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THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Mariama Bâ's Souvenirs of Lagos: An Introduction

TOBIAS WARNER

This special feature convenes a multidisciplinary conversation around the rediscovery of Mariama Bâ's "Festac . . . Souvenirs de Lagos . . .," which appeared in translation last year in *PMLA* as "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos." The reemergence of this poem has inspired readings by scholars of African and francophone literatures, Black internationalism, Global South feminisms, photography, media theory, ecocriticism, intellectual history, and print culture. The first exchanges took place at a roundtable at the 2024 MLA convention cosponsored by the executive committees of the MLA forums LLC Francophone and LLC African to 1990. Many participants in that discussion have returned to expand their contributions here. The conversation has also grown to incorporate new reactions to the poem, including from Bâ's own daughter.

Many factors conspire to make "Memories of Lagos" a promising meeting point. Not least among them are shared surprise and excitement at the recovery of something that no one knew was lost. Here is a new text by one of the most widely taught African writers of the twentieth century, someone who helped make gender central to the study of African literatures only to pass away in 1981 shortly after publishing her pathbreaking feminist novel, *Une si longue lettre* (*So Long a Letter*). The reemergence of Bâ's only known poem will change the way her works are taught and written about. But the text also unsettles some of the broader, commonplace demarcations that still structure the study of African literatures today: anglophone and francophone, Africa and its diaspora, anticolonial poetry versus the realist novel, and nationalism versus internationalism as horizons for political imagination.

For contributors to this conversation, perhaps the most generative aspect of Bâ's poem is that it refracts an extraordinary moment of encounter and collectivity. The text is a dispatch from a crucial event

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in the history of Pan-Africanism: FESTAC 1977, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, which gathered sixteen thousand people in Lagos, Nigeria, for a celebration of global Black culture. Bâ's own positionality at FESTAC matters greatly. Not being an official delegate, Bâ records not just the possibilities but also the fault lines she detects in a gathering "de cette dimension" ("of this scale"; "Festac" [1977]; "Festac" [2023]). As many of the contributors highlight, women were often marginalized in both the planning and the archiving of Pan-African gatherings, making Bâ's FESTAC poem all the more precious as a site to stage fresh associations and revisionist interventions and invite new ways of relating to FESTAC's Pan-African visions.

And yet, before going any further, one has to acknowledge a certain risk in all this. How can one poem, itself barely a page, unlock extended reflection and discussion? Surely Bâ's text is too slight, too inconsequential, simply *too short* for anyone to do much with it? If there is a single methodological commitment that unites this diverse group of essays, however, it is the inclination to take the smallness of Bâ's poem seriously, not as a limitation but as a productive point of departure.

To understand how the smallness of "Memories of Lagos" creates room for critical maneuver, it helps to revisit Bâ's original title. These are her "*Souvenirs de Lagos*." Not just memories, then, but *souvenirs* of the Senegalese writer's visit to Nigeria—her mementos as well as her memories, as several contributors insist. The word *souvenir* derives from the Latin *subvenire*, to "come to mind," but with the specific sense of rising up from below. To speak of a *souvenir*, then, is to imagine the act of remembering as an upwelling into consciousness, a resurgence of the past into narrative stirred by a remnant of the event itself.

In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart suggests that a souvenir offers a form of narrative consolation for the ephemerality of experience. In her memorable phrasing, people crave souvenirs of events that are reportable but not repeatable (135). Souvenirs are shards of larger happenings whose materiality has vanished and that can still be grasped only through

the in(ter)vention of narrative. The souvenir for Stewart thus has a generative incompleteness—it "must remain incomplete," she suggests, "so that it can be supplemented by narrative" (136). A metonymic sample, the souvenir is only ever a "partial" record of an event, and yet somehow it manages to be "more expansive" than the original (136). The very incompleteness of the souvenir is what allows it to precipitate further recollection and imagination. This is surely the case with Bâ's poetic report from FESTAC, except that her souvenirs already constitute a narrative, albeit one that unfolds line by line in staccato flashes.

The humble souvenir also performs a kind of scalar magic. It "reduces the public, the monumental, the three-dimensional into the miniature" (Stewart 137). Such a physical reduction, Stewart suggests, corresponds with an increase in narrative significance (138). Stewart is thinking of the physical miniaturization of the trinket, but for many contributors to this collection of essays the most striking aspect of Bâ's souvenirs is that they contract and condense timescales as well. In her poem, the pasts, presents, and futures of Black culture that were staged at FESTAC find themselves superimposed in ways that clash with the more official, linear forms of time-reckoning that were on offer at the festival.

