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THE TWO-FOLD GLOBAL TURN

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Okeke-Agulu, Chika. *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

The global turn in art history cannot be singular. Whereas the trope of a turn might suggest a singular or unified movement, a truly comprehensive reassessment of the discipline's Eurocentric frameworks requires us to attend to the iterative nature of global turns, including to the multiple practices of making and mobilization that have already pointed outward: whether toward a collective humanity, a planetarity in which the human is not supreme, or a globalized terrain of capital movements.¹ Of these many intertwined turns, some of the most theoretically significant were inaugurated in the political and cultural struggles of the so-called Third World, with the Martinican philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon's analysis of cultural practice ranking among the most important, especially the process of what he calls "two-fold emerging," which unites cultural practices to national con-

1 For helpful discussions of the plural status of global turns, see Caroline A. Jones and Steven Nelson, "Global Turns in US Art History," *Perspective* 2 (December 7, 2015), <https://perspective.revues.org/5969>; Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Jill H. Casid and Aruna D'Souza, eds., *Art History in the Wake of the Global Turn* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2014); and "Roundtable: The Global before Globalization," *October* 133 (Summer 2010): 3–19.

sciousness and to internationalism but not, crucially, to nationalism. In a 1959 speech at the Second Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Rome, Fanon outlined a theory of culture that responded to both his experience of the Algerian war for independence and his observations of the field of stutter-step liberation struggle on the African continent, calling on intellectuals and artists to pursue a commitment to building a nation and, in turn, a world for subsequent generations, such that this commitment would prevail over any harmful attachment to identity (as in ethnocentrism, tribalism, or racism).²

The two-fold formulation included a critique of prevailing continental thought, ruling out any exceptionalist recourse to African “songs, poems, and folklore.”³ Surveying a desultory track record of colloquies with African, Africanist, and Afrophile intellectuals amid political deliberations over future federation schemes, as well as the presumptions of the *Négritude* literary movement, Fanon characterized such thinking as a function of a frightfully lazy form of colonialism that had not even bothered to “deny the existence of one national culture after another,” and instead conjured a single, vast continent haunted by savages.⁴ Africans (and Arabs), he notes, had responded by formulating emotional antitheses to the cultural insult, but had not escaped it. For Fanon, the problem of national consciousness did indeed carry a continental dimension, but not as a function of a metaphysical kinship or personality.⁵ Rather, in the setting of still-entrenched colonialism in Africa, the struggle would have to be collective; until all nations were free, any one nation’s success in achieving independence would only ever be hollow, leaving it “encircled,” “fragile,” and “in permanent danger.” Fanon enjoined intellectuals and artists to take up the work of building a nation in the truer sense: interpreting the will of the people, such that the work would also entail the “discovery and encouragement of universalizing values.” It is in this kind of national consciousness that international consciousness lives and grows, he told the assembled audience. From

2 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 247. See also the discussion in Lewis R. Gordon, “Fanon’s Decolonial Aesthetic,” in *The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought*, ed. Nikolas Kompridis (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 108.

3 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 235.

4 *Ibid.*, 212–13.

5 *Ibid.*, 247.

this “two-fold emerging” of the international from the national, there would come all future, sustaining culture.⁶

This speech was included as a chapter in Fanon’s 1961 *Les Damnés de la terre* (published the same year as his untimely death, and one year before Algeria’s independence), where it reached an even wider audience. Its analysis was taken up almost immediately by some Third World cultural programs, most notably those of Algeria’s own National Liberation Front (FLN) government, which adopted Fanon’s insights as a template for cultivating a revolutionary praxis including not only decolonial self-discovery but also solidarity exchanges, such as the one that would bring a Chilean mural artist to Cuba and then Algeria.⁷ Other of the speech’s effects have played out over a much longer arc, such that they now inform and complicate efforts to forge a comparative, global modern art history.

With the recent publication of Chika Okeke-Agulu’s *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*—a chronicle of artistic theories, practices, and institutions during Nigeria’s independence years (1957–67) amid the “short century” of Third World liberation, African decolonization, and Cold War *realpolitik*—the implications of this Fanonian two-fold emerging return to the fore. *Postcolonial Modernism* dedicates its closest analysis to an independence generation of Nigerian artists who rejected the ethnos as a reservoir of authentic culture, to explore instead the possibilities of an incipient national culture realized through a studio practice of free appropriation and formal rearticulation.⁸ Through such practice, *Postcolonial Modernism* proposes, artists *perform* the incorporation of ethnically marked cultural resources into a compound space of coexistence that may be recognized as a kind of analogue to Fanon’s dual model of national culture.

