

**Staging the Black Atlantic: from the Chicago World's Fair (1893)
to the World Festival of Negro Arts (Dakar 1966)**

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If we are to understand better the tropes, typologies and images that inform the work of authors who have contributed to the creation of a literary Atlantic, then it is crucial to examine other cultural fora in which the Atlantic has been exhibited and staged, and accordingly imagined and constructed: chief amongst these are fairs, festivals and exhibitions, which have all played a substantial role since the nineteenth century in forging popular understandings of Africa and its diaspora, through their 'stagings' of various manifestations of the Black Atlantic. Over the past two decades, a wide body of work by historians such as Annie E. Coombes (1994), Herman Lebovics (1994) and Patricia Morton (2000) has begun to explore the exhibitionary practices that marked Europe's attempts to represent the colonial world to the populations of the metropolitan centre. Although this research has had a global reach, reflecting the broad range of the colonial subjects, products and other phenomena subject to these forms of display, a central aspect of this work has been the attempt to uncover exactly how these colonial exhibitions and world's fairs sought to 'stage' the Atlantic world that had been forged by centuries of slavery, colonisation and other types of voluntary or forced cultural exchange – consequently creating, in their hemispheric diversity, the often unpredictable

formations and connections generated by the displacements of peoples and goods between Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas.

The Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, organized in the year following the 400th anniversary of Columbus's first contact with the Americas, played a key role in such processes. Presented as a national showcase for the post-bellum United States, the event drew on modes of display developed in Europe in the wake of the Great Exhibition in the second half of the nineteenth century in order to project an *image* of a country not only released from the constraints of slavery (despite the clear racial inequalities that persisted post-emancipation) but now also firmly reliant for its future on industrial optimism and a faith in science and culture. Although one of the principal aims was to stage-manage an emerging sense of U.S. exceptionalism, to be seen in many ways as the successor to an earlier rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, the fair is primarily to be understood not only in the context of African American identity debates, but also in that of contemporary diplomatic and political manoeuvrings related to Pan-Americanism, often ambivalent but increasingly evident in a more open Atlantic space. The tensions inherent in the event are particularly evident in the Haitian Pavilion, the displays of which were co-commissioned at the request of the Haitian government by Frederick Douglass. Study of this exhibitionary location, now increasingly recognized as key Black Atlantic site, reveals the entanglements of that space in debates that are at once national, transnational and transatlantic: perhaps most significantly, under Douglass's influence, the pavilion became a locus of African American struggle for equal recognition; at the same time, however, distinguished from 'human zoos' such

as the Dahomey village on the Midway Plaisance of the same site, it reveals the complex hierarchies of blackness in the Atlantic space, and in particular the residual racist hierarchization that distinguished between those directly from Africa and those of African diasporic origin. Finally, the efforts of the Haitian President Hippolyte to project for an international audience an image of his country preparing to enter the twentieth century as an equal partner reveals the continued difficulty of Haiti, especially in the period leading up to the U.S. invasion of 1915, to negotiate a status that was simultaneously postcolonial and neo-colonial.

The 1893 Chicago fair provides one of the rare examples of Haiti's visibility in the context of a major universal exhibition, and provides a clear indication of the ways in which exhibitionary practices may be seen to reflect and, to a certain extent, shape the changing contours of the Black Atlantic. (The subsequent 1949-50 international exposition in Port-au-Prince itself—organized during what proved to be the final months of the presidency of Dumarsais Estimé in an attempt to mark the bicentenary of the foundation of the city by the French—is now, however, beginning to attract the critical attention it merits as an example of an event positing Haiti as a pivot between North America and Europe, and more specifically the U.S.A. and France.) In the post-war, postcolonial era, there has also been a series of African attempts—beginning with the *Festival Mondial des arts nègres de Dakar* in 1966—to stage Africa and its diaphora in ways that engage with conceptions of the Black Atlantic but that also seek to challenge its parameters, as in the 1969 *Festival Panafricain* d'Alger, which positioned sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora alongside North Africa and the resistance movements of the emerging Third World. These

