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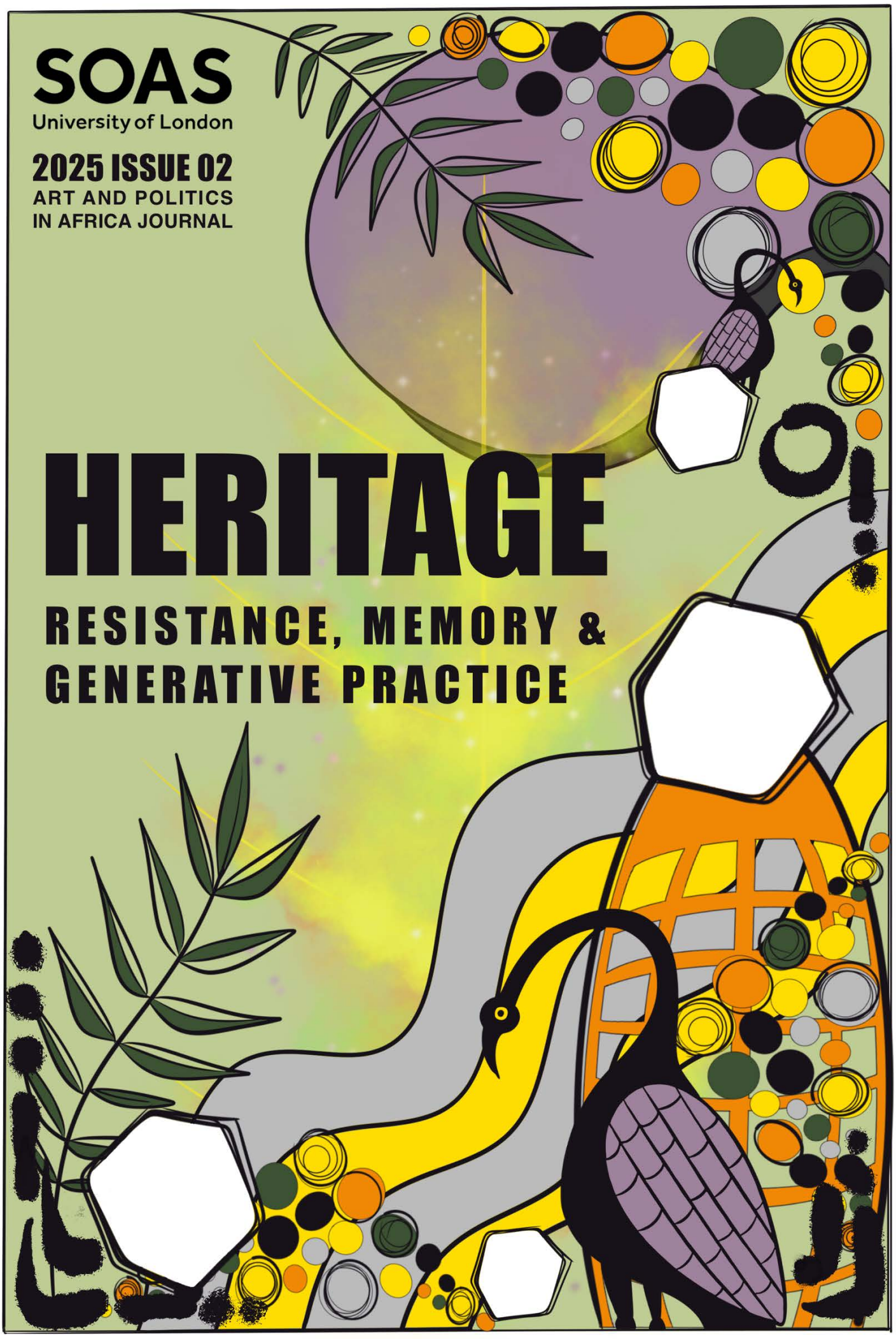

HERITAGE

RESISTANCE, MEMORY & GENERATIVE PRACTICE

Heritage

Resistance, Memory & Generative Practice

Art and Politics in Africa Journal

2025 Issue 2

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This issue presents the outcome of a dedicated group of students from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, guided by Dr. Polly Savage.

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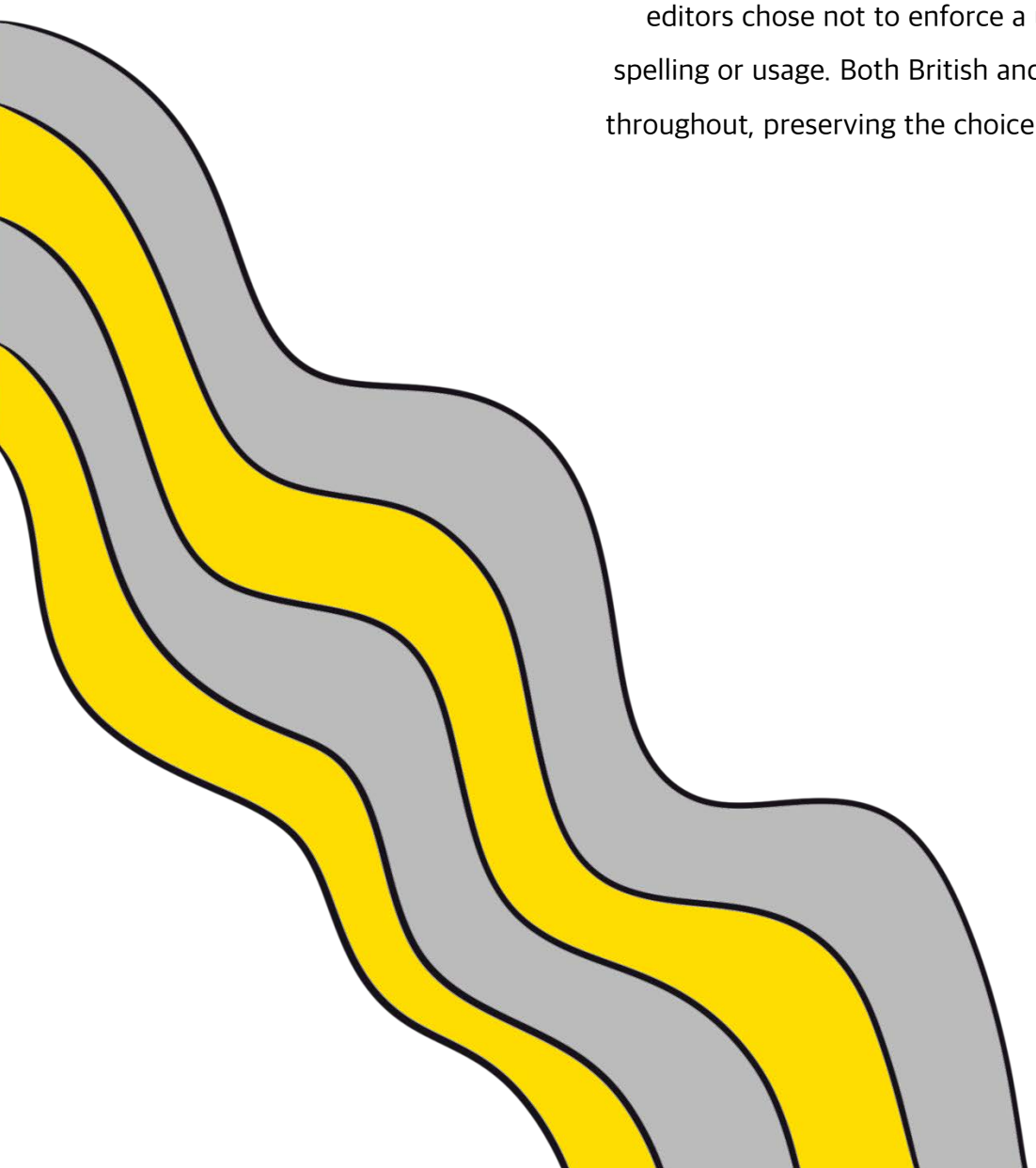
Contents

Note

This volume brings together a range of voices from different disciplines, backgrounds, and corners of the world. In light of this diversity – and in recognition of the distinct linguistic and academic traditions each contributor brings – the editors chose not to enforce a uniform system of English spelling or usage. Both British and American English appear throughout, preserving the choice of each individual author.



