

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

“Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos” and the Temporality of Black Expression

ANNETTE K. JOSEPH-GABRIEL

In unearthing the poem “Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos” (“Festac . . . Memories of Lagos,” hereafter “Souvenirs”), Tobias Warner has made a monumental discovery that will allow scholars to explore Mariama Bâ’s creative and intellectual projects anew.¹ “Souvenirs” is a joyful celebration of the movement, color, and sound that constituted FESTAC’s project of valorizing Black and African creative expression and intellectual thought. The festival was conceived of as an assemblage of representatives of the Black world, drawing participants from Africa, Europe, the Americas, and Australasia to partake in a “multi-linguistic, multicolored framework of traditional dancers, secular plays, exhibitions, films, books, ceremonies, and endless discussions on solidarity, revolution and history” (Monroe 34). Bâ’s poetic account of this historic event, written in the journalistic style of reportage and published under the heading “témoignage” (“testimony”), claims a multigenre identity that is well suited to its project of chronicling FESTAC’s multifarious events.

The Nigerian state officials who organized the festival saw it as an occasion to unite these varied forms of intellectual and creative expression under the umbrella of Black culture. They understood this culture to be “explicitly precolonial, manifesting an original power and authenticity that had been undermined and degraded by imperial domination. Drawing on the discourse of anticolonial struggle in the neocolonial context of the 1970s, a ‘return to origins’ was the only way toward final emancipation and self-determination” (Apter 5). At the heart of this project to locate and valorize Black culture was a question about temporality, specifically the relationship between past, present, and future.

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For FESTAC's organizers, that relationship was linear and instrumental. In their opening remarks at what they called "the heart of the festival," the Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education, Nigerian government officials urged Black intellectuals to harness their knowledge of Black history in the service of making "positive and objective changes in the educational processes to which future generations must be subjected" and to "build a bridge-head for assaulting today and the future, for preparing ourselves for regaining control over our destiny" (Fingsesi 15; Obasanjo 20). If FESTAC promised to reclaim a Black and African history violated and erased by imperial conquest, it understood that reclamation as conjuring a precolonial past in the present to guide the Black world toward a hoped-for future that the Nigerian state defined as economic and technological progress (see the introduction in Apter).

What kind of cultural-political movement would propel the Black world into this imagined future? Nigerian state officials were insistent that the festival's valorization of history was entirely different from the negritudian brand of reclaiming the past that had undergirded FESTAC's predecessor, the Festival mondiale des arts nègres (FESMAN) in Dakar in 1966. At FESMAN, Léopold Sédar Senghor had designated Nigeria the festival's next host, but Lagos and Dakar were soon at loggerheads. The heart of the festival was also the source of its "most protracted conflict. . . over North African Arabs and their participation" (Apter 55). The Senegalese contingent of FESTAC's planning committee opposed the participation of North African Arabs on the grounds that they belonged to an "Arab-Berber zone" and consequently could not lay claim to "Negro-African civilization." Nigerian state officials argued that this exclusion would be "tantamount to sheer prejudice" (67). As relations between the two camps began to fray, newspaper editorials in Nigeria declared negritude a "dead orphan" and "a mummification of the romantic African past, oblivious to contemporary material advances" (68). FESTAC's "ethnohistorical poetics" would ultimately cast negritude as a relic no longer up to the task of supposedly ushering

Africa into modernity (79), favoring instead "geopolitical constructions of a pan-African identity" (Murphy).

Bâ's poem highlights the dissonance that sometimes existed between these political debates and on-the-ground experience, particularly in relation to the temporal. Among the performers, writers, artists, and observers who make up the world of Bâ's poem, FESTAC exceeded and sometimes even departed entirely from the "top-down, monolithic, univocal expressions of the state-sponsored national cultural vision that underpinned" the festival's planning (Murphy). Photographic and poetic accounts of FESTAC suggest that the festival's temporality could not always be neatly parceled out into distinct pasts, presents, and futures. After all, having been postponed from 1975 to 1977 because of civil war and a military coup, was FESTAC not already an event out of sync and out of time?

