

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Punctuating Place, Time, and Pan-Africanism in Bâ's "Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos . . ."

STÉPHANE ROBOLIN

In vivid verse, Mariama Bâ's "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos" relays the "feast for the eyes" and ears experienced at the 1977 FESTAC hosted in Nigeria's coastal metropolis (Bâ [2023]). The list poem catalogs a cross-section of the plastic, performative, and sartorial arts from across the African continent and diaspora that were showcased for collective celebration and education. This inventory of the festival's cultural splendor itself constitutes a work of art with its own striking formal features. Not least of these is the poem's deployment of punctuation, in particular the ellipsis, which I argue provides the poem's robust emotional register and powerfully cues readers into Bâ's demarcation and bridging of Pan-Africanism's constitutive gaps.¹

By 1977, when she published her poem (as Mariama Diop), creative punctuation was a regular feature of experimental poetics across the Black World, a fact that offered Bâ numerous precedents and contemporaries. Négritude poets, for instance, led with typographic innovation and improvisation—including unconventional line breaks, spatialization of words, and capitalization—as Carrie Noland has carefully traced. Indeed, formal inventiveness permeates the expressive arrangement and punctuation in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*), "Les pur-sang" ("The Thoroughbreds"), and "Le grand midi" ("The Great Noon"), among other poems; it likewise informs the repeated exclamation points in Léopold Sédar Senghor's "Que m'accompagnent kôras et balafong" ("To the Music of the Koras and Balaphon") and "Éthiopie," as well as in David Mandessi Diop's "Souffre, pauvre nègre" ("Suffer, Poor Negro"). Later, some Black Arts movement poets veered away

STÉPHANE ROBOLIN is associate professor of literatures in English at Rutgers University, New Brunswick. He is the author of *Grounds of Engagement: Apartheid-Era African American and South African Writing* (U of Illinois P, 2015), winner of the 2017 African Literature Association First Book Award, and the coeditor of a volume (in progress) on the institutions of African literature.

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from punctuation altogether, but many African American writers before, during, and after the movement—including Russell Atkins (see Pruffer and Dumanis), Bob Kaufman, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Ntozake Shange—operationalized ellipses, backslashes, em dashes, ampersands, among others as formal interventions and signatures.

In "Festac . . ." the exclamation mark overwhelmingly predominates, generating the poem's effusive mélange of anticipation, wonder, joy, inspiration, and hope.² The poem's twenty-three exclamation points express the speaker's exuberance over the profusion of the Pan-African art, activity, and sensorial splendor that the speaker immerses herself in. The exclamatory bursts crescendo by the poem's end, assuring readers of a "second élan of black people" and a past "reinvigorate[d]" ("vivifi[é]"; Bâ [2023]; Bâ [1977]). But the two ellipses gracing the title ("Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos . . .") and the four opening the first phase of the poem merit special attention. True to their nature, ellipses in Bâ's poem trail off (before the halfway point), but they inaugurate and help constitute the poem's initial tone, from which the exclamation marks soar. The ellipses' expansive, multivalent nature underscores their significance to this inquiry. Jennifer DeVere Brody astutely casts the ellipsis as "ambivalent, enigmatic, paradoxical—the presence of absence (or vice versa)" (73). Ellipses, after all, communicate not an end to thought but a freighted break in space and time—a gap not emptied of but rather supercharged with unwritten meaning that either opens out onto an eventual continuation of thought or launches into weightier silence. And in Bâ's poem, the ellipsis furthermore becomes Pan-Africanism's typographic mark par excellence: representing spatial and temporal distance while providing connecting points across it.

"Festac . . ." opens with the speaker arriving in Lagos's airport before continuing on to the FESTAC Village. The early ellipses mark the transition, the weary wait, the passage of time: a pause in the airport, the result of slow "administrative formalities" and baggage claim. They also accentuate the subsequent "journey to the city," likely slowed

by traffic to the festival grounds (Bâ [2023]). Here and at the speaker's arrival in the festival's center, the symposium located at the National Theatre, the ellipsis registers lag and fatigue by slowing the lines' pacing while also introducing an underlying eagerness and building anticipation around FESTAC that has incubated within the delay. In crossing this threshold into the time of the festival, it also quite literally punctuates a utopian sense of proleptic "outward lunging" toward the liberatory possibilities of black international gathering (Omelsky 91).