A number of circumstances make the Nigerian case particularly compelling, not least of which is the notable elasticity involved in the “post” designation of the book’s title. The country’s independence

6 Ibid., 248.

7 See the cultural coverage in the FLN propaganda newspaper *Révolution Africaine* over the years 1963 to 1965. I refer, in particular, to “Mohamed Khadda peintre abstrait . . . ?,” *Révolution Africaine*, October 26, 1963, and “Deux Peintres du Tiers Monde,” *Révolution Africaine*, February 29, 1964. Fanon had been involved in another FLN publication, *El Moudjahed*, which published his speech in its April 10, 1959, issue.

8 *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2001).

date of midnight on October 1, 1960, had been negotiated and scheduled a full two years earlier, in October 1958, following a series of constitutional conferences held in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, as Okeke-Agulu navigates in the volume, no single state institution would emerge after 1960 to coordinate Nigerian culture. This was the case in part because the mapping of the country's independence preserved 19th-century British colonial divisions into Eastern, Western, and Northern regions, arrogating only a few central powers to a Nigerian federal government in Lagos, and having the perverse effect of fostering fights over electoral power both within and between regions.⁹ What this extended and decentralized process of national independence meant for artistic initiatives is that they could seem to materialize without causal relationship to the political and economic history of the nation-state (such as elections or the development of the oil industry)—and *Postcolonial Modernism* tracks them as such, showing many key initiatives as taking place prior to the formal transfer of sovereignty, and at far-flung points in different regions.

By the book's accounting, the most significant moment in this history was the 1958 creation of a student Art Society in the Fine Arts program of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology (NCAST), located in the city of Zaria in the Muslim North. The group's members had come to the degree program from different points of origin, and they used their new Art Society as both a self-organizing study group and a pressure organization for demanding recognition from their government(s). As they sought to dis-identify from the hegemony of British standards, they took recourse to the cultural resources of multiple ethnic groups. Members researched and discussed such topics as folktales and water spirits, magic and supernatural powers, tattooing and tribal marks, and marriage and social practices.¹⁰ Further, they reframed their relationship to European modernist precedents by invoking the notion of "natural synthesis," a term coined by Uche Okeke (1933–2016), the group's president from 1959 until its dissolu-

9 Frederick Cooper, *Africa since 1940: The Past of the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 68–69.

10 Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 87; cited hereafter as *PM*. See also "Extracts from Uche Okeke's Diary 1957–1961," in *The Zaria Art Society: A New Consciousness*, ed. Paul Chiike Dike and Pat Oyelola (Lagos: National Gallery of Art, Nigeria, 1998), 270–89.

tion in 1961.¹¹ Introduced as a strategy for combating the chaos of new nationhood, it named a robust mode of synthetic experimentation by artists who claimed the right to evaluate and appropriate the best of all traditions—old and new, indigenous and European, and functional and aestheticist—without coercion, injunction, or fear of otherness.¹² At the time of Okeke’s presentation of natural synthesis in 1960, the artist had just returned from Lagos, where he spent three months with Zaria colleague Demas Nwoko (b. 1935) contributing art and artistic design to the federal independence celebrations. Not unlike Fanon in 1959, Okeke had in mind the continental debates over the liberation of culture, and his speech aligns the Zaria group’s efforts in pictorial and plastic media to *Négritude*’s search for resolution and politicians’ invocation of an “African personality”—all standing for the “awareness and yearning for freedom of black people all over the world.”¹³ The natural synthesis expounded by Okeke, meanwhile, is “natural” in the sense of being intuitive, but not easy. It requires a strenuous effort of discernment, resulting in complex, multilayered, and even convoluted modernist formations.¹⁴

Notably, although Fanon’s theoretical work establishes a major periodization in *Postcolonial Modernism*, marking a shift from racialist to nationalist concerns, the book makes no claims for the Zaria artists’ direct knowledge of Fanon’s 1959 address. Okeke-Agulu instead discerns a generational commitment to national consciousness by African and African-diasporic intellectuals, manifesting, as the author puts it, in a shared sense of a need to subject the “gauzy mass of *Négritude*’s racialist aesthetic” to a conceptual filtration.¹⁵ Perhaps more controversially, Okeke-Agulu also posits the cultural project adumbrated by the Zaria artists as a fuller realization of the one imagined by Fanon, proposing that, because the Art Society’s program of self-study focused on the specific arts of specific ethnic groups in Nigeria, it went “beyond

11 *PM*, 1. Elizabeth Miller suggests the use of “natural synthesis” in reframing the relationship to European modernism in her review of *PM* and of Sonal Khullar’s *Worldly Affiliations: Artistic Practice, National Identity, and Modernism in India, 1930–1990* in *The Comparative* 40 (October 2016), 338–46.