Because temporality was so central to FESTAC's project of showcasing Black culture, my reading of "Souvenirs" traces how Bâ situates Black cultural and intellectual production temporally. I argue that through her intertextual engagement with David Mandessi Diop's poem "Appel" ("Call"), Bâ imagines Black culture as existing in a future that is already present. Reading Bâ through Diop brings into sharper focus the ways that time unfolds in firsthand accounts of the festival, through skips and repetitions that signal past, present, and future colliding, merging, occupying the same moment. Time is simultaneously immediacy and anticipation, as evidenced by firsthand accounts of FESTAC that meld the prospective and retrospective, making both contemporaneous in the present. As Bâ moves between Diop's and her own engagement with the possibility of Black cultural expression, her play with temporality reaches beyond the perceived opposition between FESMAN's negritude and FESTAC's Pan-Africanism, to locate Black culture in entangled pasts, presents, and futures.

Bâ's most direct intertextual engagement with negritude and Diop's poetry appears near the end of her poem. Almost as though overwhelmed by the intensity of FESTAC's sonic and visual

landscape, Bâ's speaker turns to Diop's "Appel" to supply the words for her description of the festival's soundscape, which opposes two sonic images: "I hear, accompanying your progressions, not 'the veiled tom-tom of Black despair' / But the 'thousand choirs of negritude rediscovered'" (Bâ). The tom-tom frequently appears in negritude poetry as the quintessential symbol of a Black culture to be reclaimed and revalorized to reverse the alienation wrought by slavery and colonialism. However, neither Diop nor Bâ mobilizes it as a static, nostalgic representation of an idealized pre-colonial African past. Instead, the tom-tom for both poets marks a temporal shift that situates Black expression in the simultaneous space of the future and the present. Tracking how the tom-tom moves first across Diop's oeuvre and then into "Souvenirs" shows how Bâ pivots from FESTAC's official narrative of temporality—reclaiming the past as a tool for future advancement—to position the myriad forms of Black intellectual and creative expression at the festival simultaneously in the speaker's immediate moment and in a time to come.

Diop engages with the tom-tom as a marker of time in his poems "Appel" and "Celui qui a tout perdu" ("Loser of Everything"). In the latter the tom-tom is a recurring image that charts a history of dispossession and alienation.

Le soleil brillait dans ma case
 Et mes femmes étaient belles et souples
 Comme les palmiers sous la brise des soirs.
 Mes enfants glissaient sur le grand fleuve
 Aux profondeurs de mort
 Et mes pirogues luttèrent avec les crocodiles.
 La lune, maternelle, accompagnait nos danses
 Le rythme frénétique et lourd du tam-tam,
 Tam-tam de la joie, tam-tam de l'insouciance
 Au milieu des feux de liberté.

Puis un jour, le Silence . . .
 Les rayons du soleil semblèrent s'éteindre
 Dans ma case vide de sens.
 Mes femmes écrasèrent leurs bouches rougies
 Sur les lèvres minces et dures des conquérants aux
 yeux d'acier

Et mes enfants quittèrent leur nudité paisible
 Pour l'uniforme de fer et de sang.
 Votre voix s'est éteinte aussi
 Les fers de l'esclavage ont déchiré mon cœur
 Tams-tams de mes nuits, tam-tams de mes pères.
 (Diop, "Celui")

The sun used to laugh in my hut
 And my women were lovely and lissome
 Like palms in the evening breeze.
 My children would glide over the mighty river
 Of deadly depths
 And my canoes would battle with crocodiles.
 The motherly moon accompanied our dances
 The heavy frantic rhythm of the tomtom,
 Tomtom of joy, tomtom of carefree life
 Amid the fires of liberty.

Then one day, Silence . . .
 It seemed the rays of the sun went out
 In my hut empty of meaning.
 My women crushed their painted mouths
 On the thin hard lips of steel-eyed conquerors
 And my children left their peaceful nakedness
 For the uniform of iron and blood.
 Your voice went out too
 The irons of slavery tore my heart to pieces
 Tomtoms of my nights, tomtoms of my fathers.
 ("Loser")

This two-stanza poem traces movement from freedom to abjection as imperial conquest destroys the speaker's way of life. The first stanza is replete with imagery that shows the speaker's world to be one of harmony and order. An idyllic hut, supple women, and swaying palms in the evening breeze all convey a tranquil setting in which the tom-tom, with its frenzied, joyful, and insouciant rhythm, speaks of freedom.

