An Introduction

Okwui Enwezor

Fellow African Freedom Fighters still carrying the burden of Imperialism, pull together. We who have won our freedom stand uncompromisingly behind you in your struggle. Take heart. Unite your forces. Organization and discipline shall command your victory. All Africa shall be free in this, our lifetime. For this mid-twentieth century is Africa’s. This decade is the decade of African independence. Forward then to independence. To Independence Now. Tomorrow, the United States of Africa.

Kwame Nkrumah

The Scramble for Africa: 1885

The story of colonialism in Africa is a well-known one—or so it seems. While contemporary historiography on Africa has often focused on the pathology of violence and official institutional degradation, very little is said today about the structure of colonial violence and its concomitant contribution to the historical view of recent history in Africa. Where to begin?

Berlin, 1885: No single historical event has had as much impact on the shape of modern Africa as that one that took place between November 15, 1884, and February 23, 1885, in Berlin, under the auspices of the German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. The scramble for Africa that precipitated the Berlin Conference, or the Belgian Congo Conference, and the unilateral, quasi-legal document called the Belgian Congo Act that it engendered, illustrates the willingness of the fifteen European nations attending the conference to betray, for profit, the juridical principles at the foundations of their own civil societies.7 It was at this meeting that Africa’s final fate at the hands of the imperial powers of Europe was sealed. To be sure, the colonial enterprise was short, a mere but brutal seventy years (as the history of the Belgian Congo under Leopold II reminds us). Yet it left an indelible mark, whose crude, schematic features remain difficult both to erase and to reconcile with civilized conduct. Any attempt to return to that exemplary scene of uncivil conduct that was Berlin—so masterfully provoked and instigated by King Leopold II of Belgium, a man whose violent actions and gross human rights violations in the Congo have come to symbolize the pernicious and brutal activities of colonial conquest—renders unto European history a dark blot.

It cannot be repeated enough that the territorial violations and abject violence that followed the annexation of most of Africa sprang from a deeply held belief that simple issues of human decency and legal protection do not and cannot apply to subject peoples, especially those deemed in need of civilizing. Despite the flimsy illusion of respectability conveyed by the Belgian Congo and Act, the mad race by European powers to occupy desirable swaths of African territory, whether by absurd “legal” treaties or by outright military conquest and occupation, represents one of the most tragic encounters between Europe and Africa since the abolition of slavery in the mid-nineteenth century. The act carved up Africa, like war booty, into five main spheres of influence: British, French, Portuguese, Belgian, and German.

Today, at the conclusion of another historical period, to view the history of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the struggle of subject peoples to regain their independence and liberty is to see up close the intricate and calculating mechanisms in the complex interrelationship of dependence and exploitation, violence and patronization, that bore upon the emergence of numerous non-European cultures and nations into modernity. At the conclusion of this millennium, it is quite commonplace to ignore the dramatic processes of decolonization, from India to Indonesia, Ghana to Kenya, Egypt to Jordan, Algeria to Congo, perhaps the most significant events of the twentieth century. Decolonization, and its attendant ideological and philosophical contestation of Western imperialism, does in fact remain one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, much as the abolition of slavery was in the nineteenth century, but very little of what its processes represent—especially in proposing new narratives and subjectivities, identities and nationalities, contemporary and historical forms—has produced a proper understanding of the mutually binding relationship between Europe and its former colonial territories, a relationship manifest in areas of language, culture, politics, law, and other social institutions. Thus to reexamine and assess what this relationship means with regards to the vast corpus of historical writing dedicated to the study of the twentieth century requires new methods.

It is with this in mind that The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994 was initiated. This exhibition and book are an attempt to construct a contemporary “critical biography” of Africa. The exhibition’s principal aim is to explore and elaborate on the critical paradigms and ideas related to concepts of modernity, the political and ideological formations of independence and liberation struggles, their impact in the production of self-awareness, new models of cultural expression, dialogues with processes of modernization, and what lies at the heart of modernity itself out of the ruins of colonialism.

Independence Now: Toward a Political and Social Ethic

As long as the black man is among his own, he will have no occasion, except in minor internal conflicts, to experience his being through others. There is of course the moment of “being for others” of which Hegel speaks, but every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society.

