

Alfredo Jaar

**Searching for
Africa in *LIFE***
1996/2014
Duratrans color
transparency
and LED lightboxes

PAGES 202-03: Alfredo Jaar,
Searching for Africa in LIFE,
1996/2014.

PAGES 204-05: Alfredo Jaar,
Searching for Africa in LIFE,
1996/2014 (detail).

Searching Blindly

Radhika Subramaniam

SEARCHING FOR THE ORIGINS OF HUMAN LIFE, we find it in Africa. At Laetoli, near the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, lie our earliest-known imprints: footprints stamped indelibly into volcanic ash. While made with far less fanfare than Neil Armstrong's giant step on the moon, that determined foray by our African ancestors heralded our rapid and rampant journey across the planet. When we recognize ourselves in those footsteps, the time intervening between then and now is immediately eclipsed. The geographical space of our journey, on the other hand, doesn't collapse so easily. Few vantage points, it seems, extend their lines of sight to Africa.

Searching for representations of African subjects in *LIFE* magazine, Alfredo Jaar doesn't find much of an impression. In the sixty-year span of a magazine that prided itself on the global reach and caliber of its photojournalism, Africa steps onto its covers a scant five or six times. In the library of The New School, Jaar stages his quest across the magazine's history from 1936 to 1996 as a set of five lightboxes on which are displayed its complete run of 2,128 covers. As sentinels, these images watch over the spirits active in the site itself, a place that invites in people who are thirsty for knowledge and information. But Jaar's survey is equally an indictment of repositories whose very practices of collection, classification, and access channel thirst down specific courses that determine what seekers may find.

If you're searching for faces in the crowd of *LIFE*'s cover reproductions, peer closely because they aren't much more than an inch high. You would have to squint hard at the serried rows to spy those few African covers. Does this optical failure in the face of a multitude of miniature pictures mirror the artist's findings in the archive? The masses of images that suffuse everyday life in the West are selective. The profusion

so effectively overwhelms people's vision that often they are rendered unaware of what they overlook. The sixty-year barrage of photographs from the likes of *LIFE* has produced, in many eyes, a continental blind spot.

LIFE's iconic covers run the gamut from astronauts to bombs, steelworkers to marines, kisses to frogs, the Beatles to politicians, movie stars to dancers, divers to ships at sea. They feature faces of the times, from Mahatma Gandhi to Mother Teresa, Alfred Hitchcock to Charles Manson, Winston Churchill to Greta Garbo, FDR to JFK, Richard Nixon to Jackie Robinson, Mountbatten to Tito, the Kings (Elvis and Dr. Martin Luther) and the Queen (Elizabeth). As extensive as they are, they remain opaque to decades of events on the African continent.

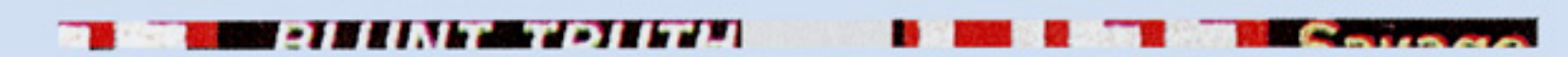
Having seen all this, it is now that you might notice that the fifth lightbox in Jaar's installation is largely empty. Only six and a quarter rows appear in its upper portion, with a large expanse of empty space below. Blank space, light space, white space.

Step back and see where you are. Search for your own location.

What light does this shed on dark matters? Image making is intimately wrought with matters of life and death. Even as time is killed at the moment the photograph is taken, it is taken alive in the space of the image. Resurrection through the image is at the heart of the process. So if you're searching for the reasons why *LIFE's* covers raised some and not others into the light, you know whose lives matter. In the library, you could get caught in the cross fire of light's reflections: The day's white light slants in; overhead electric lights bounce off windowpanes that refract the night lights of the city; Jaar's installation radiates implacably behind glass; and throughout, the glow of phone and computer screens on the features of students deep in their searches—seeking contact, poring through faces and feeds, searching for meaning amid the relentless ricochet of word and image. Where once the likes of *LIFE* directed our sight, it is algorithms that now ensure you will seek what you find.

