A Quiet Revolution in Arts Education
The Rise of blaxTARLINES Kumasi

Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu and Ruth Simbao

A quiet revolution has steadily been rising in Kumasi, Ghana. The fluid, experimental network known as blaxTARLINES is a mutable and transgenerational community of artists, curators and writers that is based in, but extends beyond, the Department of Painting and Sculpture at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST). This special issue on blaxTARLINES, edited by Ruth Simbao and Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu (Castro), brings together five articles authored by twenty blaxTARLINES affiliates who, in their own words, trace the rise of the creative and intellectual network that was sparked by the work of ƙrƙ'ƙchà seidou, affectionately known as the godfather of this revolution.

Kissiedu and Simbao first met at the African Tertiary Arts Education (ATAE) meeting organized by the African Arts Institute (AFAI) and the Goethe-Institut South Africa in 2015. Spearheaded by the playwright and arts activist Mike van Graan, the ATAЕ meeting brought together "high-profile leading African arts educators of formal tertiary as well as nonformal (postsecondary school) institutions in arts education ... to network, exchange and identify key areas of concern and collaboration."

Participants from ten African countries shared their experiences of being involved in tertiary arts education on the African continent and focussed on the importance of networking, which for van Graan is about "stakeholders taking responsibility for their own lives and livelihoods ... irrespective of whether government comes to the party or not." In a plenary panel with Emma Woũkau-Wanambwa and the late Harry Garuba, Simbao shared her ideas of "learning sideways" and curriculum transformation in the context of the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall movement. This paper developed into ongoing interest in collaboration on the African continent and resulted in the multivocal dialogue, "Reaching Sideways, Writing Our Ways," coauthored with fourteen artists, writers, and curators (Simbao et al. 2017). It was at this ATAЕ event that African colleagues in arts education learnt about the blaxTARLINES network from Kissiedu, who has the reputation of being the informal ambassador, negotiator, and counselor of blaxTARLINES. Our mutual interest in arts education models that emphasize nonhierarchical learning and collaboration laid the foundation for this special issue. The backdrop of the ATAЕ networking event is important, as it sets the stage for discussions on arts education that are not predicated on a dichotomy between formal and nonformal education. The assumption of such a dichotomy overlooks opportunities for meaningful resonance, slippage, and intervention. Although some might have lost faith in the intellectual currency and social relevance of African universities—particularly since the crisis of universities in the 1980s and 1990s (Zeleza 2009)—it would be erroneous to suggest that it is only independent arts spaces on the African continent that are generating exciting intellectual and creative ideas. A spirit of scholarly and creative camaraderie that intersects across various types of learning platforms is growing significantly in Africa and is attracting the attention of people worldwide. As this special issue demonstrates, there are scholars, artists, and curators within tertiary education institutions in Africa who are successfully navigating the formal and the nonformal, as well as the ‘gown’ and the ‘town’ through their embrace of interventionist strategies, daily struggles, and the optimistic belief that there is always possibility for slippage, subversion, and surprise. Reflecting on her visit to Kumasi with participants of the Asikò Art School in 2013, Bisi Silva (2017: xxiii) expressed confidence in such fluid and intersecting models, concluding that the cultural revolution encountered at KNUST proffers “great reason to be optimistic about the possibilities for art on the continent.”