Frantz Fanon
Perhaps there is a need to clarify a central operating principle of this exhibition, namely to examine the link between independence movements and liberation struggles as methods for achieving African political autonomy and cultural self-awareness. Independence and liberation on the first level are constitutive of two radical and revolutionary political programs. One, based on the Ghanian notion of nonviolence and civil disobedience (especially in West Africa), adopted a strategy of working within colonial law, albeit by provocatively testing its limits in order to mobilize popular discontent against its oppressive system. Early independence leaders such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah successfully applied this method, using the editorial platforms of newspapers and publications, public speeches and campaigns, strikes and trade union activities, to disrupt the machinery of colonial economic interests and to undermine its legal authority. Even in cases where this method was the desired approach, however, there was never a guarantee against the use of violence; the Mau Mau insurrection in Kenya in 1952, and the brutal British suppression of it, being a case in point. By the time the Mau Mau challenge of British rule was over, more than 50,000 Kenyans had been killed, against under twenty losses for the British.

As we will see elsewhere, Kenya was not the exception. Armed struggle constituted the final method in territories such as Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, and South Africa, where a mixture of colonial intransigence and inflexibility undermined peaceful negotiations. The Front National de Liberation (FLN) in Algeria, which began an armed revolt in 1953 against French colonial military violence, not only affected Algeria but had a direct impact on France itself. Algeria represented both a political loss and a psychological crisis for France.

Whatever the method on the road to independence and liberation, these two programs foregrounded the necessity to overthrow the colonial presumption. The central goal was always to wrest the instruments of power from the colonial elite. It also needs to be noted that the Ghanian method of nonviolence was never entirely nonviolent. In Congo, for example, Belgium’s need to exact revenge against the charismatic Patrice Lumumba not only led to his assassination in 1961, less than a year after he and his Mouvement National Congolais (MNC) successfully led the nation to independence as her first prime minister, it more cruelly undermined the new nation’s hard-won independence, setting up a weakened and manipulated President Joseph Kasavubu for Joseph-Desiré Mobutu’s coup d’etat. The notion of colonial revenge can thus be seen as a subtext of the independence and liberation struggles, whether exacted through imprisonment and exile or through torture and murder.4

With the independence of Ghana, in 1957, a powerful psychological and ideological force put in place what would become the main political event of the 1960s: what Nkrumah, Ghana’s first prime minister, in a 1958 speech at the First All-African People’s Conference in Accra, announced as Africa’s decade of independence. In 1960, a loud cannon-shot was fired across the bow of the political spectrum, in Africa and around the world: not only did seventeen African countries gain independence that year, but the United Nations, upon admitting them en masse into the international body, declared that year to be the year of Africa. For the rest of the decade, independence celebrations and solemn ceremonies of the colonial hand-over of power were as commonplace as the zeal with which citizens of the new nations embraced their new reality.

But what indeed is the reality of independence and liberation? For sure, independence and liberation, in the African context, find critical and philosophical filiation in the fact that both of them announce themselves as political and social movements in the case of pan-Africanism, and as a philosophy of culture, regeneration, and modern consciousness in the case of Negritude. Across each spectrum there is a synthetic elaboration to clarify the program toward modernity, V.Y. Mudimbe, reading Frantz Fanon and elaborating upon the political philosophy of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Nkrumah, two proponents of Negritude and pan-Africanism, says that “the alienation caused by colonialism constitutes the thesis, the African ideologies of otherness (black personality and Negritude) the antithesis, and political liberation the synthesis.”5 Mudimbe’s argument also rests on Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous essay “Black Orpheus” (1948), which introduced the postwar French public to the works of the writers of Negritude. For Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, “In the framework of Hegel’s dialectics, Sartre saw the Negritude movement as the moment of separation, of negativity, that is like the ‘antithesis’ following the ‘thesis’ of the colonial situation and preceding the ‘synthesis’ in which not only blacks but all oppressed people would unite and triumph over their oppressors.”6 But the Fanonian philosophy of liberation has a particular appeal for Mudimbe. To negotiate the antipathy of colonialism, the colonized must first understand the Manichaean scheme and structure of colonial domination:

The alienation of colonialism entails both the objective fact of total dependence (economic, political, cultural, and religious) and the subjective process of the self-victimization of the dominated. The colonized internalizes the imposed racial stereotypes, particularly in attitudes toward technology, culture, and language. Black personality and negritude appear as the only means of negating this thesis, and Fanon expounds the antithesis in terms of antiracist symbols. Negritude becomes the intellectual and emotional sign of opposition to the ideology of white superiority. At the same time, it asserts an authenticity which eventually expresses itself as a radical negation: rejection of racial humiliation, rebellion against the rationality of domination, and revolt against the whole colonialist system. This symbolic violence ultimately turns into nationalism and subsequently leads to a political struggle for liberation.7

Against this backdrop, the independence and liberation struggles and revolts represent the twin projects from which the text of African modernity after World War II was fashioned. First, their central aim was the destruction of the inferiority complex imposed by colonialism; second, they attacked the disempowering devices of colonial injustice and economic exploitation; third, they affirmed a political and social vision that recuts the fabric of the
modernist dialectic of progress and change; fourth, they described an ethic of modernity and a view of history that puts Africa in the center of all international events; and fifth, they rejected the anachronism of European cultural superiority and argued for an African critical subjectivity that is both a political ethic and a cultural deity.

The Cultural Dimension of Decolonization: Modernism, Pan-Africanism, Negritude, and African Art

Our error was not that we fought with the weapons of colonialism—most African politicians, though not all, unfortunately, are anticolonial—but with the weapons of Europe.

Léopold Sédar Senghor

Since culture does not just reflect the world in images but actually through those very images conditions a child to see that world in a certain way, the colonial child was made to see the world and where he stands in it as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O

s much as the political ideologies, nationalist movements, and their decolonization tropes constitute bases for self-fashioning knowledge, on a cultural level decolonization represents the exemplary scene of ambivalence. This ambivalence is readily perceivable in the complex relationship between colonial discourse and its African interpretation and use of that discourse. Ambivalence and alienation have been crucial terms employed to describe the relationship of the colonized to the colonial text. As such, the ‘ux of this exhibition concerns, on the one hand, the uses of the ornamental structure of modernism and, on the other, the uses or abuses of that structure.

Here, however, we are not concerned with nor unduly exercised by the modernism dispatched by some colonial envoy and assimilated by Africans. The modernism addressed in this exhibition concerns the African systematization, deployment, and usage of odern forms, values, and structure. It may be productive to look closely at how African modernism accomplishes its modernity. To begin with, this modernism is not founded on an ideology of the universal, nor is it based on the recognition and assimilation of an autonomous European modernism, or on the continuity of the systemic field of artistic territorialization achieved and consecrated in the colonial project.

Paris, 1934: While Europe is in the grips of fascism, amidst it is a marginalized and restless population of Africans and West Indians. One way or the other the silence will break, because the lionized wish to speak. René Maran’s Batouala (1921), an anticolonial novel set within an African culturescape, had been published and had won the Goncourt prize a decade before. The work African-American and West Indian writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer, which med the crux of the Harlem Renaissance, were becoming readily available in Europe and made an impression on Africans living there. The arcus Garvey’s “return to Africa” movement provided the political ballast. What the Harlem Renaissance writers and Garvey offered was a view of blackness (Africaness if you will) that found value and beauty in African culture and history as subjects for their art, much in the same way that African sculpture and religious rituals had penetrated Cubism and Surrealism.

The Negritude movement—begun by Aimé Césaire, Senghor, Léon Damas, and other African and Caribbean students in Paris in 1934, and one of the key founding moments of African modernism—had absorbed this lesson. Through L’Étudiant noir, a small student review founded by Senghor and Damas, the framework that would propel Negritude into the ranks of the Paris intellectual and artistic scene was born. To say that this difficult birth was an event of great importance would be to underestimate its radical import. Negritude, facing the example of African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance during the Jazz age, when black culture carried a bit of the charge of the exotic and was desirable, posited a conscious intellectual dramatization of African alterity, and insisted on the reality and originality of an African culture in the making of modernity. Thus African modernism from this instance onward achieved its first synthesis through an act of internal reflexivity on the status and value of African culture. It also constructed for itself a tool for bringing about a structural and philosophical change in the making of modern culture. According to Sartre, “Negritude is the negro’s being in the world.” This “being-in-the-world” and its arrival in the cultural and literary economy of Europe are not merely a production of bombastic self-regard; its “antiracist racism,” as Sartre puts it, is a strategy of subversion and rebellion. Thus Negritude, as a modernist avant-garde, was based on the construction of an ethic, a field of practice, and on the primacy of African subjectivity and subject matter in order to contradict colonial alienation. It was the same impetus that led Kenyatta to try to demonstrate in his anthropological study “Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyus” that the Gikuyus as an African people had a conception of society, politics, law, and culture that was as complex and sophisticated as that of any European culture.