Souvenirs are said to occasion narratives that are personal rather than collective (Stewart 138), but for Bâ the practice of the souvenir worked quite differently. In French *un souvenir* refers to an instance of remembering, a memory rather than memory in general. For someone who thought deeply about the stakes of recollection, Bâ rarely wrote about memory in the abstract. She preferred instead to explore the powers of the physical or mental souvenir as a provisional performance of memory that could be both personal and communal. In the opening pages of *So Long a Letter*, for example, Bâ's narrator Ramatoulaye distinguishes between her "*souvenirs*" and her "*memory*." Souvenirs are the "*sel de ma mémoire*" ("salt of my memory"), she tells her friend Aïssatou (*Une si longue lettre* 5; *So Long a Letter* 1). Ramatoulaye's souvenirs are what allow her solitary

practice of writing to cut through her isolation and “conjure up” her absent best friend (“Je t’invoque”)—a gesture that has captivated generations of readers (*So Long a Letter* 1; *Une si longue lettre* 5).

For Bâ, souvenirs were small but potent particles of the past that could still spark something in the present. Her attachment to the souvenir—mental and material—extended across her writings. In *Letter*, the invocation of the memories that the two friends share is what allows for their past to be “reborn” (“renait”; *So Long a Letter* 1; *Une si longue lettre* 7). But the power of souvenirs and memories could also be ambiguous. In Bâ’s posthumously published second novel, *Un chant écarlate* (*Scarlet Song*), two ill-fated lovers are drawn and then held together by the persistence of the “souvenirs” they hold of each other (*Un chant écarlate* 25, 32). Even in her earliest known piece of writing, a school composition about her childhood, Bâ focuses on what acts of remembering make possible (“Ma Petite Patrie”).

Bâ’s souvenirs of Lagos were not private memories. True, she refracted FESTAC through the prism of her own lived experience, but Bâ’s memory fragments were always already public. They were printed in a periodical and presented to an audience to whom they did not belong but to whom they were still addressed. The publicness of these memories went hand in hand with a certain embrace of the ephemeral that at first seems contrary to the notion of the keepsake. Indeed, this poem went on to meet an almost oxymoronic fate: that of a forgotten souvenir. These textual mementos of Lagos did not become heirlooms (Bâ’s family was unaware of their existence until recently). And yet, the fact that this text was forgotten seems integral to what transpires around it today, as these souvenirs allow readers to “conjure up” FESTAC once more.

Tsitsi Jaji’s contribution to this conversation explores the formal qualities that Bâ’s poem shares with the photographs of Marilyn Nance, whose images from FESTAC were recently published in *Last Day in Lagos*. For both Nance and Bâ, Jaji suggests, less is more. The marginal positionality of these two gifted Black female artists at FESTAC

allowed them to capture the festival’s monumentality from unique angles, often leading them to favor intimate moments and unexpected perspectives. Reading across Nance’s photos and Bâ’s poem, Jaji identifies a Pan-African feminist archival practice that locates the antiracist and anticolonial potential of Pan-Africanism in its aspirational stance. For Jaji, Pan-Africanism is “neither failed nor dead, it remains in rehearsal,” with each instantiation serving as “a practice session for unfinished progress toward mutuality.”

Annette K. Joseph-Gabriel traces how Bâ situates Black cultural and intellectual production temporally in her poem. For FESTAC’s organizers, the project of valorizing and showcasing Black culture turned on questions of time. Joseph-Gabriel shows that despite the ideological battles that raged between the Nigerian and Senegalese delegations, the organizers viewed the project mainly in terms of reclamation, the aim being the conjuring of a precolonial past into the present to serve as a guide for the future. In a close reading of the intertextuality of Bâ’s poem with the poetry of her compatriot David Mandessi Diop, Joseph-Gabriel suggests that “Memories of Lagos” moves beyond such an instrumental relationship to time in order to locate Black culture in entangled pasts, presents, and futures.

Stéphane Robolin also explores temporality in the poem with a focus on Bâ’s deployment of punctuation, especially her use of the ellipsis. Instead of understanding an ellipsis as a mere pause in thought, Robolin argues for viewing it as a poetic break in space and time that can become supercharged with potential meaning. For Bâ, the ellipsis is a way of marking and bridging Pan-Africanism’s constitutive gaps. Her ellipses mimic the representational translation that her poem performs, while also holding space for what is yet to be articulated.