festivals saw their role as the antithesis of that promoted by colonial exhibitions, a process the anthropologist Andrew Apter describes as “transforming the gaze of othering into one of collective self-apprehension” (Apter 2005: 5). However, as the work of Apter and other scholars has shown, these postcolonial stagings of the Black Atlantic in fact reveal a more complex set of relationships between the exhibitionary practices of the colonial and postcolonial periods, as he has explained in his work on the 1977 Festival of African Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos: “[FESTAC’s] [a]rtistic directors and cultural officers invented traditions with precolonial pedigrees. [...] [I]n a fundamental sense, the customary culture which FESTAC resurrected was always already mediated by the colonial encounter, and in some degree was produced by it” (Apter 2005, 6). Rather than the postcolonial staging of an “authentic” vision of the Black Atlantic, what Apter’s work reveals is a process in which the postcolonial world struggles to break free of the conceptual order that it has inherited.

The aim of this chapter is thus to offer a comparative reading of these processes at key moments in the cultural and political history of the Black Atlantic. There is no aspiration to provide a comprehensive overview of what remains a historically, geographically and culturally diverse set of events and practices. Instead, by focusing in particular on two juxtaposed case studies, distinctive “stagings” of Black Atlantic phenomena from 1893 and 1966 respectively, the study seeks to contribute to the process of ‘postcolonializing’ the Atlantic, and to the critical struggle this implies “to decipher the new formations as they emerge from the debris of eroding traditions and worlds” (Edwards and Gaonkar 2010: 6). We

understand “postcolonializing” in the terms that Ato Quayson adopts to describe the process—i.e., it entails not a specific or single theory or practice, but rather reflects the recognition of critical approaches that deploy an understanding of the “postcolonial” as “a process of coming-into-being and a struggle *against* colonialism and its after effects” (2000: 9). Such an approach not only allows acknowledgment of the existence of the chronologically “post-colonial” within ongoing resistance to the colonial itself (the need for recognition of which the exceptional nature of Haiti’s postcoloniality makes abundantly clear), but also provides a clear indication of what we see as the central element of any postcolonial approach: the discernment of continuities that exist between often seemingly (and chronologically or historically) discontinuous sets of circumstances, “drawing on a notion of the centrality of colonialism for understanding the formation of the contemporary world” (Quayson 2000: 10).

The Haytian Pavilion at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893

The Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 belongs to a tradition of universal and colonial exhibitions inaugurated by the Crystal Palace event of 1851. As such, it constitutes a further stage in the evolution of what Timothy Mitchell (1992) has dubbed the “exhibitionary order” that regulated colonial cultures in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Although recent work on “human zoos” (Blanchard *et al.* 2008) has demonstrated the universality of such processes, there is nevertheless a need for a continued micro-historical vigilance to particular case studies so that local, regional, national and even continental variations can be

factored in alongside the inevitable specifics of the chronological and ideological niche in which an event occurred. The Chicago fair provides evidence of clear continuities, not least in its emphases on an exoticism of entertainment—associated in particular with the popular attractions on the Midway Plaisance—that was often awkwardly juxtaposed with pavilions and other displays whose pretensions (if not actual effects) were predominantly educational. At the same time, as was customary in other venues, the provision of human exhibits depended in part on international circuits of exchange: the Dahomey village at the 1893 exposition, in many ways a classic ‘human zoos’ from which the Haiti pavilion sought actively to distinguish itself, was itself animated by West Africans, transported to North America by the French impresario Xavier Pene (Rydell 2004).

What remains distinctive about Chicago, however, is the specific national project with which it is associated. The fair, commemorating the 400th (or more exactly 401st) anniversary of Columbus’s initial contact with the Americas at a site now in contemporary Haiti, is a particularly striking illustration not only of the role of the exhibition in an effort to project national identity, but also of the ways in which the exhibition reveals the inevitably transnational dimensions of any such attempt. In the aftermath of the Civil War, not even three decades after the abolition of slavery in the U.S.A., the event aimed at underlining the modernizing superiority of Western civilization as it stood at the brink of the twentieth century, and endeavoured at the same time to exploit new economic opportunities for the U.S.A. by attempting to assert control over the new manifestations of a political Pan-Americanism (see Gonzalez 2011). It is important to stress, however, that these

national and hemispheric concerns were played out against a backcloth that is firmly to be understood as that of the currents and counter-currents of the Black Atlantic. Almost inevitably, given the post-bellum and post-abolition scheduling of the event, controversies about race—and in particular the comparative capabilities and achievements of the black and white populations of the Americas—marked the event: debates about the status of the formerly enslaved citizens of the United States reached a new intensity and representatives of the African American community achieved new visibility and prominence (Reed 2000).