Manchester, September 1945: World War II is over, African and West Indian soldiers from the war, along with students and trade unionists, stage a radical congress that demands, among other things, independence and the right of self-determination for Africa and the West Indies. The organizers had made clear the contradiction of colonialism by fighting to help secure freedom for Europe during the war. Organized by George Padmore, Nkrumah, Peter Abrahams, Kenyatta, and many others, the Fifth pan-African Congress openly contested the European right to rule Africa and other colonies.

Like Negritude, pan-Africanism situated itself in the field of the subjective. It sprang from the political recognition of an African search for social and cultural equality and autonomy. Where Negritude began as a Francophone phenomenon, pan-Africanism found its strongest appeal among Anglophone artists and students. In terms of art and culture, Negritude and pan-Africanism sought their meaning and viability in relation not to a canon (art history for example) but to a political and social process (contemporary African society).
If, as Senghor had indicated, Negritude was a humanism and Nkrumah’s pan-Africanism centered on the African personality, one other approach to African modernism is to see in it an awareness by artists, intellectuals, activists, poets and writers, political leaders and students, a necessity to subvert and destroy European cultural imperialism as the sine qua non of progressive culture. Thus African modernism arrives at its strongest proposition in relation to its progressive alignment against racism and petty European superenity. Césaire had articulated it best when he stated his case for Negritude, insisting:

my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
it breaks through the opaque prostration with its upright patience.

But Césaire’s self-deprecation is not merely a pragmatic strategy; within it lies the prime argument of many Africans for rejecting the construction of a questionable universal subject. We see this rejection of universalism formally embodied in the principle of non-alignment of the Bandung conference in 1956. African delegates to the conference saw in its ethos a way to begin with a fresh perspective, while not rejecting the West completely. Bandung was a statement and declaration of autonomy. As the old colonial world crumbled, a new order of social, political, and economic relations among nations of the developing world took hold. These relationships in part exemplified a critical response to that which Western modernity could neither properly digest nor outright negate. Thus we can say that Western modernity’s limits expose it to a parallel international dimension of political philosophy. In a sense, the objectification and inscription by the formerly marginalized of a new will to power into a political philosophy of equality and respect for other nations and cultures in the international arena specify for us a new consciousness of modernity as it took hold among the formerly colonized. Thus, rather than pure celebration, Césaire’s is an occasion to muse over the process of regeneration:

I say right on! The old negritude
progressively cadavers itself
the horizon breaks, recoils and expands
and through the shredding of clouds the flashing of a sign
the slave ship cracks everywhere. . . its belly convulses
and resounds. . . . The ghastly tapeworm
of its cargo gnaws the fetid guts of the strange sucking
of the sea.

Like the cracking of the slave ship, the relationship of African modernity to Europe’s construction of the universal subject is both a critique and modification, a rip in the body of the colonial text. The aesthetics of African artists and writers in the post-World War II period were never founded on a spatial concept to which a proper geography could be ascribed; their aesthetics constituted both an ethic and an imaginary. On this basis the internal cohesion of mid-century African aesthetics is first a discourse of an awareness of otherness, and second a process of regeneration that draws upon the particularity of an African perspective. According to Mudimbe, “In literature this position is expressed in three major ways: first, in terms of domestication of political power (Ezekiel Mphahlele, Mongo Beti, and Sembene Ousmane); second, in criticism of colonial life (Chinua Achebe, D. Chraibi, Ferdinand Oyono); and third, in the celebration of African sources of life (A. Loba, A. Sefniou, Cheikh Hamidou Kane).”