Brody's characterization of the ellipsis as "a suspended space and space of suspense" throws into relief the specifically geographic dimensions that govern the poem (73). Beyond the affective transition from lethargy and impatience to elation, the ellipses chart the speaker's physical movement from the periphery (in Bâ's case, Dakar) to Lagos and, ultimately, the "Heart of the festival," a movement that articulates the scene of arrival—a staple of Pan-African representation capturing the convergence of African neighbors and diasporans alike.³ And while the speaker's journey is particular to the speaker, it also symbolizes the generalizable geographic movement and concentration of thousands of contributors and audience members essential to any festival. More symbolically, ellipses index the fundamental facts of Pan-African circulation: first, the speaker's diegetic physical journey in one direction and, second, the poem's extradiegetic "return" to its target audience in published, circulatable form. The title's punctuation and emphasis on memory mark precisely this elliptical, there-and-back journeying between two distinct places. The poem is, after all, a firsthand testimony, or *témoignage*, of an experience elsewhere, as indicated by the heading in *L'Ouest Africain (The West African)*, the journal where the poem was first published. If Bâ's catalog poem records FESTAC's abundant offerings in concise detail, it is primarily to bring those offerings back to the Dakar-based publication's primarily Senegalese francophone readers, most of whom did not attend the historic event. In effect, the ellipses mimic the poem's own representational translation—a carrying over—across geographic, temporal, and experiential gaps.

What the ellipses accomplish grammatically—both their demarcation of a gap and their attempt to bridge it—is what the poem achieves literarily, culturally.

If that's the case, then part of the scholar's task is to decipher the poem's retrospective translation of an event into literature, to consider what and how Bâ's poem translates. The poem is no mere poetic "report," nor is translation a simple act of transfer. On the contrary, just as the Lagos festival was a deliberate curatorial enterprise, out of which emerged an expression of Pan-Africanism in active formation, Bâ's poem—a literary distillation of the festival—carefully collates and curates a selection of FESTAC's cornucopia.

Much of Bâ's own curatorial work is shaped by *L'Ouest Africain* and its readership. The list poem gathers glimpses of cultural production (visual and sonic) featured in Lagos that would be familiar to the journal's audience: masks, statues, pagnes, tapestries, plays, films, dances, costumes, and music featuring drums, flute, percussive calabashes, and bells. These elements of plastic and performed arts are interspersed with explicit references to the scholars Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Théophile Obenga and the resistance fighter Lat Dior Ngoné Latyr (featured at the Senegalese exhibition), as well as an allusion to the poetry of David Diop—all of whom had been the subjects of previous features in the pages of *L'Ouest Africain*. These figures would be most legible to the publication's francophone readers, whereas festival contributors from beyond the francophone world—for example, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mario de Andrade, Jayne Cortez, Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, Audre Lorde, Miriam Makeba, Jesús Perez, Sun Ra, and Wole Soyinka—might be less immediately familiar (see *FESTAC '77*). *L'Ouest Africain* was a worldly publication that followed political and cultural developments across the globe; in a single 1972 issue (no. 5, 30 Sept.–6 Oct.), for example, it explored Congo-Brazzaville's withdrawal from the African and Malagasy Common Organization, the war in Vietnam, and Phillis Wheatley as a precursor of Négritude. *L'Ouest Africain's* deliberate crossing of linguistic and national boundaries should not

be overlooked, nor should the translinguistic circulation of artists that makes them known elsewhere across the globe. Too rigid a division between europhone zones on the African continent risks encouraging a dangerous myopia. Even so, one might view Bâ's curation as offering more recognizable examples for her reading public to connect them to FESTAC's dizzying cultural plenitude and, further, to place their known world in relation to (and as contributing to) the festivities in Lagos. Put differently, one might read this "translation" of FESTAC as Bâ's negotiation between multiple places: a process that accounts for two different geographic and cultural centers—Dakar and Lagos—in writing her poem and, further, for the modeling of exchange across the Black World that FESTAC facilitated.⁴ "Festac . . ." accordingly, enacts a spatial and temporal extension of the festival, becoming itself an imaginative *rallonge*, or extension leaf, in the elongated table of FESTAC and its animating Pan-Africanism. The fact of this extension is signaled and symbolized by the figure of the ellipsis, but as an act of translation the ellipsis also marks the negotiation of inevitable temporal and cultural *décalage* (Edwards 13).