The Haytian Pavilion—to which the Haitian government appointed Frederick Douglass in the role of the commissioner, following his recall as U.S. minister-resident and consul-general to the Republic of Haiti (an office he held 1889–1891)—became a key platform for these debates about African American politics and identity. It may even be seen as a privileged *lieu de mémoire* in this continued African American engagement with Haiti (Bethel 1992; see also Bacon and Jackson 2010), for, in Ferdinand Barnett's terms, 'America could find no representative place for a colored man, in all its work, and [...] it remained for the Republic of Hayti to give the only acceptable representation enjoyed by us in the Fair' (1999 [1893]: 81). The Haitian site on the fairground may thus be seen as an important (if now long-lost) location in African American history, a notable reflection not only of the transnational, Atlantic-facing dimensions of that history, but also of the privileged role of Haiti in it.

Central to controversies regarding the fair was a sense that African American achievement was largely ignored and that the African American community had had

little say in its preparation and management. This discontent is articulated most clearly in the booklet from which Barnett's comment is drawn, *The Reason Why the Colored American is not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, a new edition of which was produced by the scholar most active in studying the Chicago fair, Robert Rydell, in 1999. For all the three co-authors who worked with Frederick Douglass to bring the publication to completion—Ida B. Wells, Irvine Garland Penn and Ferdinand L. Barnett—involvement in the Chicago event played a major role in their increasing public visibility, and Christopher Reed describes their text, of which over 10,000 copies were distributed to visitors to the Haytian Pavilion, as a publication that 'set the tone for civil rights advocacy in the twentieth century' (2000, 31). In a now often repeated expression included in one of his key speeches at the Chicago fair, Douglass stated his fear that the event in its entirety would become a 'whited sepulcher' (1999 [1893], 9), echoing an anxiety evident in other African American newspapers of the time, which dismissed the fair variously as 'the white American's World Fair' or 'the great American white elephant' (cited in Paddon and Turner 1995, 21).

Accounts of the Chicago exposition reveal the extent to which the conception, management and delivery of the event indeed projected a version of the United States that was indeed predominantly white, and actively silenced emerging African American voices. The role of women in North American society was acknowledged in the granting of a dedicated pavilion in which their work was celebrated, but the fair's organizers refused an equivalent stage on which to celebrate the significant African American contribution, both before and after abolition, to the nation state,

effectively excluding the formerly enslaved from narratives of national progress. African Americans were deliberately not invited to the fair's opening ceremony (Douglass was only present as a representative of the Haitian state), and the subsequent decision to designate 25 August 1893 "Colored Peoples Day"—a segregated event devoted to African American achievement—may at best be seen as begrudging and overdue official recognition of the legitimacy of the protests at this absence.

The Haytian Pavilion served as the focus for such protests, and as such disrupted the discourse of white racial supremacy to which the Dahomey village, a site influenced directly by the similar colonial and anthropo-zoological exhibits presented at the Exposition universelle in Paris in 1889, acted as clear foil. The contrast between the logic of the human zoo with which the Dahomey village is associated and the aspirations and achievements of the Haitian site remain, therefore, marked. Reed describes in clear terms the contrast between these two extreme versions of Blackness most evident at the Exposition, underlining the ambivalent racial politics of the Black Atlantic evident at the time:

The visitors at Dahomey Village on the Midway represented one reality, positive to themselves, but negative to some in the western world who desired to see them in a depreciatory light. An elitist, Francophone Hayti and its Afro-Saxon spokesman, Frederick Douglass, wished to project a new reality and image to the Western world, so they ignored the Fon at their pavilion on the fairgrounds. (Reed 2000, 142)

Frederick Douglass himself dismissed in his speech on Colored American Day the “barbaric rites” of the Fon, and employed this denigration of sub-Saharan culture to privilege what he presented as the relatively slow civilizational progress of members of Black diasporic communities, creating through such a manoeuvre overt connections between communities of African origin in Haiti and the United States, and combating the more lurid representations of the former in the popular culture of the latter.