The crystallization of a powerful political ideology through pan-Africanism is another moment at which the relationship of power and knowledge between Africa and Europe was reworked. Pan-Africanism in the post-World War II period was never the amelioration of an African cultural order but a field of recognition that sought active political, social, cultural, and economic integration of Africa into the international system. On this level, pan-Africanism was a more critical and progressive project than Negritude. Pan-Africanism’s promotion of the notion of a collective production of a common social space was rooted in the twin ideas of the recognition of the discourse of otherness and the need of regeneration based on that recognition. Mudimbe reminds us that it was in the political essays of early pan-Africanists such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, in Renascent Africa (1937), Nkrumah, in Toward Colonial Freedom (1947), Obafemi Awolowo, in Path toward Nigerian Freedom (1947), Césaire, in Discours sur le colonialisme (1950), and Fanon, in Peau noire, masques blancs (1952), “that a clearly progressive awakening gradually affirmed the principles of African nationalism and international integration.” “For a number of African intellectuals,” he continues, “these works have been, and probably still are, major sources for their cultural autonomy.”

**Taking Inventory: Decolonizing African Cultural Production**

Our books in the colonial schools taught us about the wars of the Gauls, the lives of Joan of Arc and Napoleon, the list of French départements, and the poems of Lamartine and the theater of Molière, as if Africa had never had a history, a past, a geographical existence, or a cultural life. Our students were valued only for their aptitude for this policy of complete cultural assimilation.

Ahmed Sékou Touré

By the early 1960s, the concept of African liberation had gradually shifted from political dogma to the realm of cultural nationalism and liberation. Some of the inherent ambiguity of Negritude in relation to European cultural hegemony was challenged by a more militant discourse. In their searing study of postcolonial literature and critique of the attempt to domesticate African literary production by subsuming it into the European canon, Chinweizu, Onwuchekwu Jemie, and Ihechukwu Madubuike had this to say:

*The cultural task in hand is to fend off all foreign domination of African culture, to systematically destroy all encrustations of colonial and slave mentality, to clear the bushes and stake out new foundations for a liberated African modernity. This is a process that must take place in all spheres of African life—in government, industry, family and social life, education, city planning, architecture, arts, entertainment, etc.*

A liberated African modernity? The question bears upon what this exhibition seeks to demonstrate, namely, that the construction of
African modernity in the twentieth century is inextricably bound to the defense and legitimization of all and every sphere of African thought and life. It seems unnecessary, then, to make an argument that does not take the totality of this manifestation (political, social, economic, identity, culture, etc.) into full account. Thus this exhibition and the book that accompanies it should be understood in light of this totality, which bears upon the construction of both a political sphere and a cultural order.

In fact artists and intellectuals made this analysis the very heart of their discourse—that to constitute a decolonized African aesthetic, one must first make a complete inventory of what needs to be decolonized. The Kenyan novelist, dramatist, and essayist Ngugi Wa Thiong'O had exactly such a thing in mind in his equally militant and soberly polemic view of African literature. Ngugi insists that the inventory requires, first, a systematic review of what constitutes African literature, and that part of that review requires the decolonizing of one's mind; a part of which is the rejection of the Africanness of any African literature written in colonial languages. He sees in the language of African literature a means of mediating for an African audience a sense of their own reality. He writes that "language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture." Ngugi goes further, suggesting that only literature written in African languages can qualify as African literature, and describing its method in relation to its capacity to produce and carry a meaningful representation to real life by noting that "language as communication is speech and it imitates the language of real life, that is communication in production."17

Ngugi's well-argued position and analysis of the situation of African writing in whatever colonial language could just as easily be transmuted to the situation of visual art. But not all African writers were in agreement that literature written in European languages by Africans is necessarily illegitimate and colonial. Some writers insisted that colonialism was a reality, that to critique it is to recognize it, and that writers and artists must be allowed to work in whatever method allows them the fullest capacity to express their ideas. Chinua Achebe saw the entire relationship of African representation to European languages as one of choice rather than of imposition. Writers, he cautioned, must not be put in positions where they have to choose sides. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian Nobel laureate, had already made a preemptive strike against a stance like Ngugi's, dispensing with what he saw as the wrong-headed essentialism of such a position, particularly in the philosophy of Negritude. In a famous quip against Negritude's essentialism, Soyinka stated, "A tiger does not proclaim its tigeritude." He pointed, in other words, to the pitfalls of relying on genetic codes and false African experience as the prerequisite for an authentic African cultural voice.