12 *PM*, 1–2, 88–93.

13 Uche Okeke, “Natural Synthesis (Art Society, Zaria, October 1960),” reprinted in *Art in Development—A Nigerian Perspective* (Minneapolis: African American Cultural Center, 1982).

14 *PM*, 289.

15 *Ibid.*, 98.

Fanon” by recognizing how “the national” in Africa will always be conditioned by the “competing interests of its powerful constituent ethnicities.”¹⁶ Such an assertion performs its own two-fold movement, for it seems to pit the artists’ daily negotiations with subnational identity formations in Nigeria against Fanon’s imagination of a transformative passage into international humanism, only to assign the physical process of creative composition a transcendent power of its own as a process of “natural synthesis.”

These claims are elaborated with the most detail not in *Postcolonial Modernism* itself, but rather in the recent essay “Fanon, National Culture, and the Politics of Form in Postwar Africa.”¹⁷ Okeke-Agulu enumerates the three prongs of the mission Fanon assigns to the new African intellectual: to transcend the race-based ideological work of the *Négritude* and Pan-Africanism of the previous generation; to shift the terrain of critical engagement to the nation; and to develop a truly national culture that would serve as both instrument and object of the liberation struggle. Of these, Okeke-Agulu writes, the artists of a wider canon of postcolonial modernists—including Ibrahim el-Salahi in Sudan, Farid Belkahia in Morocco, and Skunder Boghossian from Ethiopia, among others—are allied to the first two, but “sidestep” the instrumentalist understanding of national culture entailed by the third prong. Okeke-Agulu views this maneuver not as an abdication of responsibility, but rather as a necessary move toward cultural complexity in which artists, having remained sympathetic to the legacies of the modernist avant-garde, engage in the politics of claiming and manipulating forms. On these grounds, he goes so far as to suggest that these artists in Nigeria devised a more complete version of national culture than Fanon had even imagined.¹⁸

The particular route by which *Postcolonial Modernism* develops a revisionist reading of the milestones of Nigeria’s modernism is crucial to the stakes of the claim that the Art Society artists consummated a national culture project via transposition into registers of formal

16 Ibid.

17 The Zaria approach is described as “subjective pragmatism” in *ibid.*, 90; Chika Okeke-Agulu, “Fanon, National Culture, and the Politics of Form in Postwar Africa,” in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes (Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 2016), 639–43.

18 *PM*, 98. Expanded upon in “Fanon, National Culture, and the Politics of Form in Postwar Africa.”

exploration across ethnic lines. The book begins at the start of the 20th century, proceeding from the supposition that the colonial past had hijacked the African future before it even began, “cryopreserving” its social forms in ways that blocked the advent of an African modernist subjectivity.¹⁹ In order to settle academic disputes about the origins of modernist practice, it homes in on particular pioneer figures, posing the question of exemplarity: What kind of modern art did these artists anticipate with their work?²⁰ Exemplars cited in the book include such proto-practitioners of natural synthesis as Herbert Macaulay (1864–1946), the black nationalist who claimed a right to mine Yoruba, African, Arab, and Western heritages, and Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904–96), a nationalist who not only organized the Igbo State Union but also, in 1937, published *Renascent Africa*, outlining the rise of a new Africa on the basis of educated political consciousness.

The purpose of such analysis is to intervene in the art historical habit of placing modern art’s origins at the decision to include arts courses in colonial schools, in this case by highlighting how British pedagogy simply furthered the cryopreservationist project. Thus, when *Postcolonial Modernism* weighs in on the question of the “first” artistic modernist in Nigeria—whether this was painter and educator Aina Onabolu (1882–1963), a Nigerian artist who defiantly adopted European-style academic realism in spite of proscriptions on native education (a move analyzed by art historian Olu Oguibe as an avant-garde gesture “in reverse”²¹); or arts-and-crafts teacher Kenneth Murray (1903–72), a British appointee who developed a pedagogy for the Lagos and Southern Nigeria schools of the 1930s based on memory images and immanent African traditions—it asks whether the artistic approach of each figure contested the prescribed place of the Nigerian African subject. The book sides with Onabolu in spite of his stylistic academicism, characterizing his critical appropriation of Western forms and techniques as exemplary.²²

19 Both the argument and the term follow Olufemi Taiwo, *How Colonialism Preempted Modernity in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

20 *PM*, 64.