With the stanza break comes a temporal rupture conveyed by an adverb of time: "Puis un jour, le Silence . . ." ("Then one day, Silence . . ."). The terse "puis" gives way to a foreboding silence whose magnitude resides both in the capitalization of its first letter and in the trailing ellipsis, suggesting that the expressive capacity of language—even the language of the drums—falls short in the face of catastrophe. It is not so much that the speaker's

world has become disordered in the wake of conquest. He is still in possession of his hut, his women are still objects of desire, and his children still do battle. It is that the order of his world is now meaningless, and he can no longer make sense of his place in it. The speaker cannot lay claim to the tom-tom that appears at the end of this stanza. It belongs to his forefathers and, as such, it is stranded in the past. Diop's poem describes the profound devastation that "les fers de l'esclavage" ("the irons of slavery") and "des conquérants aux yeux d'acier" ("steel-eyed conquerors") have wrought on the speaker's world. As the imperfect tense of the first stanza's habitual past gives way to the *passé simple* of the second stanza's rendering of the bare historical record of imperialism, the tom-tom moves from frenzied drumbeat to silent relic, marking the time of the speaker's alienation as its capacity for expression is always contained in the past.

Diop takes up the tom-tom again in "Appel," a poem whose movement from disenchantment to liberation is the converse of the speaker's trajectory in "Celui qui a tout perdu."

Tam-tam voilé du désespoir
 Noir Tam-tam suffocant du Congo-Océan
 Tam-tam de pierres
 Tam-tam de fers
 Que ne me berce plus le rythme de vos pleurs
 J'entends déjà sonner dans un ciel d'espérance
 Les mille chœurs de ma négritude retrouvée
 L'orage sanglant de la liberté Aujourd'hui fera
 trembler la chair d'Afrique
 Et les ombres trompeuses de la résignation
 Fuiront éperdues mon soleil de Ghâna Bantous
 Soudanais
 Togolais Guinéens
 Nous referons l'Afrique
 Et ses guerriers et Tombouctou
 Nous referons l'Afrique
 Et ses purs cris d'amour à travers les savanes
 L'Afrique qui s'éveille au chant puissant de l'Avenir.

Tom-tom veiled in despair
 Black suffocating tom-tom of Congo-Océan
 Tom-tom of stones

Tom-tom of irons
 The rhythm of your tears no longer lulls me
 I can already hear ringing in a sky of hope
 The thousand choirs of my negritude rediscovered
 The bloody storm of liberty Today will make Africa's
 flesh tremble
 And the deceptive shadows of resignation
 Will flee lost my sun of Ghana Bantus Sudanese
 Togolese Guineans
 We will remake Africa
 And her warriors and Tombouctou
 We will remake Africa
 And her pure cries of love across the savannas
 Africa that awakens to the powerful song of the
 Future.

(my trans.)

Although there is no stanza break, "Appel" can also be read as a two-part poem. It opens with the anaphora that emphasizes the disenchantment of a tom-tom that is despairing, suffocating, weighted down by rocks and irons. Here is a tom-tom tortured by the brutal colonial exploitation of which the deadly Congo-Océan railway—whose construction under colonial rule claimed many African lives—is the symbol par excellence. Here too, the tom-tom symbolizes the speaker's alienation. Whatever harmonious relationship they once shared is no more, and the tom-tom's ability to comfort the speaker with its sound is again confined to the past of "ne plus" ("no longer").

There is a distinct change in tone as the silent, suffocating tom-tom disappears from the poem and the speaker assembles a range of sonic images to suggest that Africa's future awakening will be characterized by a profusion of sound: choirs of negritude, cries of love, and future song. Akin to "Celui qui a tout perdu," this poem shifts temporally between abjection and liberation, a shift signaled in "Appel" by "déjà." The word *déjà* is commonly associated with the past tense to describe a preceding moment or event—as in the "already" of "déjà vu"—but it is in fact a multivalent adverb of time that can refer to past, present, or future, sometimes simultaneously. When *déjà* follows a verb conjugated in the present tense, as it does in "Appel," it refers to an event that begins

in the present at the moment of speaking, or to an event that the speaker anticipates or imagines will occur in an imminent future ("Déjà").