Though Soyinka did not need to justify the fact that Yoruba cosmology, religion, epic tradition, poetry, ritual, and language were sources for his dense poetic, literary, and dramatic works, he nonetheless came under attack from Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, who called themselves Bolekaja critics.18 The Bolekaja critics accused Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and Christopher Okigbo of constituting a parade of writers whose works employed African imagery and situation in order to domesticate it within a European modernist literary formalism. They read this as a loss of self-confidence, and a compromise of the radical call for a total break with colonialism. Such debates made their rounds in conferences on African literature, language, and culture throughout the 1960s and '70s.

In the Fifth Pan-African Congress of 1945, the rallying call was for emancipation, independence, and a drive toward an autonomous African culture; in the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in 1956, at the Sorbonne, and the Second Congress in Rome in 1959, the focus was on African culture and history as a theme of a rediscovered past and dignity; at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression, at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda, in 1962, the debate concerned the state of African literature in the postindependence period and the role of the writer in nation-building. But more than any other discussion, the Makerere University College conference raised an issue that had for a time been skirted: the linguistic tool of African literature, and who its audience was. Within the visual arts, a similar debate was developing among artists in groups such as the Zaria Art Society, who were labeled "Zaria Rebels" for questioning the formalist European curriculum of art education in Nigeria. There was also the multiracial Amadofo group in South Africa, who sought inspiration in African forms, themes, and history rather than looking toward Europe; and similarly in Senegal the Ecole de Dakar adapted Senghor Negritude as a source of inspiration. In 1966, the Senegalese government, under the patronage of President Senghor, organized a landmark pan-African festival, the Premier Festival Mondial des Arts Negres, not only to celebrate the culture of Africa and its diaspora but also to examine the remarkable achievements of the previous twenty years. In a sense, the Premier Festival Mondial was an anniverssary of the independence movements.

Looking back today at the period between 1945 and 1965, it is clear that there was already in formation an emergent category of discourse that would furnish us with the tools with which to analyze African modernity. That the debates and theories formulated in the period under study in this exhibition have yielded a rich trove of material from which we can begin a proper historical examination of the constitutive models of African creative, intellectual, political, and subjective practices is the great profit of this exhibition. The legacy of this discourse is the ethical, social, political, cultural, historical, and above all the epistemological compass they have fashioned for the study of modern and contemporary African culture. We make the necessary link to the relations between modern and contemporary art in this exhibition with a view of the historical impact of the independence period on the activities and thinking of many African artists working today. What we will encounter in the exhibition, which looks at the totality of all spheres of production in Africa (music, photography, art, literature, theater, film, and architecture), both by Africans and Europeans, is the insistent paradox of all modernities, namely that they are simultaneously inward-looking and totally open to all influence and receptive to rich dialogues.

The exhibition is divided into seven distinct subject areas: art, photography, film, architecture, graphics, theater, and literature.
All of these are intimately linked to a wider historical framework. The subjects presented here are distinguished not as categories or paradigms, but as general discursive frames, allowing us to trace developments within each area and wherever possible to draw conclusions on specific topics or operations depending on the context. In no way should a clear line be drawn between each subject; instead, each section operates in mutual determination and entanglement, constantly maintaining a “soft” boundary that could allow critical interpenetrations.

That Africa was a staging ground for some of the most important questions of postwar politics and society, and that these questions made a crucial impact on identity, modernity, freedom, subjectivity, ethics, and culture, can no longer be debated. The more salient question arising from this exhibition is: “What is African and what is Africa to us?” This is, of course, a question neither philosophy nor metaphysics can provide answers to. But suffice it to say that The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994 represents an Africa of the imagination, as much as it addresses Africa in the context of her lived experiences and realities.