21 Olu Oguibe, “Reverse Appropriation as Nationalism in Modern African Art,” *Third Text* 60, no. 3 (September 2002): 243–59.

22 These are purposefully tendentious assessments. Earlier endorsements of Murray’s legacy by Nigerian art historians include Ola Oloidi, “Art and Nationalism in Colonial Nigeria,” in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa: An Exhibition*, ed. Clémentine

Following from these revisionist inaugural chapters, *Postcolonial Modernism* goes on to track a dynamic of making that is, for the most part, to be recognized in positive acts of choice, appropriation, and synthesis (rather than in negative opposition), and also as a shuttling between semantic possibilities. This account highlights artists' claims to the right of synthetic articulation—what Okeke-Agulu terms a “will to synthesis”—as these claims are performed in combinatory deployments of nativisms and Westernisms.²³ Such an approach works by use of a number of functional abstractions, including loosening the ties between a national practice and political or economic struggle. Artists appear in this narrative as primarily singular figures, with no families and hardly any affective bonds. The story plays out firmly in the mode of “allegorical exegesis” that Geeta Kapur has identified as a requirement of the Third World artist, wherein the tasks of subjectivity otherwise left unresolved are bridged by establishing equivalences between nationhood, modernity, and self.²⁴ In such cases, tribal, religious, or linguistic identifications are mobilized only as a means to locate artists amid the very colonial partitions that they are working to overcome.²⁵

In chapter 3, Okeke-Agulu goes to the Zaria crucible to excavate the archival record of the art program in the 1950s, revealing some of the earliest ways the Art Society members sought to appropriate both African and European materials for their (future) natural syntheses. An uncertainty prevailed among the ranks of British teachers, as some sought to introduce more native materials into the training (even collaborating with Okeke to organize trips to cultural sites in the South), while others sought to grant suzerainty to foreign, accrediting institutions such as Goldsmiths—a proposal that the Art Society's leadership

Deliss (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 192–94. Okeke-Agulu's essay in that same volume, “The Quest: From Zaria to Nsukka,” 41–75, also refrains from drawing a clear opposition between Onobolu and Murray and names both as possible distant influences upon the Art Society. More recently, art historian Sylvester Ogbechie highlighted the ways in which Murray's aesthetic philosophy in the 1930s—which emphasized hands-on exploration of indigenous forms—can be understood as enabling the subsequent practice of the famed Nigerian sculptor and painter Ben Enwonwu. See Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008).

23 *PM*, 10.

24 Geeta Kapur, “When Was Modernism,” in *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000), 298.

25 See the mention of artists' religions, *PM*, 11.

vehemently opposed.²⁶ From this school context of ideological grappling over sources and training, the individual members of the Art Society emerge as the protagonists of the book: Okeke and Nwoko, as well as Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932), Simon Okeke (1937–69), and Jimo Akolo (b. 1934), among others.²⁷

Subsequent chapters trace a constellation of initiatives that facilitated the eventual consummation of the ongoing effort to inhabit and perform a fully compound artistic subjectivity. Chapter 4, “Transacting the Modern,” examines the role in producing the conditions for Nigeria’s postcolonial modernism played by Ulli Beier (1922–2011), an expatriate Afroophile who had come to Nigeria to teach linguistics and stayed as a consultant and promoter of African arts (even attending the first Congress of Black Artists and Writers in Paris in 1956). The German-born Beier’s first major contribution was to establish, in 1958, the journal *Black Orpheus* as a signal forum for African cultural expression, filling it with experimental writing of continental scope, translations of Léopold Sédar Senghor and other Francophone writers, and critical writing on the visual arts.²⁸ His was not a narrowly nationalist frame, for the journal featured even non-African artists, such as the Bombay-based Goan artist Francis Newton Souza, as exemplary modernists.²⁹ Nevertheless, the legacy of Beier’s work in Nigeria is impossibly fraught. A champion of African independence struggles and their liberating ethos, he trafficked in essentializing ideas of Africa that included promoting an enigmatic aesthetics allied to his sense of the character of African religions.³⁰ He even inserted himself in “native” cultural discussion by adopting a Nigerian pseudonym to publish articles about the artists he deemed important to “us.”³¹ Still, as Okeke-Agulu details, Beier’s commitment to a particular avant-garde Africanity gained still greater traction in March 1961, when he collaborated with renowned Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka to open the Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan.

