

# From the Editors

## GLOBAL BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

**O**n May 11–12, 2014, the Global Black Consciousness international conference convened in Dakar, Senegal, cosponsored by the Institute for Comparative Modernities (Cornell University) and the Institute of African American Affairs (New York University). Held as part of the Dak'Art OFF program of the opening days of the Dakar Biennale (Dak'Art 2014), this two-day gathering brought together an array of literary scholars, art historians, visual art critics, artists, and diaspora theorists, with the aim of uncovering unknown dimensions of the art, culture, and politics tied to global black consciousness.

In our conference's call for papers, we framed our use of the word *black* as our desire to “think about both the promise and the problem of diasporic usages of ‘black’ as a unifying concept that pushes against global white supremacy.” Now that we have such tremendous scholarship on particular identities shaped by the African diaspora (Afro-German, Black British, African American, Afro-Latina/o, Afro-Caribbean, and many more) and tremendous theories of the value and limits of Pan-Africanism, Afro-pessimism, and many other “isms,” how do we create a space for the critical and nuanced analysis of global black consciousness as both a citing of diasporic flows and a grounded site of decolonizing movement? Hence, the conference aimed to explore the confluence between theories of diaspora and theories of decolonization. Consequently, several of the presentations at the conference explored the crisscrossing of visual art, literature, film, and other cultural productions, alongside the crosscurrents that shaped the transnational flow of black consciousness. Many participants in the conference situated their texts in the space of the crisscrossing that occurred as the Black freedom struggle became a layering of locations and dislocations and past, present, and future.

The 1960s and 1970s were our pivotal point, as we thought about the precursors and legacies of

those eras of black freedom struggles. The occasion of Dak'Art and its theme, “To Produce the Common,” allowed us to revisit major black and Pan-African intellectual collectivities in movements and festivals such as the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, the 1959 Second Congress in Rome, the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar (FESMAN), the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival (PANAF) in Algiers, and the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria. In addition, this focus allowed us to revisit individual artistic and intellectual work tied to Africa and the African diaspora. Our ultimate goal was to gather scholarship that opens up and complicates the key paradigms that have shaped the vibrant work on theories and cultural productions of the African diaspora.

The promise and problem of using the word *black* when organizing the gathering in Dakar became very clear when we realized that we could not use the word *noir* in the French translations of the conference program. Our competent translator and several of our colleagues who are French native speakers told us that the direct translation of our English program into French (“black” to “noir”) would not work as well as translating “black” as “Africaine.” The fear was that, in Senegal, the word *black* would signal a racial identification (not radical Pan-Africanism). We decided to use *Africaine* in the French conference programs and chose *black* for the English conference program. Nonetheless, this issue of translation shaped some of the most vibrant parts of the discussion during the first day of the conference.

This volume of *Nka* gained its wings during this 2014 conference, which was so crowded that the open-air, amphitheater-style venue had very few empty seats for the two days of its unfolding. The essays are a testament to the ongoing work of figuring out which words, which archives, and which theories make global black consciousness most legible, even when this global black consciousness remains the work of *illegible* resistance, aesthetics, and solidarity building. To broaden the coverage of issues related to our theme, we invited scholars beyond the participants to contribute essays that would augment the conference presentations and explore lesser-known events or topics. The essays are organized in

three sections as follows: “Theorizing Global Black Consciousness,” “The Flow of Pan-African Festivals and Conferences,” and “New Perspectives on the Practice of Global Black Consciousness.”

In the first section, the essays range from an analysis of the Négritude movement to a transnational approach to what is often most legible as the 1960s and early 1970s US Black Arts Movement. The opening essay, written by Souleymane Bachir Diagne, is also one of the opening papers delivered as the 2014 conference began. The crowd was enchanted when Diagne, as he developed his theory of Négritude, explained that what is woven during the day is unwoven at night. He presented a stunning reconsideration of strategic essentialism as not a strategy, but a weaving and unweaving process. As the conference progressed, people continued to hold on to this image of the woven blackness that needs the unwoven (the woven blackness that is an unweaving).