Conclusion: The Reader

To conclude, I should like to say something about the historical documents—essays, speeches, manifestos, resolutions, pamphlets—that are gathered in this book as an anthology, forming a crucial part of the project that must be seen in relation to its visual dimension. Throughout this text I have argued that the processes of African independence and liberation that began in the period after World War II produced an epistemological change in the Western conception of the universal subject, challenging and transforming the ontological limits imposed by European hegemony over African history and societies. Before the end of World War II, the world was essentially divided into two spheres: the colonizer and the colonized. This division manifested itself further into two spatial distinctions: Europe and its colonies. The critical emergence of new African nations from colonial vassalage and into nationhood ushered in a fresh context, the narrative of which is inscribed in a new kind of historical text. This text defined limits to colonial power and authority, ushering in a world no longer constituted by the Manichaean scheme of the absolute self and the abject other.

The Reader is divided into two thematic sections. The first, Politics/Ideology/Ethics, seeks to analyze the questions that concern the discourses of pan-Africanism, pan-Arabism, liberation movements, and African socialism, and their structural and discursive performance in organizing social and philosophical thoughts. The second section engages culture, as an operation of subject formation, and the emergence of artistic and literary production. This section looks closely at the role of culture in the practice of the everyday and the articulation of popular and individual visions.

With this in mind, any analysis of the tumultuous period of African decolonization must seek to begin with the primary texts and actions of that historical moment. The question for such an enterprise could be posed this way: in what forms and forums were the activities that were the spur for the independence and liberation movements organized? And who were the chief ideologues, theoreticians, and leaders of these nascent movements? The many essays, speeches, manifestos, conference resolutions, and pamphlets gathered in this volume commit themselves to exploring those questions. The Reader recommends itself as one of those rare occasions that allow for a deeper penetration of an important historical project in order better to understand its complexity and heterogeneity. By carefully reading these texts addressing contemporaneous events and attitudes, we become witnesses to the confrontations that shaped the processes of African modernity in the mid-twentieth century. We learn how they were written, and in what arenas they found their audience.

The task here is more than the mere recapitulation of the major themes of decolonization through the critical exegesis of varied intellectual, political, cultural, and theoretical frameworks. The Reader is a signpost for revisiting those themes, focusing on how new interpretations of African modernity were framed and disseminated. More important, we would do well to read the texts in relation to their import in organizing the forms and ideals of the new societies after colonialism. Attached to this purpose is the emergence of ideas of subjectivity and forms of representation that seek to link praxis and theory, ideology and action, emancipation and agency, history and consciousness, race and difference, nationhood and citizenship, identity and society. Many of the texts included here can be read today as documents of their time, while others remain as vivid to political, cultural, philosophical, and literary theories as they were when they were written.

To read Africa in light of these formative and well-argued positions is to emerge on the other side of the present African condition and the unfinished project of decolonization. Yet underlying many of the debates in this volume are contradictions that require forceful argumentation in the formulation of the goals of an African modern consciousness—whether those goals are based on instruments of armed struggle, or on the tension between cultural philosophies and political ideologies, or whether they are allied and subservient to Western democratic traditions and the institutions of global capitalism. On such a platform, the multiple voices in this volume give us an occasion to readapt many forms of historical argument concerning African modernity, especially in relation to the links between European models of political practice, institutions, and artistic and intellectual forms. In painting, sculpture, the novel, poetry, music, or film, and the modalities of today’s African Realpolitik.

What one must also search for are the signs of rupture embedded in the very formation of African freedom from European colonization. From this rupture we may be able to glimpse the beginnings of several notions of identity discourse and cultural philosophy, social movements and ideological projects, that became solidified both in popular political agitation and in the founding texts of intellectual developments. In these texts, the discourses and projects take such names as Negritude, pan-Africanism, black consciousness, pan-Arabism, the African personality, African socialism, African nationalism, and so on. These critical projects, more than being ideological, posit affirmatively the deep entanglement of Africans in the project of twentieth-century
modernity, it will become obvious that the instruments of action with which African independence (political and cultural) was fought test many of the earlier arguments, which often made no links between Africa and what could now be viewed as a historic period of global transition.