26 PM, 82. The fascinating Goldsmiths saga may also be followed in Okeke’s diary entries in *The Zaria Art Society*.

27 Akolo was a fellow NCAST student but never formally joined the Society.

28 Beier’s use of the phrase “black Orpheus” is a reference to Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Léopold Senghor’s *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* (1948), which is titled “Orphée Noir.”

29 PM, 137–38.

30 *Ibid.*, 134.

31 *Ibid.*, 300n10.

This name references the *mbari* sacred complexes of Igbo cultural practice, with their integration of both high art and the everyday in ritual collaborations.³²

Okeke-Agulu argues that the Ibadan “club” version of the multi-form *mbari* marks a high point of interdisciplinary, experimental activity. Boasting a bar and restaurant and a paid membership of intellectuals and artists, it hosted an international exhibition program of Beier’s favorite discoveries from across Africa as well as beyond, including an exhibition of historical prints by the German expressionist Karl Schmidt-Rottluff.³³ Beier’s exhibition of the German prints offered their use of African forms to the Mbari Club visitors as a salutary example for future African art—aligning Schmidt-Rottluff’s work, counterintuitively, with the national liberation project (an interpretation that Okeke-Agulu largely retains in his own analysis).

The question of natural synthesis and its implications for national culture returns as a subject in chapter 5, when the book bears down on the practices of the Zaria artists *after* Zaria, as each reached distinctive solutions to the natural-synthesis model. The 1960s were Okeke’s most prolific decade, during which he produced an oeuvre that ranged from folk-fantastic drawings based on Igbo tales (1958), to suites of drawing made in Munich and inspired by research into the Igbo visual lexicon of Uli wall painting and body drawing (1962–63), to large political paintings upon his return to a fraying civic order.³⁴ The work Okeke made abroad is particularly significant to *Postcolonial Modernism’s* arguments about the national and international dimensions of formal play. In those drawings, Okeke explored the capacity of motifs such as the *agwologwo* spiral to slide between semantic systems—rendering a coiled serpent into hair and into forest—via open-ended formal play.³⁵ For Nwoko’s part, the natural-synthesis rapprochement comes with a turn to sculpture and the clay-firing methods of the Iron-Age Nok artists, which is work the artist inaugurated at a terra-cotta workshop at the Mbari Club Ibadan in 1965. Okeke-Agulu offers Nwoko’s work in this period as the most fully national version of natural synthesis;

32 Ibid., 149, 288.

33 Ibid., 149. The club’s cosmopolitan membership also included non-Nigerians, such as the South African writer in exile Ezekiel Mphahlele and the Ghanaian sculptor Vincent Kofi.

34 See also Chika Okeke-Agulu, “From the Editor: Matters Arising in Memory of Uche Okeke,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 40 (May 2017): 4–5.

35 *PM*, 196.

because Nwoko is Igbo, his decision to work with the Nok forms of the Jaba ethnic group seems to exemplify a desire to recognize a diverse set of cultural resources as common to all Nigerians.³⁶

Chapter 6 moves the focus to Lagos and its own tangle of institutions, such as the Nigerian Council for the Advancement of Arts and Culture (est. 1959), which presided over public commissions; foreign initiatives such as AMSAC (est. 1960); the exhibition platform of the Society of Nigerian Artists (est. 1964); and the development of arts television programs hosted by female tastemaker Afi Ekong. Whereas Lagos had long been a center of bureaucratic skirmishes over authority, Okeke-Agulu demonstrates its growing importance as a center of post-colonial artistic production, and for new avant-garde challenges as well.³⁷ Spurred by increasing numbers of degreed artists and the discursive space opened by *Black Orpheus* and Mbari Ibadan, painters entered into intergenerational conflicts. By the end of the chapter, the artist Colette Omogbai—a new Zaria graduate—has emerged as the star. Omogbai made dramatically expressive paintings of ugly, exaggerated figures that split the opinion of the cognoscenti. In 1965 she used *Nigeria* magazine to issue a manifesto against “sweet and sentimental” paintings, boldly critiquing the patriarchal dynamic of the older modern artists who insisted that children must wait their turn.³⁸ Her text thus marks another turn in Nigerian self-articulation within the fold of national-international emerging. By 1965, a young generation had stepped forth to claim a postcolonial future for itself without kowtowing to the stewardship of its forebears.

