It was the tenth anniversary of Mambéty's death, and she travelled with her father, who had scored one of his brother's films. Djibril and Wasis had shared a house on the tiny island of Ngor, where nearly everyone knew them. (The family is Lebu, an ethnic group believed to be Dakar's original inhabitants.) Diop recalled being struck by seeing her father back in his birthplace. "I felt the weight of the exile's vertigo—of the choice to leave or stay—condensed in 'Touki Bouki' but also in their lives

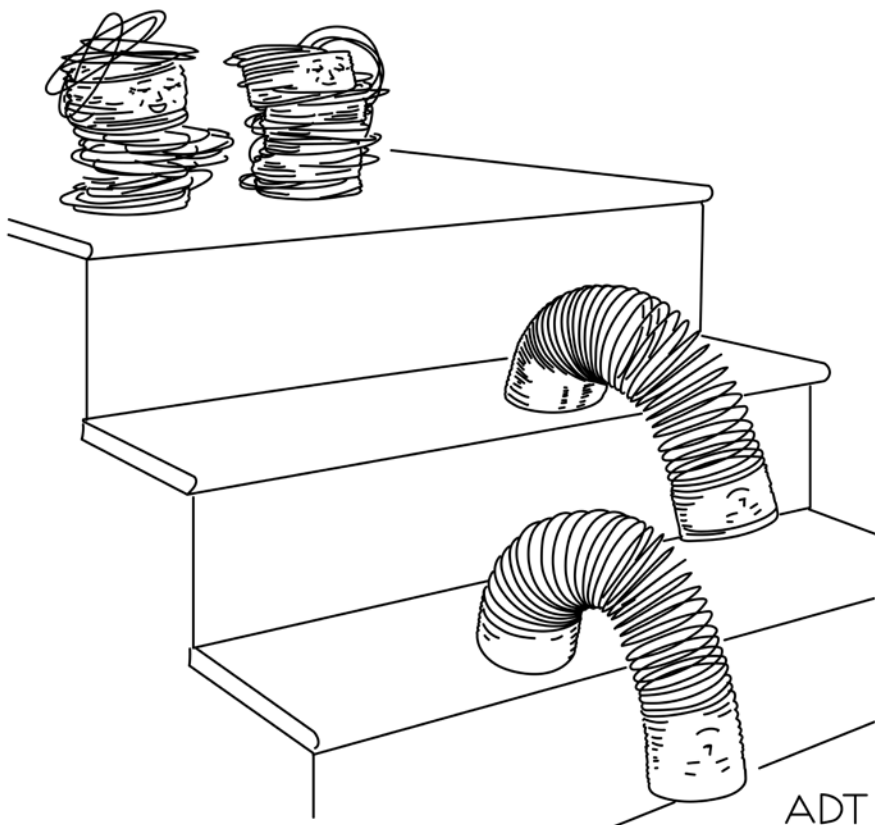
and mine." She began to feel that it was time to take her place as an artist in the family, and to establish a dialogue with an earlier wave of African film.

The result was the short "A Thousand Suns" (2013), in which the male lead of "Touki Bouki," Magaye Niang, plays a version of himself. "That's me," he tells a group of kids at a Dakar screening of the 1973 film; they mock him in response. His acting dreams have gone nowhere, and it begins to seem that his entire post-independence generation—scorned by the young and abandoned by émigrés—has missed its rendezvous with destiny. When he calls his co-star in "Touki Bouki," who is working on an oil rig in Alaska, she seems equally unfulfilled. "You don't have a home until you leave," he tells the woman in one dreamlike sequence, which envisions him pursuing her naked spectre across the tundra. "And, once you've gone, you can't come back."

While beginning to shoot the film, in 2009, Diop saw Dakar anew on rides with a beloved cousin, Cheikh Mbaye. "We spent our time exploring the city on his scooter, making images day and night," Diop said. "It's all you need for cinema." Mbaye, who now lives in Texas, told me about Diop's passion for seeing the city from a lighthouse, and catching it unawares at dawn. "There were times when we missed the sunrise because I'd been hanging out late with my friends," he recalled, laughing. "She would be *super, super* upset about it."

As Diop embraced her Senegalese heritage, Mbaye's friends dreamed of migrating to Europe. But theirs was no longer the fanciful aspiration of her uncle's time. It was born of a period of economic contraction and of a despair that she managed to film one night during a fireside conversation between her cousin and two of his friends on the beach. One, a poor tailor, recounts his deportation from Europe, and swears that he'll try to make it there again: "May I die en route if I lie—I would get on board. There's nothing but dust in my pockets."

"Dakar started to feel like a city of the living dead, with youth throwing themselves into the ocean," Diop told me. She felt an almost supernatural



"Ah, to be young!"

calling to tell the story of this “ghost generation,” and made a short called “Atlantics” with her footage of the conversation on the beach. But her feature of the same name took ten years to realize. Back in Paris, she began a fruitful collaboration with Judith Lou Lévy. The two met at a night club, and bonded over a shared interest in genre films. Before long, Lévy had established a small company that went on to co-produce “Atlantics” and “Dahomey.”