Grace A. Musila’s essay explores what she terms “bracketing the possible.” To step into Bâ’s “Memories,” Musila suggests, is to experience the Pan-African possibilities that were envisioned in FESTAC ’77 only to then step out again into a world where global Black everyday realities largely

fall short of that vision. Musila analyzes how the seeds of the decay that consumed the FESTAC vision were there from the beginning. Emblematic for her reading is Nigeria's National Theatre, a massive edifice that caught Bâ's eye. Designed for FESTAC by Bulgarian architects, the structure ended up requiring tremendous amounts of energy to maintain and began to decay in the tropical climate. Sifting through crumbling concrete and postponed futures, Musila identifies residues of multiple temporalities and conceptualizations of freedom in Bâ's poem that gesture toward ways of replanting the seeds of Pan-African futurity.

Merve Fejzula connects Bâ's FESTAC testimony with a poem by the multimedia artist Younoussé Seye, who was a participant at the earlier Pan-African Festival in Algiers (PANAF) in 1969. Both Bâ and Seye developed original aesthetic and political thinking about negritude in their poetic responses to these festivals, while refusing to be drawn in to the ideological debates that raged around them. Fejzula directs attention to the ways in which these two Senegalese women opted for ephemeral forms of circulation for their poems, distancing themselves from the statist, male-dominated archives these gatherings generated. Urging readers to take Bâ and Seye's ambivalence toward print seriously, Fejzula argues for recognizing ephemerality as a practice in its own right that afforded African women creative possibilities that were not possible in more enduring printed formats.

Reacting to the poem's cascade of fragmentary images, Ainehi Edoro-Glines asks, "What if Bâ had had an *Instagram* account when she attended the festival?" This question prompts Edoro-Glines to explore the mutually illuminating properties of Bâ's poem and social media. Both have in common a mode of representation by accumulation that Edoro-Glines suggests can be deployed to capture the radical diversity of the Black experience. Central to Edoro-Glines's reading of Bâ is her concept of "mediated ancestrality," which evokes the need to adapt connections with ancestors to new media ecologies.

Akua Banful's essay reflects critically on the extractivism that subtends Bâ's poem. Whatever

else FESTAC '77 may have been, it was also a lavish spectacle made possible by the Nigerian state's dizzying new wealth in the wake of OPEC's 1973 oil embargo. Banful's reading recaptures the tensions between national development and the contingencies of an oil boom, between the elaboration of global Black consciousness and its underwriting by a wave of petro-naira (the iteration of Nigeria's currency inextricable from oil booms and busts). For Banful, Bâ's report from FESTAC is not merely euphoric, it also evinces a dimension of instructive self-awareness. This is a poem that is aware of the infrastructure that makes its production possible, Banful suggests.

My own contribution situates "Memories of Lagos" as part of a previously unknown trove of writings by Bâ that were published in *L'Ouest Africain* (*The West African*), a dynamic Senegalese newspaper of the 1970s. In addition to her FESTAC poem, Bâ contributed several more articles to its pages, including the first published excerpt of *So Long a Letter*. Strikingly, all of Bâ's newsprint work from the 1970s is intertextual to varying degrees with her first novel. In other words, a writer who was thought to have abruptly burst onto the scene turns out to have been honing her creative practice in public across a variety of genres and formats for years before publishing a book. My essay introduces Bâ's pre-*Letter* writings and suggests that these texts demand to be read as robust experiments in political and aesthetic imagination in their own right.

This cluster of essays concludes with my interview with Mame Coumba Ndiaye, who is Bâ's daughter and her only biographer. Ndiaye's study of her mother's life, *Mariama Bâ; ou, Les allées d'un destin* (*Mariama Bâ; or, The Alleys of a Destiny*) provided the clue that led to the rediscovery of "Memories of Lagos" and her other early writings. Ndiaye's book is an experimental archive in its own right. An unclassifiable hybrid of biography, memoir, and filial ventriloquism, the book draws from a variety of published and unpublished sources, including family documents and photographs as well as Ndiaye's own letters with her mother. In this interview, Ndiaye discusses her mother's life and writings, her own research

practice, the role of print culture in their family, and the relevance of Bâ's work today.

The jagged-edged images of Bâ's "Memories of Lagos" have caught hold of the contributors' imagination in various ways. By sampling and condensing FESTAC '77 into a single page, Bâ's text has produced a wide-ranging conversation around her work and the festival she documented. Deliberately diminutive and intentionally incomplete, her souvenir-poem will continue to generate new ways of engaging with FESTAC's dreams of Pan-African possibility.

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