Searching to make sense of the blank expanse on the fifth lightbox, I thought at first it was an invitation to project onto it the faces and

places that were absent from the rest. Yet, all I face is the exhaustion of my eyes. But isn't this limit of sight the very experience that propels Jaar's illumination, demonstrating how the poverty of representation makes people and places invisible? His long-standing excavation of the limits of representation—what images cannot show, words cannot say, eyes cannot see—has focused on the genocide in Rwanda, itself only about a day's journey from the footprints of Laetoli. Where do these limits leave us? Do we step anew out of this sightlessness, toward others, searching blindly for the simple clarity of those footsteps made over three million years ago in the ash of Africa?



An Absence That Conjures a Presence

Omar Berrada

HERE IS A WALL OF IMAGES, a large picture made of smaller pictures juxtaposed into a grid of homogeneous discontinuity: the covers of *LIFE* magazine (1936–96), all 2,128 of them, distributed over five backlit panels. *LIFE* was a wildly popular publication, with up to thirteen million weekly readers. It had the power to shape perception. Here is a vertical, open-faced visual encyclopedia of the twentieth century as understood by North Americans.

Searching for Africa in LIFE offers a direct confrontation with media-constructed reality. You have to come close to distinguish specific images and captions. But then you lose sight of the larger picture. Either way, one thing you will not find is Africa. It is virtually absent, except for a handful of wild animals or hungry children waiting to be saved—a classic case of humanistic dehumanization.



Alfredo Jaar, *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, 1996/2014 (detail).

In his book *Blank Darkness*, Christopher Miller lists various historical definitions of and etymologies for “Africa.” A nineteenth-century American encyclopedia states that “its name is a mystery; it is supposed to be derived from Afrigah, which word, in the ancient Phoenician, is said to have meant colony.”¹ Africa is presented as *ontologically* colonial, so to speak, an entity meant to be conquered and kept in the dark. Some have also linked Africa to the Arabic root *fa-ra-qa*, which means “to separate.” Stripped of agency, the continent is exposed to lazy projections of the Western imagination. Always already separated, Africa cannot possibly be found on the covers of *LIFE*. It dwells in the interstices between them.

Alfredo Jaar has long been interested in repressions of representation. He spent his early twenties in Pinochet’s totalitarian Chile, where opinions were silenced and people “disappeared.” Making use of what seemed like naive, innocuous language (“Are you happy?”), he devised performative frameworks that eschewed censorship while offering ordinary people a space of appearance,² an opportunity for their images and opinions to be publicly displayed on billboards, in videos, in interview transcripts.³ Thus gathered together, “they could see themselves. They could see others. They felt complicity.”⁴ In media-saturated twentieth-century America, it is the African other who has been disappeared. This is not dictatorial repression; it is imperial indifference. To the extent that it is represented at all in *LIFE*, “Africa” is reduced to clichés endlessly repeating.

The visual economy of American spectatorship is one of anesthetized half-consciousness. But false representations produce real effects. As the journalist Fergal Keane observes in regard to his work covering the Rwandan genocide, “In our world of instant televised horror it can become easy to see a black body in almost abstract terms, as part of the huge smudge of eternally miserable blackness that has loomed in and out of the public mind through the decades.”⁵ *Searching for Africa* is part of an extended series of “African” works that Jaar made following his visit to Rwanda in the summer of 1994. He wanted to see the aftermath of atrocities to which the Western world had turned a blind eye. The Rwandan

1 *New American Cyclopaedia* (New York: Appleton, 1858), 1:169, quoted in Christopher Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 10.

2 According to Hannah Arendt, “the space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action,” where the space of appearance is “the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly.” See Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998), 198–99.

3 See Alfredo Jaar, *Studies on Happiness 1979–1981* (Barcelona: Actar, 1999).

4 Alfredo Jaar quoted by Caille Millner in “Alfredo Jaar and the Happiness of Chile,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 8, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/alfredo-jaar-and-the-happiness-of-chile> (accessed November 12, 2017).

5 Fergal Keane, *Season of Blood: A Rwandan Journey* (New York: Viking Press, 1995), 29–30.

genocide is a central subtext of *Searching for Africa*, for decades of media-made invisibility are precisely what makes indifference possible.

