

Déborder la négritude: Arts, politique et société à Dakar

9-12 minutes

Déborder la négritude, despite its compact format, is a trove of rigorous scholarship and a pleasure to read, with striking visual representations of Dakar and its artistic milieu. Edited by Mamadou Diouf and Maureen Murphy, the book offers a series of reflections on the intertwining of art and politics in relation to *négritude* and the enduring impact of President Léopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001).

As a poet, philosopher, and statesman, Senghor made his mark in Senegal and abroad through his intellectual prowess and political agenda, two distinct legacies that became deeply intertwined over the course of his multifaceted career. In addition to his historic role as the inaugural president of an independent Senegal, Senghor is known as a cocreator and proponent of *négritude*, a poetic theorization of Black experience and identity. As a literary and philosophical schema crafted during the 1930s by Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas, *négritude* represented a repudiation of colonialism and a Pan-Africanist perspective designed to unify and celebrate people of African descent.

In *Déborder la négritude*, Diouf and Murphy present as their point of departure a meaningful confluence of events in 2018: the

opening of Dakar's Museum of Black Civilizations and the intensifying debate surrounding the restitution of African cultural objects. As a timely contribution to this ongoing discourse, the book provides a multifaceted intervention into *négritude* as a mode of self-determination and creative expression as well as a philosophical invention shaped by the French language and colonial encounters.

Arranged into three sections, the book presents a series of essays organized thematically as aesthetic and political accounts (part 1), confrontations and ruptures (part 2), and six conversations between Senegalese artists and art historians (part 3). Part 1, featuring contributions by Joshua I. Cohen, Coline Desportes, Maureen Murphy, Giulia Paoletti, and Emmanuelle Chérel, is a set of interrelated analyses on the formation of Senghor's *négritudiniste* philosophy and its impact on virtually all forms of cultural and societal engagement, from art making and art criticism to historiography and national politics. Cohen examines the Parisian conceptualization of "art nègre" during the early twentieth century, relating its appropriation by Black intellectuals to the formation of the *École de Dakar* style, thus illuminating its connection to modern Senegalese art. Desportes, by focusing on Senghor's 1972 exhibition of Picasso and the accompanying text, "Picasso en Nigritie," sheds light on Senghor's rereading of Western primitivism through the lens of *négritude* and argues that his intervention in Western debates surrounding "Black art" and "modern art" allowed him to subvert colonial notions of influence. Desportes's essay ends with a reference to the 1974 exhibition *L'art sénégalais d'aujourd'hui*, providing a fitting segue into Murphy's essay. By interpreting unpublished archival documents

pertaining to the creation of Senghor's Paris-based exhibition, Murphy frames the formulation and motive of this historic show as effectively joining traditional African art with the work of a new generation of artists. Paoletti takes up the topic of photography to demonstrate that, rather than rejecting photography as a mimetic art form, Senghor understood it as a potential manifestation of his belief in "art as analogy" (74). Through close reading of Senghor's writings alongside visual analysis of photographic portraits, Paoletti argues that Senghor, instead of dismissing realism or photography, was using photographic instances of compositional rhythm or analogy as they existed in other forms of African art. Chérel, whose essay concludes part 1 of the book, highlights a particular photograph, *Omar Blondin Diop lisant l'Internationale situationniste en 1969*. Presenting this image as a point of connection between the work of Issa Samb (1945–2017), an esteemed fixture within Dakar's artistic and activist spheres, and Brussels-based artist Vincent Meessen (b. 1971), whose work often visualizes postcolonial trauma and collective memory, Chérel weaves an intriguing network of past and present struggles for liberation and the artists and collectives that propel such causes. Perhaps the book's most significant contribution, when taken as a cohesive whole, is its capacity to purposefully complicate the twentieth-century debate surrounding *négritude*, a discourse that can be, at times, too easily reduced to the theoretical poles represented by Senghor and, for example, Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian writer and philosopher who famously remarked that "the tiger does not proclaim his tigritude—he pounces." The vast cohort of notable critics and interlocutors engaged with Senghor's ideology includes Frantz Fanon, writer and activist Es'kia