Recently the experimental work of blaxTARLINES was situated within the broader context of contemporary art in Ghana in an African Arts First Word (Nagy and Jordan 2018), and in a special issue of Critical Interventions edited by Kwame A. Labi, professor at the University of Ghana, Legon. Labi (2019: 1) curated a collection of essays on Ghanaian art that were authored by “six
Ghanaian scholars, and one scholar who has worked extensively in the country in response to the "minimized contributions of African artists and scholars based on the continent to knowledge production, scholarship, and global discourses on art." This important emphasis on African and Africa-based authorship in the global academy (specifically in the arts of Africa discourse) grows out of "the emboldening belief in locally grown research" (Kwami 2019: 53). Locally grown research that is cutting edge, such as the work by blaxTARLINES, seeks ways to shift beyond individualistic models of research in the arts and humanities more broadly. The work of blaxTARLINES that is brought together in this special issue contributes meaningfully to questions raised recently in various African Arts articles that emphasize the value, and indeed the necessity of experimental and collaborative models that open up spaces beyond solo authorship, capitalist-driven competition, and the commodification of knowledge and creativity (Baasch et al. 2020; Foláranmí 2019; Simbao et al. 2018; Simbao et al. 2017). For blaxTARLINES, it is the "ardent spirit of experimentation" that has pushed art training at KNUST beyond "colonial parochial definitions and practice of fine art" where the classroom was a site of "struggle … and ineptitude or bland artlessness" (Bodjawah, Kofigah, and Ampratwum 2018: 31, 33). Upon his appointment as a lecturer at the Kumasi Art Academy in 2002, Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu, who was about ten years younger than the youngest lecturer in the department at the time, sought ways to inject life back into the fusty art department he had inhabited since he enrolled as a student in 1992. Some of the things that were of concern to him were the armchairlike approach to art making that disregarded first-hand sources, the reliance on printed images and photographs as source material, and the general lack of criticality. Kissiedu was first taught by käri'kächä seidou when seidou was a teaching assistant at KNUST in 1994. When seidou was employed as a lecturer in the Fine Art Department in 2003, Kissiedu found a formidable senior colleague to work with. As colleagues who developed a legendary friendship, they began to implement the blueprint for this artistic revolution already developed in seidou’s PhD thesis.5

In November 2018, a group of blaxTARLINES artists and writers traveled to Makhanda in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, where they participated in the workshop Publishing and Research of the South: Positioning Africa (PROSPA) run by the Arts of Africa and Global Souths research program at Rhodes University.6 The goals of the workshop were to plan this special issue on blaxTARLINES; to engage in a dialogue about the roles of publishing and collaboration in arts and research programs; and to provide participants with the opportunity to meet with postgraduate students and participate in a studio critique (Figs. 1–2). The workshop was cohosted by Ruth Simbao and Stephen Foláranmí (who at the time was a postdoctoral fellow in the program), and they were joined by the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) President Elect/VP Peju Layiwola from the University of Lagos. Cognizant that käri’kächä seidou at times refuses to travel (particularly beyond the African continent due to his Pan-Africanist beliefs and ideals), the presence of the blaxTARLINES godfather was momentous. Other blaxTARLINES participants were Ibrahim Mahama, Dorothy Ame-nuke, Edwin Bodjawah, George Ampratwum (Buma) and Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu (Castro).7

During our dialogue on “reaching sideways” and forms of collaboration that resonate with our respective programs, Layiwola remarked on the importance of these collaborations taking place on the African continent, for “most of the times we find ourselves stepping out of our African brothers and sisters in the US or Europe.” Stepping into his shoes as the blaxTARLINES ambassador, Kissiedu shared an Asante Twi proverb that speaks to the need for academics to collaborate and to be flexible.

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in doing so. “Nipiga ye de nanso yewume ne nám,” which can be translated as, “Humans are tasty but their meat is not eaten.”10 The proverb stresses the importance and pleasure of relationships and connections, as humans are inherently pleasant and sociable beings. This playful proverb suggests that humans are as desirable and pleasing as food that is considered to be a delicacy, but it immediately adds that humans are not meant to be eaten. Importantly, the reference to the human being here is devoid of gender, race, class, or any other consideration. With reference to flexibility in academia, it suggests that academics need to be open to wisdom and knowledge from people outside of their circles, and that in expanding connections beyond geographic, cultural and other barriers, we can learn from what it means to be human.

Collaboration needs to grow organically, and it is critical for it to evolve from meaningful relationship. In the current knowledge economy that is “characterized by three interdependent strategies: privatization, marketization, and internationalization” (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019: 285), it is easy for collaboration itself to be treated as a commodity. Knowledge is increasingly measured through metrics and systems designed to reveal which universities are deemed “world class.” While the quantification of metrics might calculate activity, and internationalization might reflect a certain scope of reach, the measurement of activity fails to ask “what it means” (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019: 291; emphasis added). Many funding institutions similarly follow internationalization agendas, and although certain forms of collaboration might be highly prized, they are sometimes valued for the wrong reason. While there was a time when universities in the global south11 might have prided themselves on formal collaboration with institutions in the global north, the tables have turned. Such collaborations might, of course, still hold genuine value, but it is important to soberly recognize the degree to which it has become fashionable for institutions in the north to collaborate with “the south.” In what ways might this fashion drive a commodification of collaboration and a romanticization thereof? How does the locally grown collaborative model of blaxTARLINES demonstrate resistance to commodification and the glamorization of partnership and cooperation?