The presence of Haiti at Chicago appears, initially at least, to have been a reflection of the desire of the organizers to involve the key national players involved in the re-emergence of Pan-Americanism in the later nineteenth century; at the same time, the Haitian acceptance of the invitation to attend was equally political, revealing the desire of the country’s ruling elite—in the terms employed in the official pamphlet published to mark the event, *Haiti à l’exposition colombienne de Chicago* by Robert Gentil and Henri Chauvet—to ‘affirmer sa place dans le concert des pays progressistes’ by challenging external perceptions of Haiti as ‘une sorte de pays barbare, sans industrie, presque sans commerce, sans culture, habités par des êtres dégérés vivant exclusivement des produits des cafiers plantés plus de cent ans par les Français’ (1893: 8). Yet the Haytian Pavilion, operating as an exhibition site, cultural venue and political rallying point, became instead the means of articulating alternative narratives about race. These narratives, clearly rejecting any pan-African, transatlantic solidarity, were historically distinct from those of the Black Atlantic that would emerge in the twentieth century in which Africa played a

very different role, but nevertheless permitted use of the space of the exhibition to make manifest culturally historical connections that had been previously “silenced” (Trouillot 1995).

The building itself, an inscription on whose facade presented the date of the fair as a pivot between Columbus’s arrival in the Americas and Haiti’s independence (“1492 République 1893 Haïtienne 1804”), stressed the foundational role of Haiti in hemispheric histories of the Americas, but also underlined its precocious independence by asserting the Haitian Revolution as an event in the age of Atlantic revolutions of a comparable importance to its U.S. counterpart. The anchor of the Santa Maria, salvaged from the site off Cap Haïtien where the flagship of Columbus’s fleet had been wrecked on Christmas Day 1492, was the centre piece of exhibits in the pavilion, where it was presented alongside Toussaint Louverture’s sword. The presence of these relics asserted the primacy of Haiti in the history of the Americas, making it clear that the anniversary being celebrated in Chicago was part of a transnational, hemispheric, Black Atlantic history of which the U.S.A. was only one element.

Staging the Black Atlantic in Dakar 1966

Sub-Saharan Africa, the U.S. and the Caribbean co-exist in a reconfigured relationship in our second case study, an event that took place in Dakar from 1-24 April 1966. The *Premier Festival Mondial des arts nègres* was organized in the middle of a period extending from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s during which a wide range of organizations and events—cultural, sporting and political—informed by

pan-Africanist ideals were created. The international forum provided by the Dakar Festival showcased a wide array of arts and was attended by such celebrated Black Atlantic luminaries as Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, Aimé Césaire and Wole Soyinka (but also tellingly some French luminaries such as André Malraux). The Festival's principal architect, Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor, sought to emphasize the significance of culture and the arts in defining a global role for Africa in the aftermath of empire. In particular, the Festival was designed as a showcase for Senghor's concept of Negritude as the fundamental expression of "black" identity, one that highlighted rhythm, spontaneity and emotion, and also a certain understanding of art as "high culture".

A US visitor to the Dakar Festival, Newell Flather, wrote of his impressions a month later in *Africa Report* (May 1966):

Visitors to the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar had an exhilarating immersion in the sights and sounds of Africa and the Negro World, of the old and avant-garde in dance and drama, poetry and painting. Dr Léopold Sédar Senghor, President of Senegal and principal architect of the festival, told the audience on opening night that its purpose was the "defense and illustration of negritude"—"the elaboration of a new humanism which this time will include all of humanity on the whole of our planet earth." (57)

It is no coincidence that this quote from Senghor manages to refer both to Negritude and to the work of Joachim DuBellay, author of a "defense and illustration of the