One of Jaar’s best-known Rwanda-related works, *Real Pictures* (1995), centers on photographs he took in Rwanda, which are concealed inside closed black linen boxes, each bearing a verbal description of the image it contains. “Images are buried in order that history might again be made visible and legible,”⁶ as David Levi Strauss observes. Another well-known work by Jaar, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita* (1996), comes in multiple versions. One of them sets up a cinematic device (a darkened room in which sequenced text panels are projected) that slows down perception before the viewer is made to encounter a single image appearing in a brief, intense flash: a close-up of the eyes of a woman who has witnessed the massacre of her own family. If this work eschews direct violence, it displays a gaze that conveys unspeakable, unpicturable horror. As Levi Strauss suggests, the moment we meet the eyes of Gutete Emerita, the distance imposed by media representations of Rwanda collapses. *Searching for Africa* seeks not to collapse the media gaze, but to expose it. In a way, it is a preliminary to *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, or perhaps its reverse shot. Imagine Emerita’s eyes watching you looking at *Searching for Africa* in LIFE.

Jaar’s work has long relied on a sense of geometric clarity, of strong emotion contained by form. *Chile 1981, Before Leaving* (1981) presents a line of small Chilean flags planted in the sand, extending into the ocean. *Telecomunicación* (1981) is an alignment of six bin lids on the floor, referencing Northern Irish women’s ritual of clashing lids together in order to announce the death of IRA hunger strikers. In *Searching for Africa*, Jaar could have fit the magazine covers into a set of four rectangular panels. Instead, they spill over into a fifth panel that remains largely blank. The blank oblong redoubles the absence of African representation, but it also provides the viewer with the potential for alternative inscription, a surface on which a face for Africa might be drawn—a surface for apparition rather than a space of drowning.⁷ In this glowing space is an absence that conjures a presence.⁸

6 David Levi Strauss, *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), 93.

7 Jaar’s *Emergency* (1998) consists of a sculpted map of Africa that continually sinks into and reemerges from a pool of dark water, much as the “African” covers of *LIFE* seem lost in a sea of indifferent images.

8 As Jaar has said in the context of *Real Pictures*, “[I]f the media and their images fill us with an illusion of presence, which later leaves us with a sense of absence, why not try the opposite? That is, offer an absence that could perhaps provoke a presence.” Quoted in Rubén Gallo, “Representations of Violence: The Limits of Representation,” *Trans*, nos. 3/4 (1997): 59.



Alfredo Jaar: Dialectic of Sight

Jennifer A. González

IMAGE SATURATION IS THE CONTEMPORARY condition of humans who live in close proximity to computers and phones, to the software and hardware of pixels and screens. Saturation implies a limit, a fullness, a completeness. Our daily sensation of an overflowing abundance of visual culture has clearly surpassed that discussed in Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* (1967); it articulates yet also exceeds the imposition of capital as a mediation between people and things; it has become the very breath we take, the vertebrae in the spine of our lives, the pulse and the rhythm of our thoughts. Image after image scintillates and accumulates; informational documents and eroticized residues of Instagram and the Internet shape every corner of our consciousness, our knowledge of the world and of ourselves. As an artist, Alfredo Jaar deploys this visibility and its corollary invisibilities in equal measures. Occlusion of spectacle undergirds his photographic installations as frequently as the economical revelation of the image does. His works interrogate how it is that, despite our image-saturated state, we cannot see.

Founded in 1883, *LIFE* magazine was originally a humor and entertainment weekly. The motto of the first issue was “While there’s Life, there’s hope.”¹ “We wish to have some fun in this paper,” wrote the editors. “We shall try to domesticate as much as possible of the casual cheerfulness that is drifting about in an unfriendly world.”² When *TIME* owner Henry Luce bought the name rights in 1936, he transformed the weekly into an important source for current events and information. *LIFE* magazine was the first all-photographic American news magazine, and effectively invented modern photojournalism, bringing the international world to the

1 “Life: Dead & Alive,” *TIME* magazine, October 19, 1936.