Introduction

Heritage is a fiercely contested concept, shaped by power, memory, and identity. We can understand it as a dynamic relationship between process and practice, as it moves beyond the finality of a site of arrival and into a third space unbothered by realist traditions. Markedly, Stuart Hall's "Whose Heritage?" challenges static and universalist definitions of heritage, arguing that it is not merely about preserving the past. Instead, the discourse should focus on how history is framed, remembered, and mobilised in the present day. Heritage, in the sense of the issue, could be both tangible and intangible, official and vernacular, communal and institutional.

We will explore colonial monuments that mark an era of otherness and the surveillance of Black bodies, moving from indigenous systems to museum collections and oral traditions that connect spirits to soil, to understand the colonial ties that continue to bind heritage. The case studies presented here will reveal how heritage is constructed, contested, and defined by several social groups and communities found in the diaspora. Hall's critical perspective invites us to question: Whose heritage is being presented? Who has the right to define it? And how do encountered narratives shape identity and power structures?

As we dive into the multifaceted answers to these questions with urgency, we want to reassure the reader that Africa will not stand as an overgeneralised phantom, but as a space of contestation and negotiation. It is a wealthy continent, exploited by colonialism and displacement, yet vitalised by emancipatory movements as it intersects to combat these elements. Our histories and spirits find their connection in community; political life is personal. This process is participatory, informed by a collective consciousness that memorialises or, despite remembrance, forgets to beget. We invite you to engage with the dialogue in this journal to construct a dynamic, ongoing, post and anti-colonial definition of a reimagined heritage.

As in previous issues, the 'Art and Politics in Africa' journal takes visual art as primary material, incorporating diverse media, including fine art, photography, poetry, book reviews, and installation. Heritage continually reproduces resistance, memory, and generative practice; in the

same sense, this issue offers a rejuvenated perspective alongside the works of contemporary and diasporic African artists. A recognition of the historical and contextual connections to regional art and culture accompanies our focus on artworks produced in the contemporary period.

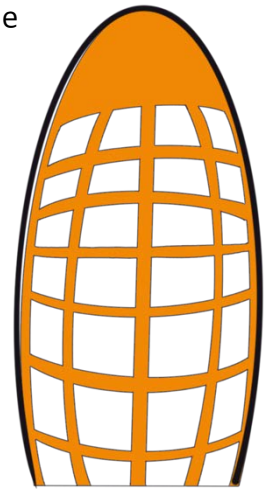
From debates over the restitution of looted artifacts, to conflicts concerning the memorialisation of colonial, post and anti-colonial histories, the articles in this collection illustrate how heritage is not a neutral record of the past, but a dynamic and often contested arena of meaning-making, as processes of decolonisation come under scrutiny. This issue will explore heritage through three interrelated sections: Heritage – Resistance and Resilience, Heritage – Preservation and Memory, and Heritage – Futurity and Generative Practice.

The first section of 'Heritage: Resistance, Memory & Generative Practice' explores resistance and resilience. Resistance is the active and prolonged refusal to accept or comply with systems of structural power that often oppress. Resilience follows when a society struggles against it and journeys to recover. This section will explore how resistance and resilience ebb and flow to embody a revolutionary spirit in *Spirits of Haiti: Reclaiming Identity by serving a Pan-African Vodou Pantheon.* Guided by spirits called the *Lwa* in post-emancipatory Haiti, a nation still grappling with the tide of its colonial history, we explore religious art, musicals, and performance here. As these different artistic elements meet to discuss revolution, we delve into *Between Tradition and Change: Colonialism's Role in Moroccan Art and Architecture.* This contribution reflects on the resistance movement during French rule over Morocco from 1912 to 1956, looking toward modernism, urban planning, and craft production, which persisted in its independence.

What follows is a close analysis of apartheid as a form of heritage, leaving a legacy that challenges the concept of finality in Heritage as Ideological Impulse in Artistic Creation: Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage.* A review titled *Disruptive, disobedient and un-disciplining – A book review of 'Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa: New Approaches to Muslim Expressive Cultures'* follows. This book employs several case studies to investigate competing narratives across the African diaspora, critiquing the Eurocentric framework that has previously influenced our understanding of Islamic art. Concluding the first section is a contribution titled *Trans-Methodologies and the Politics of Queer Heritage: A Review of Queer*

Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa. This piece details the queer contemporary art created in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region. This review centres on redefining heritage and proposing a new heritage in which queerness is negotiated; thus, the 'self' stands as a symbol of reconfiguring identity.

The second section of this journal continues to expand the dynamic and socially situated definition of heritage, challenging traditional notions of cultural memory and preservation. Memory here is not only about national histories and collective traumas, but it also encompasses more intimate, subjectivised pasts of individuals and communities. Memory becomes an ongoing cultural practice—one that transcends rigid, static, and exclusionary models of preservation—to construct new forms of personal identity and national belonging. In *Heritage Displaced: The Poetics of Exile in Salih Basheer's The Homeseekers*, the impossibility of return for Sudanese refugees is explored through monochrome photography, where heritage becomes something yet to be discovered. *Kolanut in West African Cosmology* highlights the spiritual and communal significance of the kolanut in Gbenga Offo's wood and metal works, celebrating its symbolic role in West African life. The exhibition review, *Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings*, shows how Lina Iris Viktor's work challenges linear narratives of tradition and heritage by placing her contemporary works with antiquities in the Soane Museum, creating a transcultural and multi-temporal memory system. Finally, *Perceiving Heritage in Yto Barrada's Artwork* explores postcolonial Moroccan modernisation and migration through abstraction, positioning Tangier as a site of layered memory while interrogating the global positioning of African art.



The third and final section of this journal explores heritage through futurity and generative practice. Each of the four essays in this section has its unique take on heritage and its relationship with the future. Heritage is not simply a relic of the past but an active contributor in shaping the future. The dynamism of heritage influences the way that we negotiate with tradition in order to produce emancipatory ideals of freedom and decoloniality.

The essays in this section blend themes of African heritage with speculative futures to challenge dominant narratives, to reclaim agency over Black identities, and to contribute to the broader process of decolonisation. *Gani Odutokun: Shaping a Philosophy of Freedom* negotiates themes

of tradition with the infinitude of possibility for future African Art. *Everlyn Nicodemus' Självporträtt, Åkersberga (1982) & Birth Mask 3 (2002): Inheritances and the construction of identity* deals with cultural fusion and negotiation of differing and conflicting cultural backgrounds. *Barn, diverse peers and unbridled artistic freedom – DIY decolonial heritage by Triangle workshops* discusses alternative frameworks for cultural and learning exchanges free from colonial power hierarchies.