Today it seems impossible to believe that the emancipatory project of redefining Africa’s relationship to the rest of the world and particularly to Europe—a project championed by a generation of young, determined, radical, and zealous students and trade-union members from the 1930s onward—should have happened in the short span of less than twenty-five years. Of course the groundwork for the radical beginnings of the movements of the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s had already been laid in the works of writers, historians, and political activists such as Edward Wilmot Blyden, Alexander Crummel, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Herbert Macaulay, and in events such as the formation of the ANC in 1912, and so forth. By the time World War II ended, in fact, the conflation stoked by the movements of pan-Africanism (in the Anglophone world), Negritude (in the Francophone world), and pan-Arabism (in the Maghreb) meant that the horizon for a new range of actions had broadened significantly.

This book, then, offers a means of accounting for the urgent issues that were placed before the postwar publics of Europe on the one hand and Africa on the other, as parts of a strong critical discourse on colonialism, independence, liberation, autonomy, self-determination, and freedom. These texts, I would argue, must not be read, as we are so often wont to do, as merely discursive and speculative. On the contrary, many of them were manuals for actions linked to praxis and directed toward the production of the subjective through the liberation of the individual. On the next level, the Reader is not simply an anthology for the Africanist or Africanophile; it is compiled as part of the historical record of the twentieth century; as a way to deepen our engagement with forms of historical understanding and narration.

In the context of decolonization, on which many of the texts pivot, the arguments and ideologies are many: the means and methodologies for their realization and integration into the political cultures and structures of the emergent nation-states are diverse and varied. Moreover, they point to the richness that accompanied the debates of this generation of thinkers (African and European alike) in formulating forms of governance and the political ethics of the new societies born in the aftermath of independence and liberation. Despite the variety of positions expressed in the present volume, the main impetus is the instrumentalization of the procedures of an Africanist intellectual space, and through that space a penetration of the question of what it means to be modern, African, and free in a world in which the notion of colonialism’s diametrically opposed to that of European democracy, institutions of which not long ago made Africans and others into subject peoples. Whatever we may make of them (especially of those positions that today may seem to us untenable), they remain a strong knot in the tangled web of the modern condition—ciphers or decoding the fractious memory of a time lived in the shadow of subjection and born in the deeply unethical code and moral ondus of colonialism.

Notes
2. The countries were represented by Graf Kapnist of Russia, Baron Lambermont and le Comte van der Straten Ponthrop of Belgium, Baron de Courcel of France, Said Pascha of Turkey, the Marquis de Penafiel and M. de Serpa Pimentel of Portugal, Graf de Launay of Italy, Sir Edward Malet of Great Britain, Graf de Benomar of Spain, Herr de Vind of Denmark, General Baron Bick of Sweden and Norway, Graf von Hatzfeldt, Herr Busch, and Herr von Kussenow of Germany, Graf Széchenyi of Austria and Hungary, and Jonkheer van der Hooven of the Netherlands. J.A. Kasson and H.S. Sanford attended in the capacity of observers for the United States.
4. Recently a “Lumumba Commission” was set up in Belgium to examine the role of the Belgian government in his assassination. The same process of reexamining colonial participation in the torture, kidnapping, and execution of Algerian rebels by French soldiers is currently underway in France. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has looked into the “gross human rights violations” of the apartheid government. This will suggest that colonial violence during the period of the independence and liberation movements was more the norm than the exception.
10. Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” in What is Literature and Other Essays, trans. Steven Ungar (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 314. Sartre’s essay originally appeared in French, under the title “Orphée Noir,” as the introduction to Senghor’s 1948 Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française. But the most radical work of this literature was Césaire’s seminal long poem “Cahier d’un retour au pays natal” (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land), of 1938. Debate continues today on when exactly the term “Negritude” was first used, but the earliest published appearance of it was in Césaire’s poem, which includes the lines, “My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of day/my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral.”
12. Ibid., p. 79.
19. The word Bolekaja roughly translates from the Yoruba as “Come down, let’s fight,” a metaphor adopted by Chinweizu, Jemie, and Maduabueke for the kind of critical operation they were performing on postcolonial literature. In their minds a great deal of this literature was pretentious, pompous, and exemplary of what they called “Hopkins disease,” a reference to the kind of colonial British literature taught in most university literature departments in Anglophone Africa.