French language”, promoting vernacular French against the then dominant cultural and scientific language of Latin in sixteenth-century France. For Negritude was never conceived of by Senghor as an end in itself, a simple retreat into a self-contained and self-isolated “blackness”, which is why one also needs to consider the term in relation to the concepts of *francité* and *civilisation de l’universel*. In Senghor’s view, *francité* is expressed most clearly in the cultural domain, and he defines it as “l’ensemble des valeurs de la langue et de la culture, partant de la civilisation française” (1988, 158). The future of Francophone Africa lies in a Franco-African cultural hybridity of which he and his fellow *évolués* will serve as a sort of avant-garde, bridging the divide between negritude and *francité*, and somehow combining to forge a “Universal Civilization”. In essence, Negritude imagined a shared Black Atlantic culture but also a shared culture based on the use of the French language, which creates a rather different mental map of the world, one that posits a home in language not in the shared historical experience of slavery and colonisation or the racial identity of a shared blackness. The reference to Du Bellay also signals the parallels that Senghor is drawing between what he views as the current African renaissance and the European renaissance several centuries earlier: it is through an increased awareness of the cultural importance of the past that a great, modern culture will emerge. This cultural festival was thus perceived, by its very nature, as the staging and enactment of that Black renaissance.

At the opening ceremony of the 1966 Dakar festival, Senghor reiterated his fundamental belief in both a deep sense of identity and the need for dialogue and exchange: “[P]our dialoguer avec les autres, pour participer à l’œuvre commune des

hommes de conscience et de volonté qui se lèvent de partout dans le monde, [...] il nous faut, nous Nègres, être enfin, nous-mêmes dans notre dignité: notre identité recouvrée” (Senghor 1977, 62). Appropriately, then, the centrepiece of the Festival was the apparent juxtaposition of so-called traditional African arts and European high modernist art, which were simultaneously designed to illustrate both difference and complementarity. As Senghor had so famously and controversially stated in his best-known maxim, Africa was emotion and rhythm, while Europe was rationality and science, but each needed the other. Senghor had deployed all of his political and cultural capital to bring to Dakar—housed in the specially constructed and dramatically situated Musée Dynamique, perched on the Corniche—a touring exhibition of some of the finest examples of “traditional” African art: that is, African masks and sculptures borrowed from the great collections of European museums such as the Musée de l’homme in Paris and the British Museum in London. These were (apparently, the sources are unclear on this issue) exhibited alongside reproductions of works by Picasso, Léger, Modigliani (amongst others), in what must have been a fascinating contrapuntal play between traditional sources and the modern masterpieces inspired by them: Africa’s classical art was positioned as central to twentieth-century modernity. Through its sensuality, emotion and rejection of rational, positivist thought, the black world was, for Senghor, the expression of the type of counter-modernity that Gilroy would celebrate so famously in *The Black Atlantic* (1993).

Why this insistence by Senghor on what he understood as Africa’s “Classical” tradition, often held in opposition to its actually existing folk and popular traditions?

Despite his oft-repeated support for a new, hybrid culture, Senghor remained throughout his life a Classicist—we should not forget that his training was in Greek and Latin civilization—and he seemed temperamentally inclined to view modern arts with relative suspicion. As was mentioned above, Senghor believed that a newly liberated Africa would contribute to an emerging globalized, *Civilisation de l'Universel*, in which each part of the world would have an equal role to play (thereby replacing a discredited Western universalism based solely on the values of what he perceived as a cold, rational, industrial modernity). Senghor borrowed his conception of a *Civilisation de l'Universel* from the French Jesuit palaeontologist, theologian and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: this vision posits a common source of humanity as emerging from the first forms of human life in Africa. Senghor was clearly inspired by archaeological discoveries in the second half of the twentieth century that had begun to trace patterns of human evolution in which Africa was seen as the “original” source of global cultural diversity. However, despite recurring references in his essays to the “brassage” of various peoples, it is remarkable that his work never manages (or seriously attempts) to develop a compelling historical narrative of change. Cultural and racial “mixing” may have taken place throughout the history of mankind but Senghor perceives a deep-seated and immutable foundation to culture. Moreover, there is an extremely dangerous biological determinism at work in his vision of the unity of black African culture, which suggests that he never fully freed himself from the legacy of 1930s racialized thought. Senghor’s education in the Classics and his linguistic work on the development of African languages gave him an important “long view” on the process

of cultural evolution but this results in a largely static view of cultures as fundamentally unchanging: his visions of both Africa and Europe are remarkably monolithic for someone who believed so forcefully in the notion of *métissage*. This enables him to develop an authoritative and empowering image of blackness that rejects the cold rationality of the modernist project; but its images of this blackness are all turned towards the past with little sense of the very real engagements with Western-dominated modernity taking place throughout Africa.