Section I:

Resistance and Resilience

Section I:

Between Tradition and Change: Colonialism's Role in Moroccan Art and Architecture

Ayat El-Deen

The colonial experience in Morocco fundamentally reshaped its artistic and architectural landscapes, influencing even the movements that sought to resist it. The French Protectorate (1912–1956) introduced a framework that separated tradition from modernity, embedding colonial logics into urban planning, craft production, and artistic institutions. While Moroccan artists and architects sought to reclaim and reassert cultural identity, the structures imposed by colonial rule persisted even after independence, creating a paradox wherein even anti-colonial artistic movements were shaped by the very systems they opposed.

This essay explores how Moroccan art and architecture were both restricted and transformed under colonial governance, assessing the ways in which urban planning, craft traditions, and artistic classifications were manipulated to serve colonial objectives. It then examines the nationalist response to these structures, particularly through artistic productions like that of Mohammed Melehi which engaged with modernist aesthetics while attempting to integrate Moroccan motifs. Finally, it considers how post-independence Morocco continued to grapple with these colonial legacies, particularly under King Hassan II's rule (1961–1999), demonstrating that colonial influence did not end with independence but instead evolved, becoming an inescapable factor in Moroccan cultural production. By tracing these entangled legacies, this essay argues that contemporary Moroccan artistic and architectural expressions must be understood as both a reaction to and a product of colonial structures, rather than as a return to an untouched pre-colonial past.

Colonial Frameworks: Modernity and the Protection of Tradition

One of the defining characteristics of French colonial policy in Morocco was the concept of allochronism, whereby Moroccan tradition was artificially separated from modernity.[1] Johannes

[1] Holiday Powers. 2024. "Moroccan Modernism". Ohio University Press, 18

Fabian first coined the term allochronism to capture the idea of anthropological practices that approach non-Western cultures as though they come from a different time than Western cultures.[2] Hubert Lyautey, the first Resident-General of the French Protectorate in 1912, institutionalised this distinction, treating Moroccan heritage as something to be preserved while simultaneously introducing European modernist practices.[3]

This concept was implemented through many avenues, one being the urban planning of Moroccan cities. This was one of the most tangible ways colonial authorities implemented this ideology. The creation of the *villes nouvelles*, European districts adjacent to but separate from the traditional Moroccan medinas, reflected the protectorate's desire to control urban modernity while ostensibly preserving Moroccan tradition. Wright also argues that these policies not only separated European settlers from Moroccans but also tested modernist architectural theories that would later influence French urban design[4]. A further separation was created between Moroccans through Henri Prost. An urban city planner enlisted by Lyautey to work on the restructuring of most major Moroccan cities, Prost advocated for separate habitats for Moroccan Muslims and Moroccan Jews.[5] The structure of a city rarely changes after its formation, making it a lasting historical imprint on a nation.

"The French administration attempted to control Amazigh artistic production by enforcing regional stylistic divisions, shaping how Amazigh identity was visually represented."

Similarly, Moroccan craft traditions were also actively altered under the guise of 'protective' colonial policies. The French administration sought to "protect" Moroccan handicrafts by institutionalising them in state-run craft schools, which replaced traditional apprenticeship

[2] ibid.

[3] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 18

[4] Gwendolyn Wright. 1991. "The politics of design in French colonial urbanism". University of Chicago Press, 85-86

[5] Ibid., 26

models.[6] In the same way that urban planning was a method of implementing control, the establishment of craft-teaching institutions was also a facade for power and influence. The French administration attempted to control Amazigh[7] artistic production by enforcing regional stylistic divisions, shaping how Amazigh identity was visually represented.[8] It ultimately isolated Moroccan crafts from their evolving social and economic contexts, turning them into fixed representations of tradition rather than living practices.[9]

Variations of national separation were also enforced in these institutions, similar to urban planning. Painting workshops were originally just for Europeans and the Moroccan Jews, until later in the 1920s when Muslims were allowed to participate.[10] To reinforce this separation, the French also propagated artificial classification of arts into 'high' (European-style fine art) and 'low' (traditional Moroccan crafts), as well as imposed gendered hierarchies of creative expression, such as non-academic crafts performed by women being seen as less worthy.[11]

Etty Terem critiques this perspective, arguing that discourses of modernity and identity formation were not exclusively shaped by colonialism.[12] This could be further demonstrated by Mohammed Rbati's (d. 1939) British-influenced watercolour work during pre-colonisation Morocco in the 19th century.

However, Rbati may have experienced colonial-like influences even before formal colonial rule, considering Tangier was also a place filled with British people at the time.[13] Rbati's living situation as an employee of a British painter in Morocco is reflective of the Enlightenment's promotion of European cultural hegemony, but it also foreshadows an uncomfortable power play akin to that of the imminent colonialism.

A counter criticism to this notion may be situated in the fact that Rbati always signed his work at the front and in Arabic, suggesting that he intentionally did not want to dilute his identity

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[6] Ibid., 28

[7] Amazigh refers to the indigenous people of Morocco in an adjectival way (Becker 2008, 2-3)

[8] Cynthia Becker. 2006. "Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity". University of Texas Press, 8

[9] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 29

[10] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 28

[11] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 29

[12] Etty Terem. 2021. "Educating Women, Recasting Patriarchy." in *French Politics, Culture & Society* 39 (1): 83-107. https://doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2021.390105. 84

[13] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 30

as a Moroccan amongst the British in Tangier. Could this be Terem's non-colonial modernisation? Terem argues that Moroccan modernisation was not solely shaped by the colonial encounter, instead arguing that internal Moroccan debates and divisions were equally significant.[14] Then again, to what degree can the consequences of external influence be differentiated from the effects of colonisation in a nation?

Mohammed Ben Ali Rbati, *Scène de Fête* (Festival Scene), 1800, watercolor and graphite on cardboard, 49.1 cm by 61 cm, Wikimedia Commons[15]

[14] Terem, "Educating Women, Recasting Patriarchy.", 83

[15] Mohammed Ben Ali Rbati, Scène de Fête (Festival Scene), 1800, watercolor and graphite on cardboard, 49.1 cm by 61 cm, Wikimedia Commons, Accessed March 19, 2025

Anti-Colonial Art and Architecture as a Product of Colonial Influence

As Morocco's anti-colonial nationalist movement grew, people, including artists and architects, sought to reclaim their cultural identity through unifying vocabulary, religious activities, national holidays, and cultural traditions.[16] However, while these efforts were evidently successful in contributing towards independence, they also, in a way, upheld the very frameworks established by colonial rule. Henri Prost's lack of acknowledgment of local art[17] and promotion of an Arabo-Islamic cultural identity by nationalist leaders, like Allal al Fassi, came at the cost of dimming local traditions.[18]

The nationalist movement sought to unify Moroccans against French divide-and-rule tactics, such as the *Berber Dahir* of 1930, which had attempted to separate Arab and Amazigh communities through the separation of legal codes. Yet, as Holiday Powers points out, this nationalist artistic revival inevitably reshaped Moroccan heritage itself, meaning that even anti-colonial cultural expressions were, in part, responses to colonial structures rather than purely pre-colonial revivals.[19]

Moreover, colonial education policies influenced Moroccan artistic expression from the beginning of the protectorate in 1912.[20] French-run schools introduced European artistic styles of learning while marginalising indigenous Moroccan methodologies.[21] Early Moroccan modernist painters, such as Mohammed Ben Allal, were often trained under European mentors, reflecting a colonial aesthetic framework even as they sought to assert local identity.

