

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

## A Feast for the Eyes: Mariama Bâ's Pan-African Vision

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At their best, arts and culture festivals saturate place and time with pleasure. The republication of “Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos” (“Festac . . . Memories of Lagos”) by Mariama Diop née Bâ (hereafter Bâ) invites fresh attention to the multilayered temporalities animated by the festival as a form that is spectacularly live yet generates a plethora of new texts that materialize affect, ephemerality, and uneven access. Bâ’s lyric is true to the Latin etymology of festival, for Bâ delights in FESTAC as a feast for the eyes (“Régâl des yeux”; see Bâ [1977]) and indeed the full array of senses. The emphasis on sensorial pleasure represents a striking mid-century departure from prior transnational Black meetings including the series of Pan-African Congresses held from 1919 onward where speeches rather than the arts dominated. Even when artists and writers gathered for the Congress of Black Writers and Artists (in 1956 in Paris and in 1959 in Rome) the venue was a lecture hall, rather than a stage. Far from the rapturous memories Bâ carried from FESTAC, these earlier figures may have recalled stultifying presentations in halls without air-conditioning. With independence, however, celebration itself becomes a mode of statecraft, and international cultural festivals become the genre of choice to perform both aesthetic decolonization and infra-structural competence.

But just how much fun can a party thrown by the state be? Bâ’s poem shows that Bâ had a great time, reveling in the mutual gaze in streets and official spaces alike, and revealing the festival as an essentially social text. Skirting the tangled politics behind the event, Bâ’s lyric speaker renders the personal perspective of a cohering subject—a Black African woman’s perspective—on a pivotal event in the history of Pan-Africanism. Here the personal is indeed

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pointedly political, since women have consistently been marginalized in the planning, performance, and documentation of grand-scale Pan-Africanist projects.<sup>1</sup> By lingering in the festival's layered durations—plans, beginnings, waiting, wandering, imagining futures—Bâ exemplifies what I identify as a Pan-African feminist archival practice also visible in other work from the 1970s. Recurring elements include using the visual as an entry point into a broader sensorium, attention to embodiment, and the value of mutuality. It is in this social dimension in which the multiple layers of lived time emerge.

Whether a poem is understood as an archive depends on context. Comparatively little has been written about FESTAC, because its archives have been more difficult to access than those of the 1966 Festival mondiale des arts nègres (FESMAN) in Dakar. Arguably, FESTAC actually began in 1966, when Nigeria was first invited to host a sequel to Dakar. The tension between the organizers of each of these conferences is rarely absent in accounts of FESTAC, but these frictions occur precisely because those relationships were never disposable. Because its vision was driven by the *poète-président* Léopold Senghor's philosophy of negritude, FESMAN was vital to the construction of a Senegalese national identity, and its records are held at the National Archives of Senegal. FESTAC's history is more complicated, and it has generated creative historiographies. In this essay I discuss Bâ's poem alongside press reports circulating when it was first published and more recent FESTAC-related exhibitions and texts to note how each form archives the data and affect of the festival differently. Attention to both recurrent and innovative practices points to parallels with the rehearsal process where participants savor close encounters even as friction motivates exploration, adjustment, and insight.

The press on both sides of the Atlantic devoted copious page space to images, and likewise Bâ's poem relies more heavily on the visual than on other senses. Bâ singles out the photographic record as proof of the festival's historical significance, "Jamais les cameras n'ont fixé tant de magnificences" ("Never have cameras captured so much magnificence"; Bâ [1977]; Bâ [2023]). In

the past decade several projects have sought to revive the legacy of 1977 by exhibiting and publishing archival materials that reckon with the festival's highly variegated texture in multiple media. Among them, the Chimurenga Collective's compendium titled *FESTAC '77* and an exhibition of work by Karega Kofi Moyo curated by Romi Crawford and Theaster Gates reanimate the event by juxtaposing memorabilia such as participant registration cards, reports, questionnaires, posters, and music recordings. Chimurenga's anthology runs to 445 pages. A tour de force, edited with breathtaking originality, the anthology in its very scope starkly highlights the paucity of women's words.<sup>2</sup> This makes Bâ's poem, which distills the festival to a mere forty-seven lines, all the more valuable. Far from a simple eyewitness account, it is a skillfully wrought work, making full use of rhetorical devices including anaphora, caesuras, and parataxis. I would argue it shares formal qualities with *Last Day in Lagos*, a recently published collection of photographs by Marilyn Nance. The Marilyn Nance Archive includes hundreds of images as well as other memorabilia she gathered there, literal souvenirs. Oluremi C. Onabanjo edited the book, selecting images that showcase the staggering craft of a single precocious photographer—Nance was barely twenty-three years old in 1977. For both Nance and Bâ, less is more, and their precise vision is quite the opposite of Chimurenga's "decomposed, an-arranged" exuberance (*Festac '77*, title page). Susan Sontag once wrote that "[t]o tell a story is to say: *this* is the important story. It is to reduce the spread and simultaneity of everything to something linear, a path" (14). It behooves scholars to attend to how the minimalist, even classical element in their work crystallizes the voices of two such gifted Black female artists. Doing so also recalls the 1970s as a period when a Pan-Africanist imperative motivated women's expression at what proved to be a turning point for publishing. Bâ's contemporary Maryse Condé, of Guadeloupe, for example, introduced *Présence Africaine's* readers to Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, and Grace Ogot long before her seminal work on Caribbean writers.