Tracing the tom-tom's movement through "Celui qui a tout perdu" and "Appel" can help clarify what may have drawn Bâ to Diop's sonic imagery as she tried to capture FESTAC's dizzying temporality for her readers. Indeed, Bâ's intertextual engagement with Diop goes beyond the image of the tom-tom. The movement throughout "Appel" and "Souvenirs" is remarkably similar as both poems begin with the anaphora that emphasizes inertia, and both move from initial disenchantment to a hopeful future in closing lines that almost echo each other. In "Appel," Africa's future, full of expression and sound, is doubly conveyed at the end of the poem by the verb "refaire" conjugated in the future tense and by the capitalization of "l'Avenir" ("Future"). But it is also a future that already exists in the present through *déjà*'s double location in the immediate present and in an anticipated future. This is not the *déjà* of *déjà vu*, the *déjà* of pastness that would stake the possibility of African liberation on a return to the past to reclaim the silenced tom-tom of "Celui qui a tout perdu." The double location of *déjà* as both immediacy and anticipation brings the present and the future into proximity and situates African liberation and negritude's expression of Black civilization and culture in a future that both is to come and is already here.

Diop's evocation of past, present, and future inhabiting the same moment finds echoes in other firsthand accounts of FESTAC. The African American photographer Marilyn Nance recalls the chance encounters and opportunities that allowed her to participate in the festival: "Once we found out it was going to happen, it was already happening." Nance situates her journey to the "motherland," her rediscovered negritude, in the same double temporal location as Diop's "déjà," a "returning" that is at once anticipated and immediate, simultaneously going to happen and already happening (47). Her photographic archive bears witness to these concurrent temporalities. Tsitsi Ella Jaji has aptly described the movement within

and across Nance's FESTAC images as something akin to time travel (226). Nance herself explains that once in Lagos, her equipment necessitated an image-making technique that required the use of slow-speed film outdoors and higher-speed film inside. Constantly switching between rolls of film disrupted the temporal continuity of her contact sheets, making "some images overlap, while others jump from one day to the next" (51). The overlaps and "skips" in Nance's image archive make it difficult to trace a continuous, linear progression of the festival's events, to clearly map the sequence of images on her unspooled film onto a timeline.

What Nance renders in images—skips on a contact sheet—Bâ expresses in poetic form through her repetition of ellipses that make some of the festival's moments overlap while others jump from one day to the next. The "souvenirs" in Bâ's title evoke memory and memento, and they invite readers to experience the poem as an object that, in alignment with FESTAC's official narrative, promises to make the past present. Within the poem, however, the speaker's overwhelming use of the present tense provides very few clues about duration and makes the month-long festival appear to span a single day. She unravels the premise of past, present, and future occupying distinct places on a timeline that undergirds the Nigerian state's vision of a proposed encounter with history at FESTAC.

As with Diop's poems and Nance's photographs, the dual temporality of immediacy and anticipation is also central to "Souvenirs." Here, the idea that past, present, and future are contemporaneous with one another turns on Bâ's use of variations of the word "new." When Bâ's speaker lands in Lagos, she finds everything conspicuously new: "Finished public works and construction sites testify to large financial investments! / New: the buildings of the 'village,' new: the National Theatre in the shape of a kepi; / Perched high up, the new Tafawa Balewa Square!" (Bâ). "Neuf" ("new") is the newness of construction that did not exist before, that has only just come into being, and that is as yet unused or uninhabited. The village, the National Theatre modeled after

the Bulgarian Palace of Culture and Sports, and the square named after a slain Nigerian leader all stand as monuments to the past. But what strikes the speaker about these architectural re-creations is not that they render the past faithfully or that they are a hive of festival activity, but rather that they are unused and untouched. These sites appear to be more production than reproduction, financed by the “large financial investments” of a petrostate that the speaker encounters in the frustrating “slowness of administrative formalities.”