Moroccan philosopher Al-Jabri was critical of basing Arab modernity on European modernity,[22] arguing that it should be viewed through independent and localised tradition. However, perhaps Arab modernity is based on both its own pre-colonial traditions, as well as the European modernity thrusted upon countries like Morocco during colonisations? As Achille

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[16] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 32

[17] Ibid. 28

[18] Susan G Miller. 2013. "A History of Modern Morocco". Cambridge University Press. 131

[19] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 27

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. 28

[22] Mohammed A al-Jabri. 1999. "Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique". Texas: Ctr for Middle Eastern Studies UT-Austin. 7

Mbembe argues, colonisation is not a fixed, timeless structure or an abstract concept; rather, it is a dynamic and intricate process that creates boundaries, transitional spaces, and areas of interaction and exchange. [23] This discourse illustrates the difficulty of escaping colonial epistemologies; Moroccan cultural production, even in defiance, was still operating upon the distinctions defined within European modernity.[24]

Legacy of Colonial Structures in Post-Independence Morocco

The enduring impact of colonial frameworks became particularly evident in post-independence Morocco under King Hassan II's regime (1961–1999). While the monarchy sought to return to pre-colonial systems of governance,[25] the reality reflected a more complex negotiation with colonial legacies. Abdallah Laroui argues that Hassan II's regime functioned not as a resurgence of pre-colonial systems but rather as a continuation of protectorate structures, albeit under Moroccan leadership.[26] In other words, the monarchy's deployment of tradition as a binary opposite to modernity paradoxically reinforced the very colonial dichotomies it claimed to reject.

The material consequences of colonial policies created significant structural challenges for the newly independent nation. Miller's research documents the tangible impacts of colonial administration: by 1956, Morocco faced severe disparities in education and public health, reflecting the protectorate's systematic privileging of European interests over local development[27]. These conditions shaped the context within which post-independence artistic and architectural production operated.

Conversely, Ait Mous argues that colonial policy's emphasis on *local* traditions inadvertently strengthened nationalist ideologies, prompting nationalists to focus on *unity* as a

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[23] Achille Mbembe. 2011. "Provincializing France?" in *Public Culture* 23, no. 1 (January): 85–119. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-2010-017. 86

[24] Abdallah Laroui. 1976. "The crisis of the Arab Intellectual : traditionalism or historicism?" University of California Press. 39

[25] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 150

[26] Laroui, "Crisis of the Arab Intellectual", 39

[27] Miller, "History of Modern Morocco", 157

countermeasure.[28] This welds well with Powers' point that this focus on the local subdued Morocco's broader visual culture, resulting in many traditional art forms (such as painting on architecture[29]) being classified as "low art".[30]

The consequential battle between European "arts" and traditional Moroccan "crafts" likely persists in subtle ways through educational systems and cultural institutions. This may be evident in the words of Mohammed Melehi, an artist who widely explored European methodologies of art, only to feel like an "observer".[31] He later turned to include traditional Moroccan textiles in his works,[32] suggesting an internal conversation between colonialism's legacy of the distinction between high and low arts.[33]

Conclusion

Colonialism did not merely impose external control on Moroccan art and architecture; it fundamentally reshaped their development, leaving lasting structural legacies. While the French protectorate claimed to preserve tradition, it imposed new urban planning, redefined classifications pertaining to craft and art, and reorganised (art) education in ways that persisted beyond independence. These frameworks could not simply be reversed post-1956.

Even in resistance, Moroccan artists and architects navigated, and occasionally continued to employ colonial structures, either physical or theoretical, rather than rejecting them entirely. Modernism, nationalist tactics, and Hassan II's governance all reflected an engagement with, rather than a removal of, colonial influences. As Mbembe argues, colonisation is a process that reshapes identities and artistic expressions[34] that cannot be simply reversed.

Contemporary Moroccan artists continue to grapple with this legacy, challenging colonial frameworks while acknowledging their impact. Figures like Melehi integrated European techniques while reclaiming Moroccan visual traditions, illustrating the tension between inherited

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[28] Fadma Ait Mous. 2013. "The Moroccan nationalist movement: from local to national networks." in *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no. 5 (December): 737-752. https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2013.849888. 749

[29] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 29

[30] Ibid.

[31] Mohammed Melehi. 1967. "Fiches et questionnaire." in *Souffles* 7-8 (1): 56-68

[32] Powers, "Moroccan Modernism", 39

[33] Ibid. 29

[34]Mbembe, "Provincializing France?", 86

structures and artistic agency. Ultimately, Moroccan cultural production remains a dynamic process of adaptation, resistance, and reinterpretation—continuously shaped, but not wholly defined by its colonial past.

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Heritage as Ideological Impulse in Artistic Creation Ernest Cole's House of Bondage

Te-Ho Kong

In this essay, I will explore heritage functioning as ideological impulse to art creation. Heritage consists of features belonging to the culture of a particular society, which were created in the past and continue to have relevance to the present.[1] Culture, in this context, refers to human interventions in the natural state, encompassing all aspects of society. When considering "culture," it encompasses not only commonly associated elements such as language and cuisine but also broader aspects, including politics and economics. Individual cultural components do not exist in isolation; rather, they interact and influence one another. Art, as a cultural expression, is also shaped by and responds to other cultural elements. Consequently, one of the major roles of art is to reflect the realities of the public and express opinions about them. Such art often critiques negative societal conditions, particularly political and economic inequalities.

Social issues can be regarded as a form of heritage, as past legacies manifest in present-day problems and continue to influence current generations. In other words, social issues appear based on an enduring social environment which is formed in the past. Artists, through their works, critique and address these issues. Thus, heritage serves as an ideological motivation for artistic creation, shaping both the themes and the purpose of artistic expression.

The first section will examine apartheid as a form of heritage, emphasizing that apartheid did not exist as an isolated event but rather as the legacy of prolonged colonial rule. The second section will focus on South African photographer Ernest Cole's *House of Bondage* as a case study. During apartheid, a number of photographs were used as a potent tool to fight against apartheid. The prime example of this is resistance photography which is the term used by South African anti-apartheid photographers to describe a genre of photography that is political in its stance.[2] The resistance art primarily sought to expose the apartheid system in a dramatic

[1] Janet Blake, *On Defining the Cultural Heritage*, *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2000): 67.
[2] David L. Krantz, "Politics and Photography in Apartheid South Africa," *History of Photography* 32, no. 4 (2008): 290.

manner. However, Cole took a different approach, capturing the everyday lives of Black South Africans, illustrating how apartheid permeated every aspect of their existence. Cole's documentary-style photography, though visually simple and direct, conveys profound metaphorical meanings. This essay will therefore analyze the photographs featured in *House of Bondage* to interpret the messages he sought to convey.

Apartheid as Heritage

There are two types of heritage: one that is voluntarily made by the community and another that is formed by external force. Both share a commonality in that they continue to impact on people's lives in the present. In the country that experienced colonial rule, the legacy of the former ruler will continue to impact on the lives of people. In South Africa, the prime example of heritage formed by an external force is the apartheid.

"...the political and social problems which lead the majority of people to extreme poverty and enduring racism in the country can be linked with apartheid."