After beginning this volume with Diagne’s rethinking of the negotiated universalism that shapes Négritude and global black consciousness, we move with intention to Manthia Diawara’s analysis of what he calls Édouard Glissant’s “worldmentality.” In an earlier conversation with Glissant aboard the Queen Mary II, Diawara cites the one-way departures of Africans aboard slave ships and asks Glissant, “What does ‘departure’ mean to you?” Glissant answered:

It’s the moment when one consents not to be a single being and attempts to be many beings at the same time. In other words, for me, every diaspora is the passage from unity to multiplicity. I think that’s what’s important in all the movements of the world, and we, the descendants, who have arrived from the other shore, would be wrong to cling fiercely to this singularity which had accepted to go out into the world. Let us not forget that Africa has been the source of all kinds of diasporas—not only the forced diaspora imposed by the West through the slave trade, but also of millions of all types of diasporas before—that have populated the world. One of Africa’s vocations is to be a kind of foundational Unity which develops and transforms itself into a Diversity. And it seems to me, if we don’t think about that properly, we won’t be able to understand what we ourselves can do, as participants in this African diaspora, to help the world to realize its true self, in other words its multiplicity, and to respect itself as such.<sup>1</sup>

African American theorist Fred Moten sets this language Glissant uses in motion in his 2010 essay, “to consent not to be a single being,” and his trilogy *consent not to be a single being*.<sup>2</sup> We aim to make readers hear what Moten uncovers as the tension between the involuntary and the voluntary in the global formations of this *feeling* of blackness—that is, as Glissant teaches us, a decision to lean into the multiplicity that, for many in the diaspora, was not chosen. We hope the full flow of section one will give readers an introduction to the state of the most current global black critical thought, where theories of Négritude, diaspora, Black Marxism, black abstraction, and black sound studies burst out of the boundaries we would normally call intersections.

Section two helps readers think about the influence and the limitations of the Pan-African festivals and conferences that played a huge role in the formation of global black consciousness. A case in point is Algiers’s PANAF of 1969, whose organizers sought to problematize the notion of “blackness” in relation to “Africanness” in presenting a more inclusive view of Africa beyond the artificial and arbitrary boundaries (of North and Sub-Saharan Africa) inherited within the colonial tropes of representation. The organizers also sought to situate blackness and Africanness within a larger progressive politics of decolonization and Third-Worldism. As these gatherings imagined community, they sometimes led people, such as the 1977 FESTAC organizers, to disagreements about the contours of the community that was being envisioned. The debate during the FESTAC planning about the use of the word “black” or “African” was tied to concern about people who might identify as “African” but feel shut out by the word “black.” The decision to frame FESTAC as the “Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture” offers us one way to understand the production of space for “black” and “African” to hail whoever relates to either the single terms or the broken boundaries between these words. FESTAC, in this second section, is placed in a larger trajectory of Pan-African gatherings. We hope this second section of the volume provides a deeper genealogy of these Pan-African gatherings that pushes against the impulse to sometimes fetishize the FESTAC ’77 event. Hence, exploring magazines

such as *Bingo* sheds light on black feminism and its archive within magazines during the age of Pan-African festivals. Additionally, Holiday Powers's essay on the international exhibition histories of the Casablanca School in Morocco of the 1960s and 1970s, and Barbara Murray's recount of the First International Congress of African Culture (ICAC), held in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe), in 1962, shed light on lesser-known Pan-African gatherings and festivals.