2 Ibid.

United States and American popular culture back to the world. Dominating the market for more than forty years, with millions of subscribers, *LIFE* under Luce had a goal distinct from the earlier editors' wish to have fun: "To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things—machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man's work—his paintings, towers and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; the women that men love and many children; to see and take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed."³

Alfredo Jaar's lightbox installation *Searching for Africa in LIFE* (1996/2014) invites us to contemplate the degree to which "taking pleasure in seeing" is anything but an innocent enterprise. Backlit and hung in five vertical panels, the dense photographic grid of miniature *LIFE* covers, chronologically spanning the magazine's production from 1936 to 1996, has a nearly painterly, Color Field aspect. Black-and-white covers from the early years, on the left side, give way to warm skin tones and technicolor blues that flicker across the surface of the remaining panels with a nearly pointillist effect. As one approaches the work more closely, each cover can be seen in detail, yet these details are not the primary focus of the piece. Instead, the title leads the viewer to become aware of two things: First, there are no more than a handful of covers, perhaps five, that relate to the African continent, and the majority of these focus on African animals; second, the last of the five panels is largely composed of blank white space.

Searching is a visual act. Where is "Africa" in *LIFE* magazine? Virtually nowhere. Given the massive political and anticolonial upheavals the continent experienced in the twentieth century, it is all the more stunning to consider how little it appears in *LIFE*'s pages. The conceptual and formal elegance of Jaar's work motivates us to contemplate other possible searches and other obvious omissions, while simultaneously compelling us to look at the blank space, the emptiness where stories remain untold. *Searching for Africa in LIFE* follows an earlier work by Jaar, *Untitled (Newsweek)* (1994), in

3 Liz Ronk, "LIFE in 2012: The Year in 12 Galleries," *TIME* magazine, December 2, 2012, <http://time.com/3875143/life-in-2012-the-year-in-12-galleries> (accessed May 22, 2018).

which a week-by-week chronology of the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Rwandan people is recounted through short summaries paired with the concurrent cover of *Newsweek* magazine. For fourteen weeks, the periodical entirely ignored the massacre, though the body count jumped by the hundreds and thousands between issues. What can account for this radical silence? A decade later, the artist's search through twenty-five years of *TIME* magazine covers revealed only nine related to Africa. Of the nine, three depicted animals, and the other six depicted poverty or disease. These nine images appear as a grid of photographs in *From Time to Time* (2006). "According to these covers," says Jaar, "it appears that there is no 'life' in Africa, there is no architecture in Africa, there is no science, there is no music. It is only death that they are interested in."⁴ The embedded racism in these publications echoes the overt white supremacy now on the horizon of the American and European scene, but it also reminds us that systemic visual censorship may operate at the origin of such social formations. Jaar's works, with their emphasis on relations of excess and lack in the visual imaginary, invite us to contemplate the paradoxical likelihood that contemporary image saturation may be just the latest form taken by an endemic Western censorship of sight.



Alfredo Jaar, *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, 1996/2014.

4 *Vogue Italia*, *Focus on: Alfredo Jaar* (interview by Alessia Glaviano, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjvRtNPVzgs> (accessed November 30, 2017).



The Blink of Failure: Imagining Life in Africa

Tisa Bryant

I want people to walk in that space and to feel they have entered into a model of thinking, of looking at the world.

—Alfredo Jaar

FROM A DISTANCE, Alfredo Jaar's installation *Searching for Africa in LIFE* could be mistaken for a room divider of mosaic tiles, an abstract assemblage across five panels. The left side begins in whitish grounds with smudges of gray black, a small red flag listing repeatedly to the left, bleeding into the grid. Panning right, color intensifies on a diagonal grade, ending in a jagged edge above an empty white glow. Once face-to-face with the work, we find that the emergence of color denotes *LIFE* magazine's progression through photographic innovations—while consistently misrepresenting the lives of this world. The magazine's covers chronicle Olympiads, starlets, dictators, monarchs, fashion models, and war heroes, scientific discoveries and natural disasters, all to the near total exclusion of African people.

Each cover is a blink of denial and a failure of imagination. Over *LIFE*'s six-decade run, readers were encouraged to ignore the lives of Africans outside a stereotypical shared imaginary propagated by colonialism, condescension, and fetish. At the same time, they were invited to imagine African Americans as uniquely American, cyphers for entertainment, brawn, occasional revolutionary acts, and dreams impoverished and bloodied by white supremacy. A snapshot from the magazine's 1960s-era tables of contents gives an idea:

South African massacre of Negro demonstrators at Sharpeville
Terrorism in South Africa—blacks revolt and assassinate Hendrik Verwoerd
First black cardinal of Roman Catholic Church, Laurian Cardinal Rugambwa