“Mati loves to put her camera on feminine figures, on their desiring bodies, on their relationship with what’s missing,” Lévy told me, characterizing her films as obsessed with the links between death and sensuality. The two co-wrote a homoerotic short called “Snow Canon,” about a teen-ager who develops feelings for her American babysitter in the French Alps. The short’s exploration of abandonment, nature, and the bonds between women ultimately found its way into “Atlantics.”

Nowadays, Diop is at work on a feature, set between France and Africa. But she also fantasizes about moving to New York and buying a dog. (A few weeks ago, she visited for the New York Film Festival, where “Dahomey” was screened before a packed house at Lincoln Center.) “I feel so respected as a young filmmaker,” she said of working in the United States—where, she believes, it’s easier to cross boundaries like French and African, actor and director, genre fantasy and *cinéma d’auteur*. “I would definitely make a great American film.” But she’s still waiting for a Hollywood pitch tempting enough to draw her away from her own fixations: “I’m an artist, I’m a creator, so I need to invent.”

Diop was approached about directing “The Woman King,” a big-budget action movie about Dahomey’s legendary “Amazon” warriors, set in the eighteenth-century. (The movie, which was released in 2022, drew criticism for minimizing the kingdom’s involvement in the slave trade.) She says she would have loved to work with Viola Davis, who starred in the film, but couldn’t bring herself to shoot an epic about the Fon kingdom with English-speaking actors.

“I don’t think it’s wrong for *them*

to do it,” she explained, but the project was in “absolute contradiction” with her own mission. “My name is Mati Diop,” she went on. “I’m African. If you come to me to propose a film that deals with Africa, you’ve gotta speak the language.”

“I won’t budge!” Claire Denis exclaimed, lifting her knees to let a group of newcomers make their way to their seats. We were in the Max Linder Panorama, a historic Paris cinema. The place was full of artists and activists, including Assa Traoré, a leader in France’s racial-justice movement. A prominent rap journalist introduced Diop—whose success had even reached his mother, in Benin—as “*une nana de ouf*,” or an amazing chick. Diop thanked her audience for coming out “in force,” alluding to France’s rightward tilt as she stressed the political importance of Black imagination. “Macron doesn’t have the power to reconstitute,” she declared as the lights went down. “*We* have the power to reconstitute.”

Creative works about art restitution have tended to look backward. Films like “Statues Also Die”—and, more recently, Isaac Julien’s video installation “Once Again . . . (Statues Never Die)”—are melancholy reckonings, dwelling on looted art works as witnesses of colonial devastation. A more mischievous conceit is the artifact as avenger: Kill-monger seizing a vibranium axe from a British museum in “Black Panther,” or Yinka Shonibare’s recent sculpture “Monument to the Restitution of the Mind and Soul,” a ziggurat packed with replica Benin Bronzes and a bust of a British officer imprisoned in a vitrine: Who’s the artifact now? By contrast, Diop’s film leaves behind history and wish fulfillment, preferring to explore what restitution means in the messy present and uncertain future.

Onscreen, we were back at the Quai Branly, watching a curator bandage 26’s damaged leg. “I was already in physical relation with the statue,” Denis later told me. The scene left her “moved like a child.” Denis spent part of her youth in Cameroon, where her father, a colonial administrator, disapproved of colleagues who decorated their homes with ritual masks. “Dahomey” dramatizes the rebirth of such curios

as living entities. The journey from Paris to Cotonou unfolds in the womb-like darkness of the airplane's hold—which we experience from 26's perspective through a camera that Diop had sealed in the sculpture's crate.

The art historian Bénédicte Savoy, who co-wrote the restitution report, travelled in parallel with the treasures, on a plane with Beninese officials. “Mati’s film is a U.F.O.,” she told me. Jackie Chan had made action movies about the theft of Chinese art works, and there were documentaries (and a Nollywood melodrama) about the British sacking of Benin City. But “Dahomey” confronted the epistemological question at the heart of restitution, Savoy said: “How can Western museums tell us that such objects are just objects—with a weight, an age, a material, et cetera—when so much agency swirls around them?”

Savoy has argued that restitution should involve not just the return of plundered works but their reintegration into sacred and communal contexts. But you don’t have to believe that art works are alive to see them as actors in history. The heart of Diop’s film is a spirited discussion among students at the University of Abomey-Calavi, just outside Cotonou, which moves fluidly between the art works themselves and the broader questions they’ve engendered. The students touch on class, religion, language, geopolitics, and even Benin’s government, a staunch ally of France with an increasingly authoritarian leader.

“We all know that an ancestor of our President, Patrice Talon, was one of the interpreters who facilitated the plunder,” a student claims. Others see the return of so few works as political pandering or even a “savage insult,” and wonder what economic or military concessions their own government has offered in exchange. Still more complicated are the students’ feelings about the treasures. One says that if the objects were reconnected to Benin’s vodun rituals they would inspire fear; another worries that at museums they’ll be inaccessible to ordinary Beninese.