Apartheid refers to separation of race by law and a system providing the social and political rights only to the white. Apartheid was started after the Afrikaner-dominated National Party gained the power to promote racial and ethnic separatism ideology. This was abolished in 1994 when African National Congress won the first democratic election. However, the apartheid was not introduced to South Africa out of nowhere. Apartheid was a direct continuation of the governance structure established by nineteenth-century British colonial policies, which institutionalized White minority rule. The separation legislation enacted after 1948 further reinforced and expanded these colonial frameworks. This legislation included the forced relocation of Africans to native reserves; the segregation of living, working and recreational spaces within cities; classification of Africans as "temporary sojourners' within cities. White dominance while restricting the rights and mobility of the African population.

Another reason why apartheid is part of the heritage of South Africa is that it is difficult or impossible to say that the system was firmly ended. After the Soweto uprising in 1976, petty laws

of apartheid stated to be abolished. Also, the new constitution was enacted after the election towards equality in 1994. Nevertheless, the political and social problems which lead the majority of people to extreme poverty and enduring racism in the country can be linked with apartheid.

House of Bondage

Photographer Ernest Cole was born in 1940 in the Pretoria township. He developed a deep interest in photography during his teenage years. In 1958, Cole worked as a darkroom assistant at *Drum* in Johannesburg. Engaging with other talented young Black photographers, he began to view photography as a tool for contributing to the anti-apartheid struggle.

Inspired by the photo-essays of French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson, Cole aspired to create a book of his own photographs that would narrate the story of apartheid. Recognizing that such a publication would not be feasible within South Africa, he left for New York in 1966 to pursue this endeavor. In 1967, Random House brought his vision to life by publishing *House of Bondage*. His work influenced following generations of photographers in South Africa. He could not come back to his country after the publication of *House of Bondage* and he eventually died of cancer in United States.

"The concept of time demonstrates the subjugated position of miners, while the authority has nearly unlimited power over all aspects of human life, even as basic as time."

Photograph as Resistance

Photographs were act of resistance against apartheid to Cole like other South African photographers. They tried to expose the atrocities of apartheid by taking photographs. Unlike many of his contemporaries such as Omar Badsha and Jeevea Rajgopaul, he did not focus on documenting protests.[3] His image shows relatively insignificant moments of the period.[4] He

[3] John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 254.

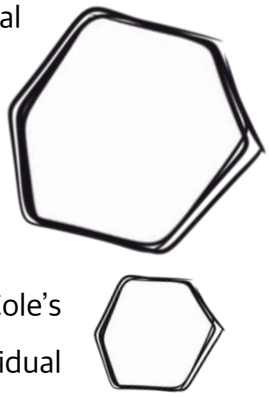
[4] Sally Gaule, "Ernest Cole: The Perspective of Time," *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 18,

focused on unfolding multiple layers of ordinary people. For example, he depicts domestic servants on their day off, railway platforms and street scenes. These ordinary scenes exposed how the ideology of apartheid penetrated every aspect of South African society.

His works are visually simple and direct, but they transcend the mere description of society at that moment. Cole tried to convey metaphoric meaning in his photographs. For instance, the picture depicting queues of miners illustrates the oppressive social structure of the period, rather than merely showing the passage of time (Figure 1). The time spent waiting is not merely a period of waiting, but rather a wasted period in which miners cannot do anything. The concept of time demonstrates the subjugated position of miners, while the authority has nearly unlimited power over all aspects of human life, even as basic as time.

"...this photo is not merely documentation of history, but conveying a message of resistance to the audience."

Photographs in *House of Bondage* come together to construct a powerful narrative. The image captures the moment of miners who were standing for physical examination (Figure 2). In the photo, miners look healthy, but audiences feel a vague sense of unease. This is because the image implies the impending dark reality such as accident and disease. The audiences realize that their inexplicable feeling of anxiety becomes reality, when they encounter miners afflicted by tuberculosis and injuries towards the end of the book. Therefore, Cole's configuration of photographs in *House of Bondage* is not just individual arrangements but intentional formation to build a single conversive narrative.



The state oppression towards Black people permeated every aspect of daily life. Cole tried to subvert this unequal system through photographs. The white banker looks at the black customer with a distrustful stare (Figure 3). It appears as if the banker is questioning the source of the customer's funds. In fact, during apartheid, black people needed to get permission from the police about the source of money that they wanted to deposit. This image reflects the reality of black people under constant surveillance during the era of apartheid. In this photo, Cole tried to

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no. 4 (2017): 381.

become an observer by reversing the gaze of surveillance. He subverted the gaze of power by shifting from being the observed to becoming the observer. As a result, this photo is not merely documentation of history, but conveying a message of resistance to the audience.

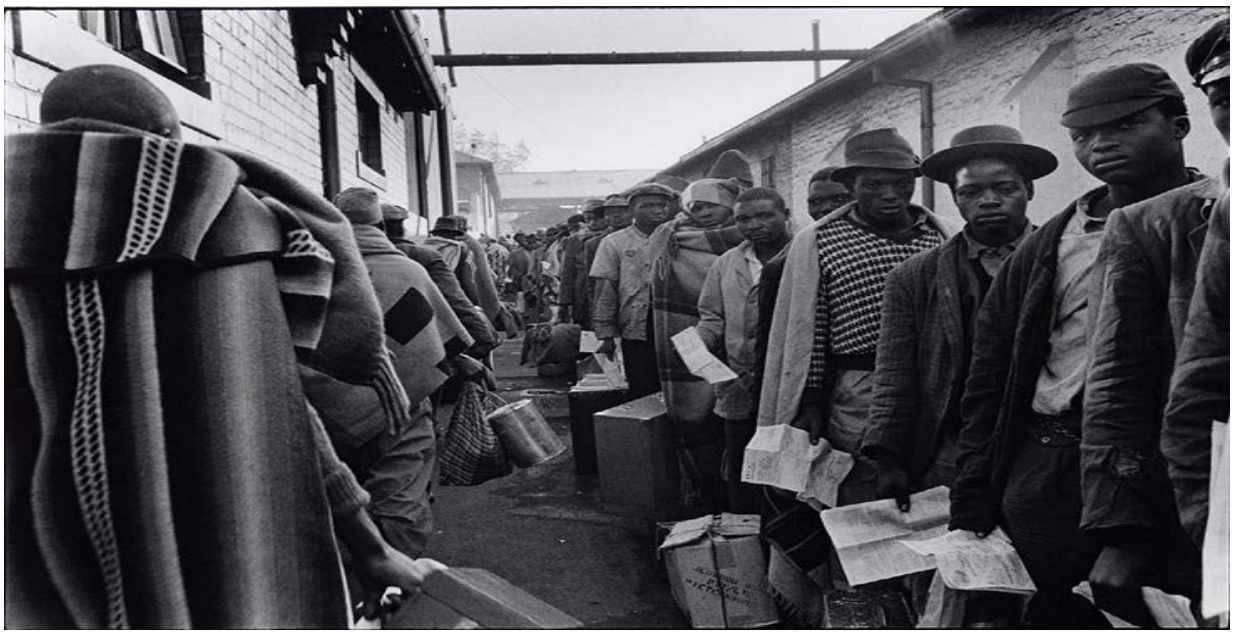

Figure 1. Miners are on standby for future employment in the mining recruitment station. The concept of time spent waiting demonstrates the subjugated position of miners, while the authority has nearly unlimited power over all aspects of human life, even as basic as time. © The Ernest Cole family Trust