To return then to the 1966 Festival, Senghor is seeking to “perform”, through his writing and through the festival, an African renaissance, to define an African classical age that can act as an inspiration for the future. For example, in speeches made prior to the Festival, he made remarkable comparisons between contemporary Senegal and ancient Greece:

Le peuple que je vous propose en exemple, c'est donc le peuple grec [...]. Il habitait un pays pauvre, fait de plaines étroites et de collines caillouteuses. Mais, comme le peuple sénégalais, il avait la mer en face de lui et des céréales sur ses plaines et de l'huile sur ses collines et du marbre dans son sol. Le peuple grec, en son temps, a préféré la qualité à la quantité. Il a tout sacrifié à l'amour de la liberté et de la vérité, au goût de la vie et de la beauté. [...] C'est pourquoi, si longtemps que vivront des hommes sur notre planète, ils parleront de la civilisation grecque comme d'un monde de lumière et de beauté: le monde de l'homme. (Speech to Senghor's UPS party congress, January 1966; cited in Rous 1967, 76-77)

This is, in many ways, a typical piece of exalted Senghor prose and no doubt far-removed from the day-to-day concerns of many of his people, though it is consistent with the profound (and inspirational) idealism of the era of decolonization that he was able to imagine such a vision for a newly independent, small country on the westernmost tip of Africa. Most importantly, this quotation from Senghor raises fundamental questions about the role of culture in the development of postcolonial Africa and the communities of the Black Atlantic more widely. Is culture posited here as a form of compensation for the absence of material development? Is culture more important than development or is it rather the case that culture in itself is here being held up as proof of development? If as we saw above, the Chicago World's Fair of 1893 was an event at which questions of Black Atlantic identity (evident especially in connections between Haitians and African Americans) were associated with debates about the 'modernizing superiority of Western Civilisation', Dakar 1966 seems to have projected an alternative modernity that was not dependent on technological and industrial development. We are here in the territory of Césaire's famous "three cheers for those who invented nothing" (from the *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*), the celebration of those who developed a culture outside the technological project of the West. Such rhetoric is important but, as many commentators have noted, the projection of a black counter-modernity runs the risk of positing a "black world" culturally and ideologically apart from and even opposed to dominant conceptions of Western-style development.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to explore some of the wider cultural understandings and formations that constitute the creative and social contexts in which writers of the Black Atlantic have operated since the late nineteenth century. Fundamentally, what connects the two very different “stagings” of the Black Atlantic that we have examined is the attempt to utilise the great capitalist-modernist “shop window” of the great fair or exhibition to carve spaces for recognition of the historical importance and contemporary potential of Africa and its diaphora. In December 2010, Dakar hosted a third edition of the *Festival Mondial des arts nègres*. It is highly significant that the 2010 Festival took for its main theme the now slightly tarnished notion of an “African Renaissance” that first emerged from the early years of post-apartheid South Africa but that also quite clearly echoed ideals that had been commonly cited in the era of decolonization: once again, the future of the continent is identified as a rebirth, the renaissance of a glorious past, taking Africa from an uncertain present to a brighter future. And, once again, the black diaspora, in this case Brazil, which occupied pride of place at FESMAN 2010, was placed at the heart of this renaissance. That former President Wade should have chosen to commission a monumental bronze-cast Stalinist statue, built by North Korea, as the centrepiece of his vision of an African Renaissance (see de Jong and Foucher 2010) simply underlines the complex contemporary and nationalist politics that have historically underpinned – and continue – to underpin any attempt to imagine an idealized version of the Black Atlantic’s past, present and future...

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