“I grew up with Disney, I grew up watching ‘Avatar,’” a student says, but never an animated movie about Dahomey’s last sovereign, Béhanzin.

(France exiled Béhanzin to the Caribbean; Diop hired a Haitian writer, Makenzy Orcel, to compose the voice of 26, playing on the parallels between the scattering of African art and life in the diaspora.) “All I want to say, I can’t say it,” a young woman laments, arguing for the use of Fon and other national languages in schools. “I’m speaking French, but I’m not French. I’m from Abomey.”

After the screening at the Max Linder Panorama, Diop, her friends, and several students from the film gathered at L’Embuscade, an African-Caribbean restaurant in the Ninth. Beyoncé played as a disco ball revolved. Diop flashed a toothy smile I’d seldom seen. Her films tend to reach their climax in moments of unexpected celebration; in “Atlantics,” the bereaved young lover awakens from her ghostly farewell smiling, as morning light fills a bar on the beach. “It’s not so much the impossibility of return as the possibility of transcending it,” Diop says of her films. “I want to create a space where lost lives can find second breath.”

For “Dahomey,” she wrote a sci-fi epilogue set in the twenty-seventies, and another sequence that envisioned the spirits of the treasures possessing a Beninese youth. But they didn’t fit within the budget. Instead, like “Atlantics,” the film concludes with a closeup of a young woman at a night club. The camera zooms in on her slumbering face as revellers dance in slow motion amid green lights and empty beers. On a second viewing, it occurred to me that she might be the source of the statue’s voice, the whole century-long saga tumbling out of a Black girl’s dream.

Watching “Dahomey,” I was often reminded of a story from “A Thousand and One Nights.” A djinn entombed in a jar on the seabed gets caught in a fisherman’s net and lifted to the surface, where he tastes freedom for the first time in centuries. He offers the fisherman a reward—not three wishes, but a choice as to the manner of his death. Deliverance has been so long in coming that its arrival inspires only resentment. They take from us thousands of pieces, a debater in the film thunders, and they retribute only twenty-six: “In a hun-

dred years, they’ll retribute two. We won’t be there then!”

Is 26 too late? Earlier this year, legislation on the restitution of cultural property was indefinitely postponed in France’s National Assembly, where the rise of the far right, in parallel with a generational turn against Paris in African countries, has left little appetite for further transfers. Last year, Nigeria’s government alarmed Western art professionals by giving the traditional ruler of the Benin kingdom—not to be confused with the nation of Benin—authority over the returned Benin Bronzes, leaving him free to decide whether and how to exhibit them. Today, Dahomey’s twenty-six treasures are back in boxes, because the construction of the new museums meant to house them is behind schedule.

“Dahomey” is full of sly acknowledgments that repatriation isn’t quite liberation. Diop zooms in on a white supervisor barking orders at Beninese workers. She cuts from a Dahomey throne decorated with shackled slaves to laborers at work on the Presidential palace in Cotonou. During an eerie night scene at the fortified capital complex, where sprinklers mist the air in time with the patrolling soldiers, 26 says that contemporary Benin is “far removed from the country I saw in my dreams.” One wonders how the Dahomean kings might have reacted to a future in which French is the official language, the currency is controlled from Paris, and billboards—as one shot reveals—advertise skin-lightening creams. But the subtlest insight of Diop’s film might be that restitution doesn’t have to undo the past in order to be right for a necessarily imperfect future.

Just before the pomp and circumstance of the official exhibition of the works in Cotonou, we see two construction workers admire the newly returned treasures in an otherwise vacant gallery. They can’t be older than twenty, and their silent fascination is more persuasive than a thousand Sarr-Savoy reports. The boys speak, looking up at a towering throne, in a conversation to which we aren’t privy. Then, at a signal from above, they amble upstairs, recalled to the endless work of building their country. ♦

WEB DISPLAY



What does it mean for art works to “go back” to a country that didn’t exist when they were taken, and what meaning will they have for a population alienated from their history? These vexing questions animate Diop’s new film, “Dahomey.”

Photograph by Robbie Lawrence for The New Yorker

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STORY Mati Diop and the Cinema of Impossible Returns

The French Senegalese director passed on big-budget Hollywood projects before making her latest film—a fantastical documentary about art restitution.

SITE Mati Diop and the Cinema of Impossible Returns

The French Senegalese director passed on big-budget Hollywood projects before making her latest film—a fantastical documentary about art restitution.

LONG DEK “Dahomey,” the new documentary by Mati Diop, the award-winning director of “Atlantics,” chronicles the repatriation of twenty-six royal treasures from France’s Musée du Quai Branly to Benin. The film’s début has reignited a moribund international debate about art restitution and transformed Diop into a fixture on French media, Julian Lucas reports.

SOCIAL Mati Diop and the Cinema of Impossible Returns

The French Senegalese director passed on big-budget Hollywood projects before making her latest film—a fantastical documentary about art restitution.

SEO Mati Diop and the Cinema of Impossible Returns

Julian Lucas profiles Mati Diop, the director of “Atlantics” and the documentary “Dahomey,” about the repatriation of African art from France’s Musée du Quai Branly to Benin.