Kenneth Kaunda, head of a new Nationalist party in Northern Rhodesia
Belgian Congo becomes independent
Congo king Lukengu Bope Mabinshe loses 750 wives

Still, it's the weekly marquee that insists on the most specific stories—not only about who and what warrants magnification in the public eye, but how and to what effect. The tropes as expressed in the covers' headlines are predictable:

Africa: A Continent in Ferment [Masai in close-up, staring beyond the frame]
Ghana's Leap from Stone Age to Eager New Statehood [Ghana's speaker of the house]
Carroll Baker [holding a spear, flanked by two Masai]
Africa's Savage Beauty [photo caption: "Wild Warega warrior poised for attack"]
Starving Children of Biafra War
Billy Graham in Africa

By representing the entire run of *LIFE*, from 1936 to 1996, set inside his signature lightboxes, Jaar marks out the labor implicit in his title. This "searching," of course—the quest for a counternarrative that would upend clichés of "darkest Africa"—is aided by the viewer. We must stand and scan, read and compare, to suss out how and what *LIFE* (and Jaar) think about Africa. Or, more importantly, what we think about Africa, what we think about the role that photographic images, and deliberate over-, mis- and under-representation in images, have played in Black people's oppression. Answers to such questions require a diligent accumulation of evidence—a fact as galling as it is unavoidable.

Consider these juxtaposed comments by Jaar:

My imagination starts working based on research, based on a real-life event, most of the time a tragedy, that I am just starting to analyze, to reflect on¹

—and by scholar Christina Sharpe:

The methods most readily available to us sometimes, oftentimes, force us into positions that run counter to what we know. That is, our knowledge, of slavery and Black being in slavery, is gained from our studies, yes, but also

¹ Jaar interviewed on *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*, "Protest," season 4, November 4, 2007.

in excess of those studies; it is gained through the kinds of knowledge from and of the everyday, from what Dionne Brand calls “sitting in the room with history.”²

Jaar sits in the room with history, positioning research as a form of attention. He is clear about the impossibility of closing the gaps between reality and representation, between what poet Erica Hunt calls our historic and our authentic selves. His ways of seeing are, by his own account, influenced by his formative years in Martinique. Given his assertion that he is incapable of creating a work of art wholly from his imagination, it's tempting to speculate about how the artist's living in relation to African-descended people has not only developed his consciousness of racism and violence, but reconfigured his imaginary beyond programmatic “inclusivity,” yielding an interventionist practice.