The book concludes with the country’s slide into civil war (1967–70), at the precipice where what Okeke-Agulu terms the “unruly politics” of the postcolony threaten to disrupt or prevent artistic synthesis.³⁹ Okeke returned from Germany in 1963 and moved to Enugu, the capital of his native Eastern Region.⁴⁰ Other Eastern Nigerian artists, writers, and playwrights moved there in this period, too, there forming the

36 Ibid., 208. On this point, see also Chika Okeke-Agulu, “Nationalism and Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria: The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960–1968,” *African Arts* 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 26–37, 92–93.

37 Ibid., 18.

38 Ibid., 256.

39 Ibid., 288.

40 This is the same region that would secede from Nigeria as the Republic of Biafra in May 1967.

Mbari Club Enugu—a conflicted project that Okeke-Agulu sees as extending the legacy of Mbari in Ibadan, but also as converting its national scope into an instrument of regional revitalization. Okeke turned to producing huge paintings on board, making prescient use of the *ogbanje* figure that, in Igbo and Yoruba mythology, signifies the child who dies prematurely, only to return to the same mother several times; by 1965, he had started to show the crisis explicitly in paintings such as *Conflict (After Achebe)*. Nwoko, by contrast, remained in Ibadan out of commitment to the importance of the Nigerian nation above the *ethnos*, making tragic paintings that explore the conversion of human subjects into killing machines and terra cotta sculptures of contorted, helmeted figures.⁴¹

In references to the haunting literature of this period, Okeke-Agulu demonstrates how these artworks responded to the tragic reproduction of ally and enemy in the Nigerian domestic sphere. Having reached its grim terminus, the book projects a sense of inevitability onto Nigeria's unraveling—including a suspicious census in 1962–63 and election irregularities in 1964, two military coups d'état in 1966 and ethnicized reprisals, and outright war in 1967. Okeke-Agulu describes how artists newly confronted the “pathologies of newly independent Nigeria,” no longer retreating into artistic autonomy.⁴²

Thus, the very problems of efficacy in struggle and liberation—all previously bracketed in *Postcolonial Modernism*—return at the conclusion as a challenge to interpretive approaches in the new field of global modern art. If the artist-protagonists of *Postcolonial Modernism* have “sidestepped” the more instrumentalist version of national culture in the service of a liberation struggle, in favor of a self-actualizing praxis of formal experimentation, then to what should the art historian attend so as to forge a more global history? How to analyze the stakes of acts of selection and articulation that, in fact, never produced a fully contained image of either self or nation? In Fanon's view, we might recall, a failure to articulate a delimited self is potentially emancipatory; at the ethical center of two-fold becoming is the need to dissolve harmful attachments to tribalist identities. In the view of *Postcolonial Modernism*, however, a failure of national articulation is but an ambivalent outcome. The very acts of appropriation that seem to augur a new

41 Ibid., 277.

42 Ibid., 260.

artistic subjectivity in fact proceed under the sign of impending tragedy and dissolution (and without any anticipation of revolution).

Ambivalence is indeed a dominant mood of the artworks comprising the canon of Nigerian postcolonial modernism. Consider, for example, Nwoko's astonishing, 4.5-foot-tall painting *Nigeria in 1959*, which debuted in Lagos at the Independence Day festivities of 1960. The painting offers a portrait of what had newly become a defunct military order of racialized subjects: a trio of white officers in the uniforms of the Navy, Army, and Corps of Engineers who sit, exhausted, before a row of black strongmen comprising the noncommissioned auxiliary troops.⁴³ It drew ebullient praise from the cognoscenti circles of *Nigeria* and *Black Orpheus* magazines when it was exhibited, including from Beier, who describes the painting's message in terms that can only be described as Fanonian: the painting conveys the "charge" of immanent revolutionary violence.⁴⁴ Okeke-Agulu's own reading in *Postcolonial Modernism* emphasizes the anxiety discernable between races and ranks on the eve of political independence, with the native forces standing as "executioners waiting impatiently for the final hour of liberation."⁴⁵ He also, importantly, pluralizes the painting's referent in ways that we must now see as "national," explaining that Nwoko developed the composition in Zaria from sketches made during the emir's annual royal pageant, and with reference to colonial photographic practice; it captures, in other words, several different points of demarcation in the country's power differentials.⁴⁶ However, to look at Nwoko's painted view of the independence event is to perceive a dissonance with the proleptic certainty of Beier's take, as well as with the "impatience" of Okeke-Agulu's. The artist introduces no visibly restive quality into his depiction of the colonial color line. Giving mask-like features to his subjects, he creates an expectation of a ritual or theatrical-allegorical meaning; this effect is heightened by the fringe-like drips of yellow pigment over its uppermost corners, suggesting a stage curtain. Independence here is a non-diegetic force that saps the colonizers of strength and authority. It is not (yet) enacted by the movement of Nigerian forces.