The final section of the volume, "New Perspectives on the Practice of Global Black Consciousness," takes readers to what Jose Munoz aptly names the "not yet here."<sup>3</sup> Starting with Shannen Hill's essay exploring the influence of the ideology of the Global Black Consciousness movement on the artistic and aesthetic in apartheid's South Africa, and Hisham Aidi's critical meditation on the political uses of Malcolm X and their implications in the context of the activist's sojourns across the Muslim and Arab worlds, this section moves to Dagmawi Woubshet's examination of James Baldwin's writings, which insists that there is a "discernable pattern" in Baldwin's representation of Africa that has shifted over time. Richard Powell, on the other hand, deploys Glissant's pedagogical projects "that strive to bring greater understanding and appreciation to *créolité* as an 'exploded discourse'" in his reading of the work of the Paris-based Haitian artist Hérve Télémaque. Taking a different path, Amanda Gilvin unearths the project and intellectual legacy of the lesser-known Nigerien intellectual Boubou Hama, a Pan-Africanist visionary and participant in the 1956 Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris.

In order to bring more visual and documentary depth to this special issue, we included three photographic/visual essays that shed light on the historic Pan-African festivals and their manifestations of global black consciousness and implications for Pan-African aesthetics. In this context, Romi Crawford juxtaposes the photography of Bob Crawford, which documents the famous *Wall of Respect* in Chicago, with his and Kofi Moyo's captivating images of FESTAC '77. Robert Wade's brilliant photographs reveal the musical performances of the 1969 PANAF against the cityscape of Algiers at the time, contrasting the Casbah and what was known as the French questers Bab el Oued. On the

other hand, Lydie Diakhaté provides a survey of the career of Melvin Edwards, the legendary African American sculptor, whose work combines abstraction and geometric forms in metal to create figural gestures that reference African Americans' history and legacy of resistance.

In conceiving the conference, we were motivated by the need to recuperate and critically engage histories of global black solidarities and their implications for our time. This becomes even more urgent as we continue to witness the return of colonial violence in the form of neoliberal policies that kill, starve, and subjugate men, women, and children of color in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Palestine, and across the Muslim world. Yet, these crises have also resulted in the rise of new resistance movements such as Black Lives Matter in the United States, paralleling antiglobalization, antiracist, and environmental platforms worldwide, which necessitate a new type of politics of solidarity capable of addressing these new challenges.

In the context of the United States, the mass incarceration of black bodies reaffirms our conviction of the need to challenge the presumption of a value-free corporeal schema in a racialized world in which "whiteness" continues to be naturalized. Overall, we certainly hope readers will see the practice of global black consciousness as unfinished work, as the horizon that this volume can only anticipate.

Before we conclude, we must acknowledge the efforts of those who contributed to the success of the conference and shepherded this volume of *Nka* to fruition. Our utmost gratitude goes to our colleague and dear friend Manthia Diawara, whose support did not stop with the partnership of New York University's Institute of African American Affairs in cosponsoring the conference, but who offered his insights into the theme of the conference, its participants, and its reconfiguration. In Dakar, the full endorsement of the Ministry of Culture of Senegal was heartening, to say the least. Several of our Senegalese friends and colleagues have been instrumental to the success of the conference; among them we wish to single out Ousseynou Wade, former president of Dak'Art; Viye Diba, the prominent Senegalese artist; Mario Petroni, coordinator of Dak'Art OFF's events; and the owner and staff of the Hotel Sokhamon, whose ambience and majestic

location overlooking the Atlantic Ocean provided the venue for our conference deliberations. Above all, we wish to express our utmost gratitude to Alexis Boyce, the former program coordinator of the Institute for Comparative Modernities, for her tireless efforts and hard work behind the scenes to ensure our ultimate success.

*Margo Natalie Crawford*

*Salah M. Hassan*

### **Notes**

1 Manthia Diawara, "One World in Relation: Édouard Glissant in Conversation with Manthia Diawara," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 28 (2011): 5.

2 Fred Moten, "to consent not to be a single being," Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/02/to-consent-not-to-be-a-single-being](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/02/to-consent-not-to-be-a-single-being); Moten, *consent not to be a single being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

3 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. (New York: New York University Press, 2009).