Figure 2. Miners take a group physical examination before being assigned to the mine. While they look healthy, the readers might feel uneasy and anxiety. This is because the image implies the impending dark reality such as accident and disease which is revealed in the final section of the part. © The Ernest Cole family Trust

Figure 3. A Black man visits the bank to receive services while a white banker looks at him suspiciously. During apartheid in South Africa, Black individuals were subjected to police inspections in order to access basic services such as banking. © The Ernest Cole family Trust

Conclusion

Apartheid has persisted as heritage from its inception to the present. Upon its implementation, it served to maintain the White Minority rule established under British colonial governance. In the present day, social and political inequalities remain inextricably linked to apartheid, demonstration that its legacy continues to shape contemporary society. While state oppression intensified, the 1950s and 1960s marked a golden era for art in South Africa. This period saw the rise of influential publications such as the popular, Black-edited magazine *Drum* and Nat Nakasa's literary magazine *The Classic*, and the flourishing jazz and visual art scenes, particularly in Cape Town and Johannesburg.[5] However, as apartheid laws increasingly oppressed nonwhite South Africans, the nation's vibrant cultural landscape was simultaneously stifled. Nevertheless, artists in South Africa tried to constantly resist to the system that excluded Black people from the society through their artworks. Although Ernest Cole was one of them, he refused to depict apartheid in an excessively grotesque manner or to portray South Africans solely as

[5] John Peffer, *Art and the End of Apartheid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xvii.

victims in the ongoing struggle against the regime. Instead, Cole sought to awaken the consciousness of a public that had been paralyzed by the apartheid system by embedding metaphorical messages within seemingly neutral images. His efforts later inspired subsequent artists, allowing art to play a central role in South Africa's liberation movement.

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SPIRITS OF HAITI: RECLAIMING IDENTITY BY SERVING A PAN-AFRICAN VODOU PANTHEON

Farisya Azwar Ridzuan

Pantheon of Vodou Deities (André Pierre) © Matt Dunn 2019-2025

Asaka, grow me a garden

Please Agwe, don't flood my garden

Erzulie, who will my love be?

Papa Ge, don't come around me!

Excerpt from "We Dance"- opening song of the musical "Once on this Island" by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty

In the opening number of the musical "Once on this Island", a group of villagers dance to gain the favour of the gods. They invoke the deities Asaka, Agwe, Erzulie and Papa Ge, who are prayed to for bountiful harvest, protection from natural disaster, a loving partner and a long life respectively. The musical, which takes place on an island in the French Caribbean, tells the story of a Black peasant girl named Ti Moune who falls in love with a wealthy mixed-race boy named Daniel Beauxhomme. Their relationship is star-crossed, as although the French colonial powers have left, the people of the island are still divided by colour and class.

The lighter-skinned French-descended families reside on one side of the island, living comfortably in grand estates. On the other side, the Black peasants live in a fishing village where they labour to sustain themselves. At the mercy of the elements, they constantly worship the gods that govern the island by performing dances, praying for protection and prosperity in their daily lives. The story is fiction, but the gods are based on spirits called "lwa" in Haitian Vodou. Asaka, or Azaka Medeh, is an agrarian lwa representing Mother Earth herself. Agwe rules over the waters. Erzulie, also known as Erzulie Freda, is the patroness of love and beauty. Papa Ge is derived from Baron Samdi, a lwa who rules over the cycle of death. [1]

Baron Samdi (André Pierre) © Matt Dunn 2019-2025

Erzulie Freda (André Pierre) © Matt Dunn 2019-2025

A Brief Overview of Haiti and Vodou

The fate of the villagers in "Once on this Island" reflect the realities of Black communities in Haiti, a nation whose nuanced history has spawned a multiplicity of narratives and traditions. Haiti's rich

[1] Skinner, A.M. *Once on this Island by Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty.* (Black Theatre Commons n.d.).

heritage has been an inspiration for the arts both locally and internationally, spanning visual arts to performance art. The most well-known heritage rooted in the country is none other than Vodou practice, which carries political importance in Haitian society on top of being a religious phenomena. In this essay, the deeper significance of Vodou will be examined in the context of both Haiti's political and artistic scene, articulating its position as "heritage"- practices and identity markers passed down that continue to live and define a culture.

Formerly known as Saint-Domingue under French rule, Haiti was one of the most lucrative colonies in the West Indies, thriving on slave labour brought from the African continent. In 1791, a revolution began that earned Haiti its independence in 1804, establishing the first Black republic in history.[2] However, the abolitionist movement in Haiti left no recovery period to gracefully transition from slavery to freedom because the mixed-heritage group known as "mulatto" ascended to authority. They remained the elites of society, reinforcing colourist and classist hierarchies. In 1957, newly-elected president Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier attempted to bridge the inequality gaps, but instead subjected the country to a dictatorship supported by a militant regime.[3] The civil unrest in the country hindered economic growth and national progress. Until today, the country's colonial hangover continues to plague Haiti, and especially the people who are threatened by poverty and social ills.

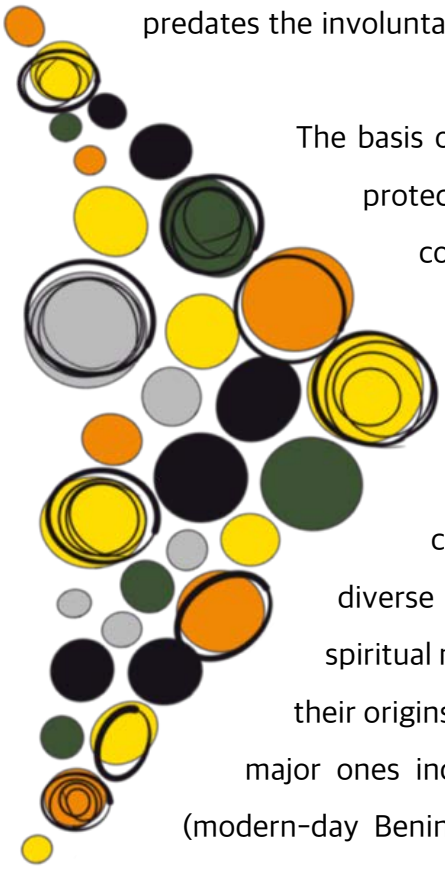
"In Haiti, this case can be illustrated through the lwa pantheon, who are as diverse as their devotees."

Throughout Haitian history, faith has played a prominent role in instilling hope, empowerment and unity. Like in "Once on this Island", faith is how people persevere through tough times and uncertainty. In Haiti, the heritage of the Vodou faith and the culture surrounding it is evident up to this day. Although many African-descended Haitians identify as Catholic, they still serve the pantheon of lwa. These two belief systems exist in harmony, as Vodou is a religion that was born

[2] Dubois, Laurent. *Avengers of the New World : The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 1.

[3] Nicholls, David. Preface to *From Dessalines to Duvalier : Race, Colour, and National Independence in Haiti*. Revised edition. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996).

out of the syncretism between indigenous African religions and Roman Catholicism. Vodou, above all, is a creolized religion.[4] The lwa venerated by "Vodouizan" (practitioners of Vodou) are an amalgamation of "African and Creole gods, deified ancestors and syncretized manifestations of Catholic saints".[5] Vodou also carries forth elements of African and Catholic fusion that originated in Africa itself rather than in diaspora, as the introduction of Catholicism to the continent predates the involuntary transplant of Africans during the slave trade.