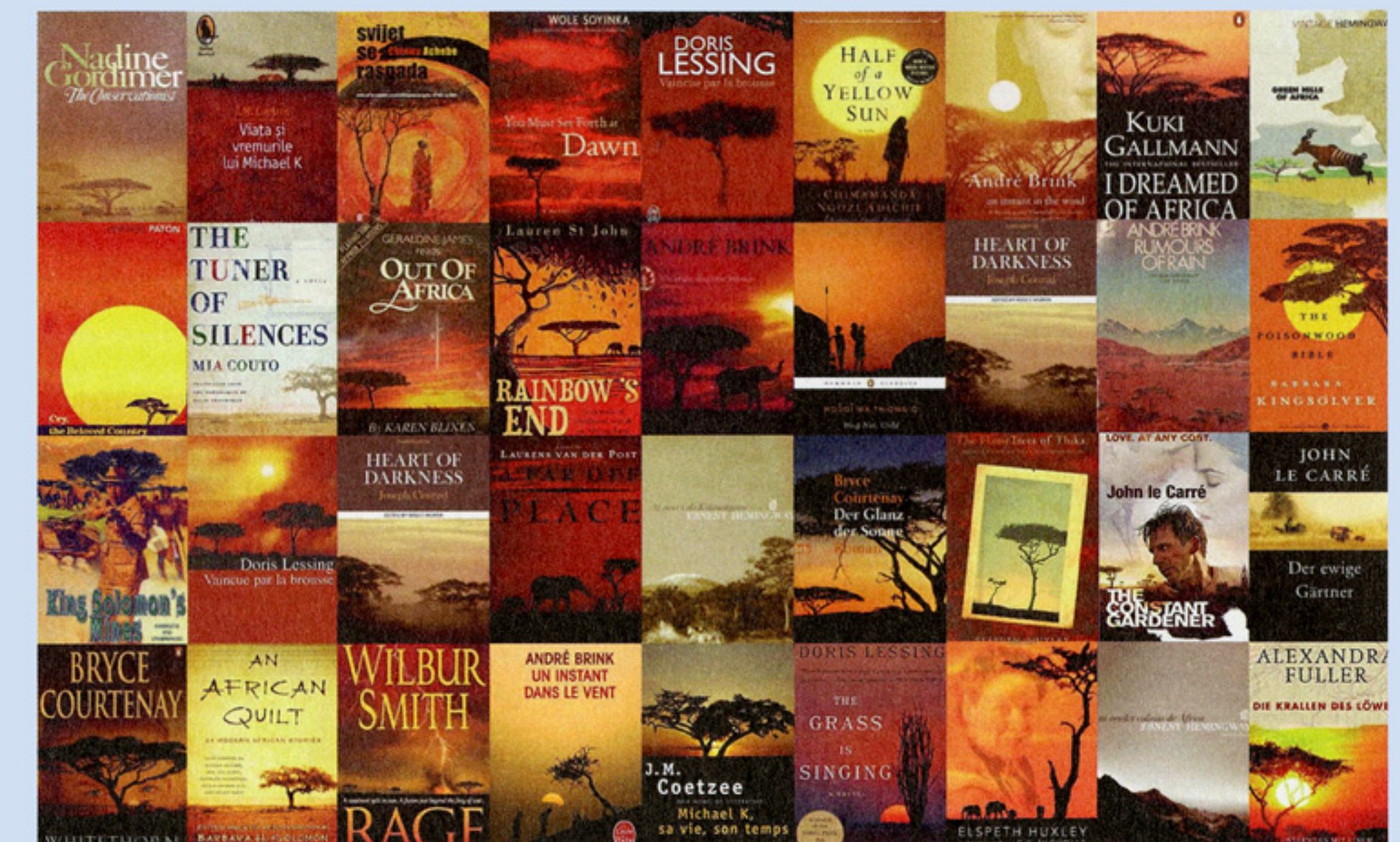
For African and African diasporic artists, scholars, and everyday people, research is likewise a method of attention. Sitting in the room with history, with eyes on present cultural phenomena, is part of living in a world that excludes you at every level. As Jaar suggests, such research via attention entails constant acts of intervention and assemblage.

Consider “The Dangers of a Single Book Cover,” an article that appeared in 2014 on the online platform Africa is a Country.³ In a riff on novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's oft-cited TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story” (2009), the listicle gathered dozens of cover designs for books by African authors; a whole category of these are emblazoned with stock photographs of an acacia tree, often at sunset (another subset presented one or another image of a sub-Saharan African woman, artfully blurred, never making eye contact). The treatment of the marquee space, the cover, in these examples seems intended to thwart readers' ability to enter the space of discourse. This is a deliberate working against the potential of relations between people as facilitated by art. The “acacia tree” meme, then, is protest. It is social practice, malleable, ripe for appropriation.

But what do such interventions, such accumulations, ultimately succeed in doing? While the critical acacia-tree meme can't be proven

² Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12. Sharpe is in dialogue here with Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002).

³ Elliot Ross, “The Dangers of a Single Book Cover: The Acacia Tree Meme and ‘African’ Literature” (May 7, 2014), <https://web.archive.org/web/20180704225820/https://africasacountry.com/2014/05/the-dangers-of-a-single-book-cover-the-acacia-tree-meme-and-african-literature> (accessed July 4, 2018).



Simon Stevens, book covers with “Acacia tree sunset treatment” (Twitter post), 2014.

to have chastened the designers of African books, such archival examination affirms the experience of sitting in the room with history crowded by the white imaginary. Jaar's installation, by assembling magazine covers, calls the eye to hover over sixty years of editorial failure to see life in Africa. Residually, Jaar's work chronicles the reality and the inequity of this everyday labor of attention in nonwhite peoples' lives. *Searching for Africa in LIFE* sits doubly in the room with history, within itself and in a well-appointed library, beckoning viewers to enter into this mode of thinking and awareness. People sit at desks, headphones on, or walk past what appears to be a brightly lit decorative wall. Some don't notice it; others glance and look away. A few stop and study. Perhaps here, in this literally standing invitation to recalibrate the imaginary represented by *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, we find the nexus at which the blink of failure opens its eyes or expands its blind spot.