In our group dialogue that took place in Makhanda, we addressed these questions and talked about some of the struggles of collaboration—either struggles that unexpectedly arise or struggles that are consciously mobilized for common political action. As seidou suggested, collective engagement inevitably involves some form of struggle.12 Ampratwum urged us to consider the history of collaboration in the arts, particularly the organic collaboration that led to revolutions, art movements, and new initiatives. There are often sacrifices involved in collaborations when they push beyond being perfunctory exercises, and when they seep into the crevices of our daily lives. “People generally want collaborations to be smooth,” stressed Ampratwum, “but we have to stretch ourselves for something to really happen … Perhaps we can call collaboration a comforting-discomforting situation, as there is comfort in offering oneself and sometimes discomfort in terms of what one loses.”13

While formal higher education worldwide has fallen into the trap of box-ticking exercises that shift knowledge from being “priceless” to “priced” (Sakhiyya and Rata 2019), as the blaxTARLINES collective demonstrates in the five articles that follow, artists, curators, and writers who are based within universities are, indeed, able to successfully intervene from within these structures. Further, these articles reveal ways in which university-based scholars are able to engage within society in pertinent and relevant ways. As Edwin Bodjawah reminded us, there are many different people who operate within blaxTARLINES and intersect with their programs, including for example, volunteers (some of whom model Ampratwum, who volunteered at KNUST long before he was employed), as well as the collaborators outside of universities and museums that Ibrahim Mahama, for example, works with in his artistic practice.14

As Mahama explained at our workshop, depth of relationship and room for spontaneity are critical to the creation of his outdoor installations. For him, connections have been built over many years and extend beyond the university and artworld into communities, including negotiations with chiefs, landowners, and people in the railway sector. When formalized funding in universities can problematically be used to prize certain knowledge over others, “sometimes the lack of resources” explained Mahama, “can be viewed as a resource itself. When you don’t have something then it pushes you to think about the conditions of the thing itself, and those conditions can become pertinent to how you work as an artist.”15 Collaborators come from those conditions, he added, “and the way that you organize the relationships that you build with people contributes to the phenomenon itself. When it is outside of [a museum space], it is spontaneous.”16

Perhaps two of the most important ingredients of the blaxTARLINES model of networking and collaborating are spontaneity and life experience. As Dorothy Amenuke stressed, “art is not an object. It is an experience.”17 and collaboration that fails to extend into the grit of life is inevitably limited in terms of agency, interconnectedness, and long-term reward. When collaboration grows out of condition, it might “start with one thing but goes in a different direction, perhaps producing something else that is closer to you and counter to what you expected.”18 This revolutionary spirit of collaboration that is characteristically ground-up and gritty, and is imbued in everything that blaxTARLINES does, is elaborated upon in the five articles that follow. While discomfort, struggle and the sometimes-difficult extension of self still exist, this flow and spontaneity that sums up the way this network operates, was explained evocatively by kər'ilsə̀d ŋi seidou with this tale:

There is a story about the crow and a millipede. The crow has two legs and the millipede has, let’s say a hundred legs.19 The crow asks the millipede: “Millipede, which of your legs do you move first?”

The moment the crow asked that and the millipede began to think about it, it got stuck, because it had to go through all hundred legs to think through which one it had to move first.19