Gender was not the only factor in their marginalization, for neither Nance nor Bâ were known quantities when they arrived in Lagos. Nance was an enterprising college student who finagled her way into the official US contingent belatedly, and Bâ would not publish her first novel for another two years. But their lack of prestige gave them access to a different perspective, in essence a valuable camera angle. They capture intimate moments from unexpected points of view, frank takes on FESTAC's most monumental elements are interspersed with close-ups of unguarded moments. What becomes apparent are the interpersonal gestures, fleeting glances, and snippets of conversations that linger and continue well beyond the dates of the festival. Indeed, the very first detail after the slow start of the first three lines of "Souvenirs" is the "fraternal and revitalizing handshakes" exchanged (Bâ [2023]). The handshake itself is the subject of the phrase, and the adjective "fraternal" makes the quality of this gesture essential: Pan-African solidarity is not assumed a priori, rather brotherhood is ratified only through the embodied gesture. Given how intractable reductive accounts of Pan-African solidarity remain in the social sciences, this is an instance where the value of the literary as both primary text and interpretive method is especially apparent.<sup>3</sup> The highly stylized poem and photographic archive condense the festival into a site for poesis in its core sense of "making" or "creating," and hence their inclusion of frictions both pleasurable and challenging exert mimetic yet personal authority.

The visual proves an ideal technology to record the affect of a live event; it seemingly captures visceral reactions in real time. As Romi Crawford has noted, "the affective bonds that ensue from scenes of collective black consciousness" also "beget more instances of it" (156). *Last Day in Lagos* includes an extended interview where Nance animatedly recounts to Onabanjo the ambience, biographies, and backstories encoded in the images she made, as well as describing the ongoing relationships she has maintained with some of her subjects. Despite Bâ's untimely passing, reading "Souvenirs de Lagos" belatedly may also

prompt scholars to revisit her fiction through a Pan-African lens.

First published in *L'Ouest Africain* (*The West African*), the monthly magazine edited by her then-husband, Obèye Diop, the poem invites reflection on the rough materiality and ephemeral qualities of serial publications. Never intended to last, yet reappearing after fifty years on the smooth first-world texture of *PMLA*'s print and online editions, the poem has a publication history that rearranges the temporalities it calls and recalls to mind. Like *Drum* with its multiple regional editions and like *Ebony* in the United States, *L'Ouest Africain* covered current affairs with significant space for human interest stories. But it was not as image-rich as the other monthly publications. Nevertheless, taking these print publications together imbues the visual and other sensory details in Bâ's poem with documentary authority. Furthermore, the form of the poem, unfolding entirely in the present tense, recounts events in the chronological order of reportage. It begins with the arrival in Lagos, describes the sights one sees from the road and the architecture of spaces before entering them, describes events taking place within and beyond these designated spaces, and closes with both an anaphoric invocation of Lagos suggesting departure (perhaps viewed from an airplane window) and musings on what has just been experienced. All the basic details of the festival—who, what, when, where—are mentioned, and the description of the "how" carefully articulates the poem's standpoint, although the poem reserves background information like the precedents that give FESTAC significance for the body in the poem's middle section. The evidence of FESTAC "is everywhere: badges on chests, multicolored fabrics with geometric designs, / Brightening up the streets!" and as clear in carvings mounted on polished copper as in FESTAC-themed license plates and construction sites (Bâ [2023]). The juxtaposition of these images evokes a photojournalist's rapid shifts in focus and the rush to capture as wide an array of illustrations as possible with limited film and lenses at hand. The press coverage in magazines used other techniques to convey visual variety. *Ebony*'s

April 1977 issue featured the festival on the cover and many of its images were in full color, conveying the event's sensuality to African American readers with a keen interest in Africa. Its sister magazine, *Jet*, pointed readers to the *Ebony* coverage as "the next best thing" to witnessing FESTAC live (Jaji 127). The visual also recurs in discussions of the festival on both sides of the Atlantic. The lead article in the Nigerian edition of *Drum* magazine's coverage asked, "Did you see FESTAC?" and one reader responded, "FESTAC . . . enables us to see our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world and their true colour. It made us see we are one people, regardless of whatever part of the globe we come from." Another requested that *Drum* give access to those "who could not afford to watch events of FESTAC [by publishing] in book form all the events at the FESTAC" (127). Print culture was to enact mutual regard and simulate face-to-face encounters, and this is the context in which Bâ and Nance's attention to the festival's intimacy should be considered.