The basis of lwa worship is reciprocity - the lwa offer their guidance and protection in exchange for offerings and ritual service from the community. Heritage is intrinsically tied to community, because without people to keep practices and beliefs alive they would not survive. The communities in the Caribbean have always been historically diverse and this needs to be considered in discussing any aspect of their cultural heritage.[6] In Haiti, this case can be illustrated through the lwa pantheon, who are as diverse as their devotees. The lwa hail from different "nanchon", or spiritual nations. Spiritual nations refer to specific groups of lwa that trace their origins back to Africa, mostly from the Central or Western regions. The major ones include "Rada" and "Gede", derived from the Fon of Dahomey (modern-day Benin), "Petwo" from the Kongos and "Nago" from the Yoruba in Nigeria. All together, Vodouizan agree that there are 21 nanchon.[7] In a way, the lwa and the respective nanchon they belong to reflect the diverse tapestry of Black-Haitian society. The heritage of Vodou prevails through the veneration of lwa, and manifests in the political sphere of the nation and in the artistic expressions of the people.

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[4] Apter, Andrew. *On African Origins: Creolization and Connaissance in Haitian Vodou.* (American Ethnologist 29, no. 2. 2002). 252.

[5] Olmos, Margarite Fernández, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, and Joseph M. Murphy. "Haitian Vodou: Forging a Creole Religion in Haiti". In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean, Third Edition: An Introduction* (NYU Press). 131.

[6] Siegel, Peter E., and Elizabeth Righter. *Protecting Heritage in the Caribbean*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011)

[7] Daniels, K. M. "An Assembly of Twenty-One Spirit Nations: The Pan-African Pantheon of Haitian Vodou's African Lwa". In *Africa and Its Historical and Contemporary Diasporas*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 51.

Spirits Rada (André Pierre) © Matt Dunn 2019-2025

Vodou's Significance in the Politics and Art of Haiti

During the colonial period, Vodou was "a series of salutations to the spirits of one another's nations".[8] Vodou, with its cosmology and liturgy meshing together the religious heritage of Africans from diverse geographical areas,[9] has unifying powers. In their political history, this unity helped the Black Haitians achieve the abolition of slavery. On the night of August 14 1791, under the leadership of Boukman Dutty, who identified as a "houngan" (priest) and Cécile Fatiman, a "mambo" (priestess), a group of slaves gathered in Bois Caïman and performed a Vodou ceremony in which they vowed to overthrow their French oppressors. That night transpired as the beginning

[8] Wilcken, Lois and Frisner Augustin. *The Drums of Vodou.* (Tempe, AZ: White Cliffs Media Co., 1992), 22.

[9] Desmangles, Leslie G. *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti.* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 478.

of the Haitian Revolution, and has been mythologised as an important component of Haitian national memory.[10] The ceremony was akin to a rite of liberation, consolidating the connection between Vodou and the Haitian spirit of resistance.[11]

"The diverse pantheon of lwa has provided generations of Black Haitians a consistent and veritable Pan-African body to identify with, one that honours their diverse ancestral legacies and connects them to their roots in a meaningful way."

Post-emancipation, Vodou practice continued to instill a sense of togetherness among the Black Haitians who retained strong elements of their identity and culture, as opposed to the Eurocentric orientation of the creole elite who refused to recognise their African heritage.[12] Even in the midst of anti-Vodou campaigns in the 20th-century, reclamation of Vodou as part of Black pride movements prevailed in Haitian society.[13] In current times, Vodou remains significant politically, in the Pan-African sense. Diaspora gave birth to Pan-Africanism, an ideology based on the premise of shared ancestry and subjugation under European powers. It is a collective response to the shared challenges of the African continent and its diaspora in gaining political freedom.[14] A huge part of Pan-Africanism is reappropriating African cultural identity, and many artists tap into the idea of tradition and heritage in doing so. This is exhibited in the quest for a liberated Caribbean aesthetic rooted in African heritage unstifled by European mores and structures[15]. In Haiti's case,

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[10] Duffy, John-Charles. *Early accounts of the Bois Caïman ceremony.* 2021. 1.

[11] Olmos, Margarite Fernández, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, and Joseph M. Murphy. "Haitian Vodou: Forging a Creole Religion in Haiti." In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean, Third Edition: An Introduction*, 130-78. (NYU Press, 2022), 131–132.

[12] Safa, Helen I. "POPULAR CULTURE, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND RACE IN THE CARIBBEAN." *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids / New West Indian Guide* 61, no. 3/4. (1987), 117.

[13] Riche, Chelsie. *Vodou and the Making of Nation in Haiti: Vodou, Politics, and Recognition.* (2017), 65.

[14] Adeleke, Tunde, and Arno Sonderegger, eds. Introduction to *Africa and Its Historical and Contemporary Diasporas*. Lanham: Lexington Books. 2023.

[15] Edmondson, B. Race, Tradition, and the Construction of the Caribbean Aesthetic. *New Literary History*, *25*(1), 1994.

a prime example of this aesthetic being achieved can be seen in the art of Hector Hyppolite (1894-1948).

Fete Du Morts (Hector Hyppolite)
© Matt Dunn 2019-2025

At the Temple (Hector Hyppolite, 1947)
© Matt Dunn 2019-2025

Hector Hyppolite was Haiti's most prolific painter, and the imagery in his artwork often syncretized both Vodou symbolism and Catholic iconography to create surrealist scenes of religious imagination. It was said that he was also a third-generation houngan.[16] Although his status as a houngan has been contested,[17] his work remains an important chapter in regards to Vodou representation in Haitian art history. Exploring dichotomies seem to be a frequent theme in his works; sacred and profane, myth and reality, life and death. Perhaps his most famous piece, a painting of the serpent lwa Damballah resting on a bed of flowers, is one of the countless features of snake-like, water spirits in the arts of Haitian Vodou. Damballah, Lasirene, Ezili Dantor are among the lwa who fit in this category, appearing in religious images in abundance across Haiti.[18]

[16] Haitian Art Society. *Hyppolite, Hector (1894-1948)*. (Haitian Art Society, n.d.)

[17] Dash, Michael J. *Hector Hyppolite*. (MoMA, 2019).

[18] Houlberg, M. "Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou." In *African Arts*, *29*(2). (1996). 31-35.

Damballah La Flambeau (Hector Hyppolite) © Matt Dunn 2019-2025

The artist André Pierre (1916-2005), who exclusively painted the lwa in stunning depictions, is regarded as Hyppolite's successor. Pierre was an active Vodouizan, who eventually became a houngan during his artistic practice. "His mission in life was to present Vodou as respectable (through his art), on par with all the other major religions".[19] The production of sacred artwork play a pivotal role in honouring the lwa, as they provide a tangible element that sustains communication between the realm of the living and the world of the spirits.[20] From the decoration of temples to the assemblage of the altars, the bright colours and striking imagery encapsulate the Afro-Caribbean aesthetic. The heritage of Vodou art is not restricted to artists, as Vodou's rich visual traditions are perpetuated by every devotee.

[19] Haitian Art Society. *Pierre, André (Haitian, 1916-2005)*. (Haitian Art Society, n.d.)