But the speaker also sees the possibility to transform FESTAC’s “staged creation(s) of a mythic, detemporalized past” into spaces where one may inhabit past, present, and future simultaneously (David Guss qtd. in Apter 15). Once the National Theatre welcomes the “Scholars, writers, artists of the Black world comparing their ideas” at the festival’s Colloquium on Black Civilization and Education, the building becomes a site for a different kind of newness: “the flowering of Black culture / With a new formulation of the values of civilization” (Bâ). “Nouvelle” (“new”), as used here, means something that is new in relation to a predecessor. Where “neuf” connotes the pristine and unused, “nouvelle” articulates a temporal relation by referring to something that can at once be new and have existed all along. Appearing in such close proximity in the poem, the two adjectives express markedly different relations to the past. The difference between “neuf” and “nouvelle” is the difference between, on the one hand, the newness of monuments that bear witness to the bureaucratic inefficiency of the state that funded their construction and, on the other hand, the generative tensions among interlocuters that make concurrent the past, present, and future of Black intellectual thought.

The colloquium’s temporality is not only narrated through grammatical tense shifts but also articulated in a “political tense” that situates the future of Black civilization as already present (Wilder 1). The speaker recounts the colloquium’s events in the present continuous tense (“comparing their ideas”), describing an ongoing process of intellectual exchange that has already come to

fruition (“Their efforts are rewarded”) and can do so again in the potential future that the speaker’s use of “likely” articulates (Bâ; see Robert 82). One may hear in Bâ’s “nouvelle” the dual temporality of Diop’s “déjà,” the anticipation of a future that is already taking place in the now of FESTAC.

Given the speaker’s acknowledgment of the tensions present at the colloquium, Bâ’s gesture in claiming the festival’s soundscape as an expression of negritude rediscovered has implications not only for understanding the temporality of FESTAC in its time but also for how we read the festival’s archive in our own time.² The story about FESTAC that has persisted in contemporary scholarship is that as tensions intensified between Lagos and Dakar, causing Senegal to announce it would boycott FESTAC and prompting Nigeria to in turn relieve the Senegalese Alioune Diop of his position as secretary general of the organizing committee, FESTAC came to be understood as a rejection of FESMAN’s ideological project. “Initially conceived as a continuation of the Dakar festival,” Andrew Apter writes, “the Second World Festival would move systematically away from Senegal and beyond *négritude*” (66). This historical account depends on the linear temporality of the progress narrative that sees Pan-Africanism triumphing over negritude, relegating the latter to an artistic and intellectual movement that had outlived its usefulness and was no longer *d’actualité*. Negritude is Diop’s forefather’s tom-tom stranded in the past.

Yet it is striking that of the colloquium’s many speakers, Bâ’s poem singles out Joseph Ki-Zerbo, who engaged with the temporality of revalorizing African culture and asserted that “the mere fact of wearing a wrist-watch can bring about a cultural mutation in the conception of time” (108), and Théophile Obenga, whose study on “the historical affinity between Egyptian and the Negro-African languages” challenged the putative divide between “Arab-Berber” and “Negro-African” that had been at the heart of negritudian opposition to the colloquium’s lineup (94). Far from choosing a camp or drawing her own line in the sand, Bâ’s speaker tells a different story about FESMAN and FESTAC, one in which negritude and Pan-Africanism are not in

dialectical opposition but rather are iterations of the same project, a "flowering of Black culture" that exceeds ideological differences (Bâ). Between the bookends of a poem that announces the speaker's arrival in Lagos but not her departure is a story told predominantly in the present tense about FESTAC as an ongoing phenomenon, another rehearsal of a future that is already at hand.³

Ki-Zerbo argued in his colloquium speech that "today's ambivalent Africa is like the two-faced Latin god, Janus with a face looking back to the past and the other scrutinizing the future. But where is the future?" (110). "Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos" imagines a different temporality. Bâ sees not a Janus-faced Africa looking to the past and the future but rather Black cultural creation and intellectual expression flowering in contemporaneous pasts, presents, and futures.

NOTES

1. Although "Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos" is signed by Mariama Diop, I refer to the author as Bâ and not Diop in order to avoid confusion with David Diop, whose poems I also analyze in this essay. The original French poem appeared in *L'Ouest Africain*, Feb. 1977, p. 32.

2. I am grateful to Jaji for the nudge to think about the temporality of FESTAC both in its time and in the present.

3. I am indebted to Jaji's reading of Pan-Africanism as continuous rehearsal and to Stéphane Robolin's observation of Bâ's arrival without a departure (in their essays in this issue of *PMLA*).

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