"Souvenirs de Lagos" opens with travel's tedium: "Slowness of administrative formalities; slowness of luggage arriving! / Slowness again: the journey to the city" (Bâ [2023]). Readers can identify viscerally with such delays, which offer an exposition of one distinctive formal characteristic of the festival genre, its capacity to concatenate infrastructure, affect, politics, and aesthetics. Many accounts of the festival dwell on challenges like the delay in completing accommodations at FESTAC Village as proof of a less-than-successful event. However, Bâ sets out to record a live event that is not just a sequence of the staged events, but everything that goes on around the edges, including roadworks, traffic, and more. Dwelling on the logistics of travel also harks back to previous gatherings and the recurring trope of the airport. Such scenes transport readers to the threshold of these meetings and greetings, often from the angle of a visitor who is honored but not credentialed to create an official record—in other words the subject whose individual experience potentially enacts global Black consciousness. An early instance of the airport scene is the footage of Louis Armstrong's

ecstatic welcome and impromptu jam session on the tarmac in Accra as Armstrong embarked on his first State Department tour in 1956. A decade later William Greaves opened his documentary on FESMAN with a long aerial shot of Dakar and included footage of Alvin Ailey, among others, waving from an airplane stairway. And the 1971 music documentary *Soul to Soul* features Tina Turner, Mavis Staples, and others discussing their expectations on the flight to Accra. The next shots show the joyful chaos of their arrival.

Another recurring critique of large-scale state-sponsored gatherings is that they exclude more people than the select few participating in and watching staged encounters. "Souvenirs," however, suggests the festival is not simply a series of closed events, but rather a massed rehearsal of Pan-African possibilities. Rehearsals are intriguingly unstable, necessitated by unfamiliarity but aiming for confidence, ensemble work, and know-how. Ironically, this spirit of rehearsal is most evident in Bâ's placement of the symposium on "Black Civilization and Education" at the very "Heart of the Festival" (Bâ [2023]). The gathering and its topic are the clearest indication that FESTAC remained tethered, however tenuously, to FESMAN, which opened with a colloquium titled "Function and Significance of Negro Art in the Life of the People and for the People" (*Colloquium*). The discourse-heavy schedule of Pan-Africanism's first decades is evident, as well as the notion of Blackness on the scale of a civilization. Bâ seems to assume familiarity with the coterie of intellectuals present—Joseph Ki-Zerbo is introduced only by last name—and expresses little anxiety over disagreements unfolding before an "open-minded audience." The official art exhibitions are also openhearted, both a treat for "connoisseurs, yes, but also for the uninitiated!" (Bâ [2023]). For Bâ, FESTAC's pleasure lies in its duality as both a reiteration of something that has happened before and a novel revelation. Inhabiting time multiply, the rehearsal is, by its very definition, a time-based medium suffused with anticipation, waiting. Nance also captures the appeal of such intimate scenes that spilled over beyond the

formal schedule in a marvelous image of the Sun Ra Arkestra practicing in FESTAC Village (fig. 1)—in rehearsal (or “en répétition” in French, which underscores its iterative nature). At the center of the composition is the crowd leaning into the window, eager to see what’s going on. The image documents curiosity and desire.

When festivals are framed as rehearsals, their tendency to draw the “usual suspects” seems less noxious, for these are sites where lasting ties are forged and maintained. Katherine Dunham began her lecture at the FESMAN colloquium in 1966 by acknowledging the audience as a living archive of relationships first cemented in collaboration, recognizing musicians with whom she had jammed and the family members of the hosts and guides she met during research trips (Clark and Johnson 414). While Nance was not privy to the Lagos colloquium’s proceedings, mutual exchange figures large in her images, but with the signal difference that her archive is more democratic. Many photographs

in *Last Day in Lagos* feature passersby, local attendees, and participants few would recognize at site. Nance consistently captures the pleasure of looking and being looked at.