Notes
1 Although blaxTARLINES was named in 2015, it has been operating in various forms for over a decade. It acknowledges the support of the following people: El Anatsui, Agyeman Osei, Godfried Donkor, Odds Teve, Kofi Setordji, Adwoa Amoah, Ato Annan, Mahmoud Malik Saako, Marwan Zakhem, Senan Okezeko, Elvira Dyagnani Os, Willem de Rooij, Sam Durant, Jacob Jari, Lone Dalgaard Andersen, Niels Staats, Mary Evans, Touria El Glaoui, Stephanie Dieckvoss, Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Helen Legg, Francesca Migliorati, Philippe Pirotti, Martina Copper, Susan May, Silvia Formi, Karen Alexander, Nana Oforiatta Ayim, Atta Kwami, Ama Ata Aidoo, Owusu Ankomah, Ayo Akinnwale, Folakunle Oshin, Nana G. Asante, Yolanda Chois Rivers, Jo Evans Mireku Kissi (Dj Stelo Live), Francis Kokoroko, Daniel Mawuli Quist, Jelie Bouwhuis, Kwame Aidoo, SR Black, Rebecca M. Nage, Susan Cookeys, Alina Jordan, Aicha Diallo, Shalom Gorewitz, Ruth Simbawo, Peter Campbell, Morten Cramer, Rachel Hadari, Leni Hoffman, Anette Flinck, Kerry Greenberg, Julia Gyemant, Violet Nantume, Frances Bartkowski, Giovanna Tissi, Elisabeth Gerner Nielsen, Lisa Soto, Romuald Hazoumé, Mareike Stolley, Julie Lipsman, Steven Riskan, Elektra Nutifada Kuenyehia, and Stephanie Soleatos.
2 The African Arts Institute ATAE networking meeting took place at the University of Cape Town from November 20–December 1, 2015.
5 Kissiedu acknowledges the contribution of SANaC and the Triangle Network to a number of his travels abroad that helped to affirm his belief in what seidou was exposing them to and what was happening at the Kumasi Art Academy.
6 See Nagy and Jordan (2018: 1–4) for a discussion of kər’il’sə̀d ŋi seidou’s PhD thesis (Theoretical Foundations of the KNUST Painting Programme: A Philosophical Inquiry and Its Contextual Relevance in Ghanaian Culture), and his role in transforming the department.
7 This program has been running since 2017. It is based in the Fine Art Department at Rhodes University and is funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Research Foundation (NRF) of the Department of Science and Innovation in South Africa. Simbao acknowledges funding from Mellon and the NRF for the 2018 PROSPA workshop. Thanks to Shirley Kabwato for assisting with travel arrangements.
8 Thank you to Pamela Nichols, the director of the Wits University Writing Centre, who ran a couple of sessions during the workshop.
9 Layewo, PROSPA workshop dialogue at the Arts Lounge, Rhodes University, Makhanda, November 21, 2018.
10 Kissiedu, PROSPA workshop dialogue.
11 We choose not to capitalize “global south,” as our understanding of this concept is not dependent on geographic coordinates. Instead, we view the “global south” as a complex term that draws from historical
social and political injustices associated with geopolitical formations and articulations of power.

References cited


blaxTARLINES KUMASI special issue participants

karî’kâchä seid’ ou is a nonobservant artist, poet, silent humorist, and willful homeboy. He is Ghana’s key figure in nonproprietary art and the architect of the Emancipatory Art Teaching project which transformed the fine art curriculum of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, at the turn of the century. He is a cofounder of blaxTARLINES KUMASI, a contemporary art hub, incubator, and open-source community and heads its teams of collaborators on its projects.

Kwaku Boafo Kissiedu (Castro) is a cofounder and the administrative director of blaxTARLINES KUMASI. He is a senior lecturer at the famed Fine Art Department of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana, where he and other colleagues, have pioneered revolutionary changes in fine art pedagogy, turning out emerging artists who are making waves worldwide.

George Ampratwum (Buma) is an artist, exhibition maker, art market professional, and a lecturer at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology-Kumasi. He is one of the leading cadre of avant-garde tutors, led by karî’kâchä seid’ ou in the Department of Painting and Sculpture, KNUST, which spearheaded the radical ruptures and resurgence of young Ghanaian contemporary artists on the world stage.

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Ibrahim Mahama is a Ghanaian artist who uses the transformation of materials to explore themes of commodity, migration, globalization, and economic exchange. Often made in collaboration with others, his large-scale installations employ materials gathered from urban environments. He is the founder of the artist-run project space Savannah Centre for Contemporary Art (SCCA) in Tamale, Ghana, and Red Clay in nearby Janna Kpeŋŋ. He is a PhD student at the Department of Painting and Sculpture at KNUST, Kumasi.

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