To fill this void, there were numerous future-oriented convictions and artist statements that tallied creative resources. The particulars of

43 The identification of these uniforms is from Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu*, 152.

44 Ulli Beier, "Contemporary Nigerian Art," *Nigeria* 68 (March 1961): 51.

45 *PM*, 108.

46 *Ibid.*, 107.

such artist writing are important. For example, a thicker description of what Okeke felt to be at stake in 1960 appears in his diary entries, which were partially published in 1998, and which are cited in *Postcolonial Modernism* but not analyzed in depth. Most intriguing is the entry from October 1, 1960, itself, marking the momentousness of formal independence with testimony to the interplay of a multivalent African nation and Okeke's own soaring emotions. The passage reads,

The beginning of a new era! The day our fathers have fought and died for! The day we of this generation and generations yet unborn shall cherish and guard jealously! My heart was as it were full with conflicting emotions of joy and sorrow. The future is certainly not rosy. It really requires giant schemers to pilot this vast African nation to its place among the stars.

I re-affirmed my faith in the cause of contemporary African art and culture. I shall fight to the end in my chosen path for the glory of God and human kind at large. My field of vision is the universe, I could now operate in all the continents with Africa as my base.⁴⁷

Telescoping from the personal to the national to the planetary, then back again, the artist casts artistic agency as an arduous labor—scheming, piloting, fighting, seeing, and operating—within a vast network incorporating God, humanity, a universal cosmology, and pan-African vitality. Further, the text noticeably crackles with the pressing political questions posed by the prospect of African unity. Okeke invokes several kinds of Africas: an allegorical one of timeless and placeless scope, and a pragmatic one that requires careful cultural and political coordination across peoples.

Such moments suggest that the many turns of postcolonial culture in Nigeria took place in a landscape of transnational political possibility, in which artists and intellectuals were able to perceive distinct Africanist movements as analogous and as inviting transnational coordination. On this point, the book's sometimes tendentious descriptions of Senghor's and Fanon's cultural projects can work at cross-purposes to the polyvalence of the national aesthetics that is otherwise stressed. Broadly, the assertion is that the Art Society represented a second wave of decolonizing cultural politics that supplanted the "evening shadow"

47 "Extracts from Uche Okeke's Diary 1957–1961," 284.

version of *Négritude* with a vivified and vivifying national culture.⁴⁸ Yet in terms of the kinds of ideas and resources available to artists, the phases seem to have overlapped, producing complementary interdependencies that do not support a strict generational reading. Beier, we know, invoked the relevance of the *Négritude* authors throughout his editorship of *Black Orpheus* and at every level, from the publication's title to its symbolic inclusion of Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas on its editorial board, so the journal's features on Okeke and Nwoko would have fallen within these same intellectual coordinates. To this archive, we can add the facts that Zaria artist Onobrakpeya exhibited a painting titled *Négritude* at the 1960 exhibitions in Lagos,⁴⁹ and that Okeke's own natural-synthesis speech spoke of a yearning for freedom of black people all over the world, which he also saw reflected in the notions of *Négritude* and African Personality.

The extent of the collective turn to national culture thus merits further comparative analysis. The dense field of writing on the problem of the nation form and on decolonization is not explicitly engaged in the book, in large part because Okeke-Agulu from the outset foregrounds a politics of form that is activated primarily in studio practice alone. Of particular concern for tracking the entanglement of one national (but not nationalist) formation with others is the strong socialist flavor of movement from the national into the international. As Pheng Cheah reminds us, Marx considered the nation form to be a “phantomatic ideology” that impeded the formation of cosmopolitan proletarian consciousness, a contention that ensured vigorous debate of the national question within all projects of socialist decolonization.⁵⁰ In his reading of Fanon's writings, Cheah observes that they make a *socialist* attempt to reterritorialize freedom: recognizing that imperialism transformed the contradiction between capital and labor into a geopolitical division between metropolitan nations and the colonized periphery, Fanon reincarnated the nation by positing its decolonizing form (and its culture) as the most effective vehicle for human emancipation.