Bâ negotiates a second, more complex geographic matter: the multiple scales of Pan-Africanism. She must confront how to represent the articulation of a Pan-Africanism embodied in 1977 Lagos against the grand scale of Pan-Africanism as a planetary conception and phenomenon that FESTAC was meant to express. FESTAC, like any other state-sponsored arts festival, was the product of political and ideological battles shaping a specific frame and assemblage of invitees, representative peoples, and their cultural production. The Nigerian petrostate, for example, sharply rejected Senghor's precursory proposal that North African Arab states be granted nonparticipant, observer-only status, the ultimate outcome of which was the relative demotion of Senegal's standing at FESTAC (Apter 154–56). Whereas in Senghor's Dakar, Négritude animated the 1966 Festival mondial des arts nègres (FESMAN, or the First World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture), as the guiding spirit to unify disparate contexts, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and

Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos distanced itself from Négritude. FESTAC's own ideological orientation was, at least in part, the continuation of clashes over Négritude's meaning and implications in the lead-up to the intervening Organization of African Unity-sponsored 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers, where Négritude was cast as a conservative, race-based ideology that risked hamstringing more revolutionary thought (Apter 156–60; Warner 1173). In Lagos, as in Algiers and beyond, key differences between the conceptual frames of blackness and Pan-Africanism would be confronted, hammered out, or left unsolved by organizers and participants alike.

Writing back to the readership clustered around Senghor's Senegalese capital, Bâ foregrounds francophone contributors of the Black World and affirms a rediscovered Négritude (routed through David Diop's poem) while also championing the gathering in Lagos. Her positioning navigates not only between two places but also between different ideological frameworks of black collectivity that these geographies have come to signify. The poem's speaker acknowledges "the inevitable conflicts in a conversation of this scale" while also marveling at the immensity of the occasion (Bâ [2023]). And the exclamation point emphatically conveys this wonder. But if, by the end of the poem, that emphatic punctuation outshines the ambiguous ellipsis that opens it, the constitutive nature of the ellipsis—the underlying negotiation and complex bridgework that it represents—remains evident.

Bâ depicts the arrival to FESTAC in the poem's opening lines, but she does not convey the act of departure. Instead of signaling the moment of parting, "Festac . . ." points open-endedly to the future, a move that returns us to the ellipses of the poem's title. The first ellipsis suggests that the "memories of Lagos" issue from FESTAC; by the same sequential logic, the second lingering ellipsis (in the original French title) either transitions directly into the poem's first line or, more enticingly, raises a crucial open question about the end(s) of FESTAC: What comes after Lagos, as a symbol of the historic festival and its memory? The ellipsis thereby gestures to the Pan-African formations (possibly) to come,

perhaps even to the many cultural festivals to follow in FESTAC's wake, and in that sense aligns compellingly with Tsitsi Jaji's concept of *répétition* at and of festivals as the perpetual rehearsal of Pan-Africanism.⁵ Representing that unending nature of Pan-Africanist projects typographically, Bâ's ellipsis is the replication of the period, the "full stop" that refuses to end but, instead, takes a serial form and continues on. The wide arc of the title's second ellipsis, in other words, dangles out a more philosophical query: Where will the spirit of Pan-Africanism practiced in Lagos, and recollected thereafter, take Africa and the diaspora? Where that spirit will or should lead, Bâ leaves open-ended, ingeniously deploying the ellipsis to punctuate what is yet to be articulated.

NOTES

1. Although I hold to the convention of capitalizing, it is worth acknowledging that many instances of "Pan-Africanism" invoked in this piece would fall under a lowercase "pan-Africanism" that George Shepperson identified as more diffuse, less institutionalized, and more cultural forms of expression and thought.

2. Bâ relied on ellipses even in her prose: in her classic *Une si longue lettre*, she employs ellipses, by my count, sixty-one times, forty-seven of which appear in the English translation, *So Long a Letter*, for the African Writers Series.

3. See Tsitsi Jaji's essay in this issue of *PMLA*. See also Jaji 224. For an exemplar in the visual arts, see the opening sequence of documentary photographs in Marilyn Nance's *Last Day in Lagos* (9–13).

4. For a lucid reading of Bâ's complex negotiation of multiple temporalities in this poem, see Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel's essay in this issue of *PMLA*.

5. See Jaji's essay in this issue of *PMLA*.

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