Consider her photograph of curious children wedged between adults waiting in line (fig. 2). See the girl smiling widely as she waves or the boy eyeing the camera skeptically, arms crossed, steadied by an older woman’s hand on his shoulder. Three women turn diagonally to face the camerawoman, others crane their necks, keeping an eye on the children. One has her mouth open, perhaps telling them to behave—rehearsing the next generation’s Pan-African possibilities. Such small gestures captured by the camera convey FESTAC’s perpetual motion, even in stillness. The Lagosians and Nance drink each other in, absorbed by the sheer luxury of each other’s difference. As they jostle on the street, solidarity is a dance, not a pose. Having retained control of the images for decades, Nance has stewarded not only the photographs but also



FIG. 1. Photo of Sun Ra Arkestra (Nance 204). © 2024 Marilyn Nance / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



FIG. 2. Photo of children waiting in a line (Nance 77). © 2024 Marilyn Nance / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

the *futures* of the relationships captured in them. Indeed, her interview in *Last Day in Lagos* is an invaluable oral history of transnational dimensions of the Black Arts movement she believed culminated in FESTAC. In their respective media, Bâ and Nance show that Pan-Africanism's antiracist and anticolonial potential lies precisely in its aspirational nature, and each instantiation is a practice session for unfinished progress toward mutuality. In other words, Pan-Africanism's tendentiousness is precisely what constitutes it as a movement and accounts for its perennial interest. Neither failed nor dead, it remains in rehearsal, which is to say that it is most effective when it invites attention to limitations and snags, to what could go better next time, and in each iteration offers clarity for the next goal, and its conditions of possibility.

In closing, I return to poetry. As the poem progresses, Bâ catalogs the exhibitions and performances with a string of one-line descriptive phrases whose near parataxis gives them a sense of

momentum. The research presented in the symposium sets things in motion, for it is “[l]ikely to modify” how Black cultures are understood (Bâ [2023]). Made objects are recognized as one moment in a long creative process: the mask lives in time and place—it has been “patiently carved out of wood by hatchets, / In the shade of kapok or flamboyant trees!,” and that life continues “with lips pursed, eyes half closed on an inner dream!” A statue may have “nonchalant or hard lines!,” and wrappers cling to curves in yellow and in indigo while tapestries evoke a meeting of the senses, in “harmonious colors.” As in the archival work of Chimurenga or Crawford and Gates, “profusion” holds Bâ’s attention, but Bâ uses a different poetics—dispensing with narrative gives her observations a sharp, precise definition, even in motion. Bâ’s appreciation of malleability becomes clear when her poem is compared with Ifi Amadiume’s “Second World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC—1977).”<sup>4</sup> Better known as a gender and sexuality

scholar, Amadiume won the 1985 Commonwealth Poetry Prize for *Passion Waves*, in which her FESTAC poem appears. Reading their poems together resists what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the danger of a single story, and cautions against conflating gender, aesthetics, and politics. The value of these women's perspectives on a mass Pan-African event whose historiography was and is astonishingly masculine—perhaps even masculinist—cannot be overstated.

Like Bâ, Amadiume evokes fertility, diversity, and vivid sensory perception. But her shorter lines employ three tropes aligned with Senghor's negritude—drum, Mother Africa, and nature's logic. Amadiume begins with the seeds that Bâ's poem closes with:

The dot of life  
in all its magic  
grows, matures  
like the seed of plants,  
the eggs of fish,  
the eggs of birds,  
from the female;  
so did we all scatter (48)

Linking seed with the feminine, Amadiume leans in to the trope of return. "Mother Africa!" implies that "[b]rothers seeing sisters again, some for the first time" are born siblings by virtue of a shared descent, instead of engaged in working out a living Pan-Africanism. Bâ's FESTAC, alternatively, unfolds in the temporal dynamism of a rehearsal, anchored both in memory (*souvenir*) and in anticipation (*avenir*). The agricultural metaphor with which the poem ends is even more vivid in the original: "Lagos vivifie les graines du passé pour enseigner l'avenir" ("Lagos reinvigorates the seeds of the past to sow the future"; Bâ [1977]; Bâ [2023]). A more literal translation for "vivifie" suggests bringing life forth. Seeds that sit unused too long turn stale, and then it takes a good soak to make sure they germinate. At Lagos dancers, builders, scholars, sculptors, and even customs agents did the hard work of solidarity. Bâ shows that Pan-Africanism at its best works up a sweat. It may be too late to stem climate change's creeping desertification of

the continent, but Bâ leaves no uncertainty that only creativity will sustain life to come.

## NOTES

1. Writing in 1962, George Shepperson made a distinction between what he termed capital-*P* Pan-Africanism as formal movements associated with the sequence of conferences with which W. E. B. Du Bois had been involved and small-*p* pan-Africanism as a more diffuse, ephemeral, and often cultural set of practices. Bâ and Nance at FESTAC straddle the two, and in this essay I follow the style convention of capitalizing *Pan-Africanism* while acknowledging its limits.

2. By my count, six of the twenty-nine conversations cited and three of the thirteen new pieces of writing are by women.

3. "[G]rand moments of Pan-African solidarity [are regularly glossed as] the kind that can demand a single united voice," suggesting that tensions among Black communities are antithetical to solidarity (Getachew). Bâ reminds readers that cultural pan-Africanism has long accommodated and thrived on both.

4. I thank Gabriel Bámgbósé for drawing my attention to this poem.

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