These socialist dynamics are sometimes more pronounced in the work of postcolonial modernists located elsewhere on the continent, to

48 *PM*, 98, 239; discussed further in “Fanon, National Culture, and the Politics of Form in Postwar Africa,” 642.

49 See *The Zaria Art Society*, 266.

50 Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 180–81.

whom *Postcolonial Modernism* gestures and identifies as a cohort awaiting comparative analysis. The Moroccan national context—and the work to develop it by artists such as Farid Belkahlia—is an instructive point of comparison.⁵¹ In the same period, in newly independent Morocco, a group of artists associated with the Casablanca School of Art—including not only Belkahlia but also Mohammed Melehi, Mohammed Chebaa, and others—began to use Islamic aniconic pattern and Berber motifs as points of access into native sign systems and visualities. These were considered autochthonous components for a decolonized culture, an initiative they initially pursued within an African territorialization of vital creativity. In this case, they turned away from a racialist Africanism and toward a more revolutionary version of national culture around 1966, following participation in the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, that year, which was organized by then-President Senghor.⁵² The Moroccan critic Abdallah Stouky, who had attended the festival, used the journal *Souffles*—a magazine of experimental art and progressive politics to which the Casablanca artists contributed—to publish a blistering critique of the naïve humanism of Senghor’s apologetic propagation of *Négritude*, which Stouky understands as part and parcel of Senghor’s support for France over solidarity with Algerian independence, and of the chauvinism of French cultural administrators such as André Malraux.⁵³ The Moroccan critics on the revolutionary left insist on the need to focus on economic and social emancipation—the condition for a “true revolution” with truly enriching outcomes for both the national culture and the culture of the former occupier.⁵⁴

51 The Casablanca School is probably the most widely recognized (but also critiqued) avant-garde group of the Middle East and North Africa region. Studies include Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912–1956* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Katarzyna Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Clare Davies, “Decolonizing Culture,” *Essays of the Forum Transregionale Studien* (February 2015), www.perspectivia.net/publikationen/trafo-essays/2-2015/davies_culture.

52 See Joshua I. Cohen, “Locating Senghor’s ‘École de Dakar’: International and Transnational Dimensions to Senegalese Modern Art, c. 1959–1980,” forthcoming in the journal *African Arts* (2018); Sarah Frioux-Salgas, “Présence Africaine: Une tribune, un mouvement, un réseau,” *Gradhiva* 10 (2009): 4–21.

53 Abdallah Stouky, “The World Festival of Negro Arts, or the Nostalgics of Négritude,” in *Souffles-Anfās: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics*, ed. Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 45.

54 *Ibid.*, 45.

Ultimately these comparisons raise the question of the ways in which the (apparently) free appropriation of the best of all traditions—old and new, indigenous and European, and functional and aesthetic—might not in fact be free. They ask us to evaluate the ways in which the supposed work of “synthesis” in Nigerian artistic practice took its impetus from national culture (or vice versa). The Moroccan artists rejected Négritude, we are told by Stouky, precisely because of its success as a conservative synthesis of political interests in Senghor’s Senegal. Yet we might also understand the work of synthesis in refusing segregation and cultural preservation as radically emancipatory, in the Fanonian sense. The philosopher Lewis R. Gordon has attended to this possibility at the level of Fanon’s style of prose, reminding us that the task of the black writer is to conjure a nondivided readership, “to break down the schism, the segregation of thought, through which ideas could be articulated beyond the racial structure by which blacks are locked, subjugated, and located beneath everyone else.”⁵⁵

Such tensions suggest that the global stakes of the histories explored in *Postcolonial Modernism* derive in large part from their contradictions and unintended consequences. In other words, the effectiveness of “natural synthesis” may have had to do with its ambivalence: its strange lack of fit with a history of struggle. Demonstrably ineffective in terms of making a lasting image of self or nation, its commitments in fact lay elsewhere. The national culture that Okeke-Agulu analyzes in Nigeria had a compound structure, was to be claimed by a performative use in concert with others, and—precisely because of these qualities—constitutes another crucial opening in the iterative, global story of a decentered modernism.

55 Gordon, “Fanon’s Decolonial Aesthetic,” 93.