Mphahlele, Jean-Paul Sartre, and, more recently, philosopher and scholar Souleymane Bachir Diagne, whose book *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude* (2011) contributed to a contemporary reactivation of négritude scholarship. Diouf and Murphy's volume may be viewed as a set of propositions and conversations that carry négritudiniste theory and Senghor's legacy further into the twenty-first century, illuminating its relevance to current manifestations of modernism and "the contemporary." In light of this fraught distinction, part 2, with essays by Mamadou Diouf, El Hadji Malick Ndiaye, Joanna Grabski, and Elizabeth Harney, moves the conversation toward concerns of the present period and ponders—to use Diouf's phrase—whether we are in a "post-négritude" moment. Diouf focuses on the work of El Hadji Sy, a painter, performer, and cofounder of the Laboratoire Agit'Art. His lyrical and evocative essay presents Sy as an artist and curator who, through experimentation (for example, painting with his feet or using alternative materials), challenges the motifs, practices, and systems associated with négritude. Moreover, per Diouf, Sy does so within the context of a postcolonial, spectacular society in which a seemingly endless set of symbols and referents can be interrogated through various artistic strategies. Ndiaye analyzes the growing eminence and provocations of Dak'Art, Dakar's contemporary art biennial, framing such art fairs and exhibitions as engines of globalization and conveyers of creativity that, he argues, serve to further dismantle center-periphery relations on the art-world stage. He proposes the idea of "quantum art" as a means of describing imagined future geographies, aided by biennials, in which art increasingly circulates and exists in multiple places at once. Ndiaye's essay provides a fortuitous transition to the

contribution by Grabski, in which she reflects on her conceptualization of Dakar as an “art world city”—a concentrated network of artists, writers, collectors, curators, and organizations that is embedded in and highly responsive to the city itself. Harney, whose essay brings part 2 to a close, focuses explicitly on the notions of “modern” and “contemporary” within an African art context. Beginning with the 2016 and 2018 installments of Dak’Art as case studies, she draws on the writings of Okwui Enwezor, George Kubler, Terry Smith, Alexander Nagel, and others in analyzing “the problem of temporality in African art” (176). As a means of comprehending perceived instances of nostalgia or retrospective inclinations at the Dakar biennial, Harney offers the term “retromodern,” framing it as a mode of “expressing contemporary desires for the return or re-establishment of broken promises . . . and a means of satisfying the appetite of the art world for renewal and difference” (186). From the beginning of part 1 to the conclusion of part 2, the book unfurls through a satisfying logic of chronology and topical dovetails.

In a valuable departure from the voice of the critic-historian, part 3 puts artists’ perspectives—in their own words—at the fore through interviews with Iba Ndiaye, Viyé Diba, Soly Cissé, Diadji Diop, Cheikh Ndiaye, and El Hadji Sy. By bringing together commentary from the late Iba Ndiaye, the *École de Dakar*’s preeminent painter, to Diadji Diop, whose sculpture was featured in the Senegal pavilion at Dak’Art 2018, the book’s final section once again moves through the city’s sixty years and three generations of postindependence art making, from *négritude* and the *Laboratoire Agit’Art* to urban transformation amid contemporary globalizing forces.

Through contributions by authors hailing from and based in Africa, Europe, and North America, *Déborder la négritude* successfully weaves a dialogic account of Senghor's legacy with an eye toward transnationalism and transhistoricism. Nevertheless, the topic at hand and the book's ambitions would feasibly benefit from the addition of even more Senegalese or West African contributors. As it stands, the roster of authors is overwhelmingly Euro-American.

Finally, despite the book's many accomplishments and varied perspectives, it remains burdened by the frequent lament among scholars of Senegalese art that women artists and professionals are typically absent as subjects of the discourse. Although female authors are well represented as contributors to the volume, the artists featured in interviews and through art historical analysis are exclusively male. In the twenty-first century, however, the Dakar art world is teeming with women artists, filmmakers, gallerists, curators, and organizers who make up a dynamic generation of creatives worthy of diligent scholarly attention.

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