[20] Daniels, K. M. " Mirror Mausoleums, Mortuary Arts, and Haitian Religious Unexceptionalism". In *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *85*(4), (2017). 957

Vodou as Heritage

Vodou is present physically through ritual practice and internally through beliefs and value systems, permeating both the mundane and ceremonial parts of life. Ever-present in the processes of liberating the nation and reclaiming indigenous identity, Vodou is indubitably a prominent part of Haiti's collective heritage. The diverse pantheon of lwa has provided generations of Black Haitians a consistent and veritable Pan-African body to identify with, one that honours their diverse ancestral legacies and connects them to their roots in a meaningful way.[21]

Ceremony with Agou and Lasirene (André Pierre, 1970) © Matt Dunn 2019-2025

*All photographs courtesy of Haitian Art Society's website

[21] Daniels, K. M. "An Assembly of Twenty-One Spirit Nations: The Pan-African Pantheon of Haitian Vodou's African Lwa". In *Africa and Its Historical and Contemporary Diasporas*. (Lanham: Lexington Books. 2023). 47-48.

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Book review: Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa: New Approaches to Muslim Expressive Cultures

Melissa Enders-Bhatia

The book "Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa: Un-Disciplining African Muslim Expressive Cultures," edited by Ashley Miller and published by Intellect in 2024, sets out to disrupt. As the title and chapter headings suggest, the book intends to question, mobilize and "un-discipline," be disobedient and subversive, uncover systems of dominance and colonial entanglements, all with the aim of uncovering agency, vibrancy and multivalency in African Muslim heritage and expressive cultures. The book focuses on the 20th and 21st centuries and the context of independence from colonial rule throughout Africa.

Cowry shell mask, Sya district, Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso, 2009, photograph Lisa Homann, cover design Tanya Montefusco, image courtesy Intellect Books

The book meets its aim successfully by employing a multi-disciplinary framework including art and architectural history, sociology and anthropology. Covering a range of geographies including West, East and North Africa including the diaspora, the book highlights a variety of creative media. Methodologically, the book employs case studies by a diversity of leading international scholars to explore contested narratives, systemic exclusions, power politics and insidious remnants of colonial power. The end-goal of the book is not to create a new meta-narrative of Islamic art in Africa, but rather a questioning of exclusionary categorizations and narratives in favour of an art historical practice characterized by heterogeneity.

“...a critique of the Eurocentric epistemologies and historiographic traditions...”

As set out by Ashley Miller in the introduction, central to the book is a critique of the Eurocentric epistemologies and historiographic traditions that defined Islamic art in Africa as Arab-centric, the purview of great Islamic empires with grand monuments and luxury objects and geographically restricted to the north. The remit of African art was defined in the course of the early 20th century and in contrast to Western modern art. Geographically restricted to Sub-Saharan Africa, it was attributed a distinct "primitive," "authentic" and immovably backward character, due to colonial administrative considerations but also insidious racism.[1] Miller furthermore questions the term "Art" - the traditional European distinction between the fine arts and crafts, with only the former being accorded creative and intellectual status. Instead, she introduces the idea of "creative expressions" to suggest a wider field of enquiry in order to explore more comprehensively the generative creative role of Islamic thought in Africa. Finally, it can be argued, that while employing a decolonial ethic and practicing "epistemic disobedience" as put forward by Mignolo,[2] the book consistently goes beyond the remit of the colonial to explore the impact of politically constructed definitions of nationhood and national identity on creative expressions.

The book is organized into ten chapters presented in four thematic parts. Titled "Beyond Borders: African (and) Muslim Objects as 'Relational Loci'," part 1 consists of two essays focusing geographically on the Swahili Coast, characterized by a multitude of cultural influences, from Islamic, African to the Indian Ocean world.

Zulfikar Hirji's essay focuses on objects from the Swahili Sultanate of Witu that now find themselves in collections abroad. Highlighting the extraction of artefacts during colonialism and

[1] Ashley Miller, *Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa: New Approaches to Muslim Expressive Cultures* (Bristol: Intellect, 2024), 5-7

[2] Walter Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought, and De-colonial Freedom." (Theory, Culture & Society 26.7-8, 2009), 1-23

their display in museums in the USA and the UK, Hirji explores the imposition of external, colonial knowledge production on the material culture of Witu. He demonstrates how this manifests in exhibition labels, often presenting erroneous and incomplete information, and the painstaking work required to correct and complete this research.

Michelle Apotsos dissects the layered narratives attributed to Zanzibar's Stone Town. Its cultural significance has shifted over time and was instrumentalized by a variety of actors, each projecting onto it ideas of identity and power. A 19th century Swahili construction, the invading Omani Sultanate used Stone Town as a power symbol while British colonial rule orientalised it as an Arabian fantasy. Following decay under early Republican rule, Stone Town was restored and re-presented as national heritage, leading to branding and tourist promotion that continues to lean heavily into exoticized nostalgic narratives.

“...emphasizes both continuity and the reconfiguration of cultural expressions, arguing for a syncretic conception of cultures as opposed to the traditional distinctions between African and Muslim.”

Part 2, titled "Disobedient Media: Reclaiming African Muslim Expressive Cultures," consists of three essays that question the Eurocentric art historical distinction between fine art and craft, pointedly replacing the word "art" with "expressive culture" and considering a variety of media.

Robert and Mary Roberts critique the persistent Eurocentric and Arab centric framing of African Muslim arts. Instead, they argue for a privileging of local perspectives and knowledge systems, asserting how Islamic beliefs manifest in different cultural expressions. Exploring a Sudanese calligraphic blade, a Senegalese compound built of reeds and a Hornbill mask from Liberia, the essay demonstrates how each manifests different aspects of Islamic beliefs and epistemologies. The hornbill mask in particular, with its use in Mende society rituals and with interior Qur'anic inscriptions, presents a case of a merging of African and Muslim cultures as manifested in the lived Liberian experience.

Lisa Homan's essay explores urban Muslim masquerade in 20th century Burkina Faso. Here the Zara community, newly converted to Islam, repurposes local practices of mask-making and *Lo Gbe* masquerade to express their Muslim identity and belonging to the ummah. Homan emphasizes both continuity and the reconfiguration of cultural expressions, arguing for a syncretic conception of cultures as opposed to the traditional distinctions between African and Muslim.

The reclamation of Amazigh female tattoo traditions by contemporary Moroccan artist Safaa Mazirh is considered in Cynthia Becker's essay. Amazigh tattooing was historically exoticized and sexualized under French colonial rule and used by male artists of Morocco's post-colonial period to negotiate a new, localized, national identity. Tattooing is considered socially unacceptable in contemporary Morocco, deemed incompatible with Muslim behaviour. In her photographic practice, Mazirh overlays blurred images of her naked body with patterns from Amazigh tattoos. The resulting palimpsests explore questions of colonial legacy and contemporary social taboos, highlighting female agency through a reappropriation of symbolism.

"...raises the question of what traditions and heritages may be referenced by artists, revealing that heritage, as national and even personal identity, is a construct."

With "Mobilizing Heritage: Painting Post-colonial Identities," part 3 moves into the contested arena of nationhood in the post-colonial context in Africa, where different traditions, histories, heritages are mobilized to define new national identities.

Mark DeLancey explores the neglected modern art history of post-colonial Mauritania. Focusing on calligraphy, he traces its manifestations through different generations of artists and political periods. The shifting preference for localized Tifanigh Arabic script toward the generalized Naskh script parallels shifts in how Islamic heritage is defined and instrumentalized in Mauritania, revealing the contested nature of national heritage.

Using a south-south comparative framework, Alex Sika Seggerman analyses works by three artists – Egyptian Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, Sudanese Ibrahim El-Salahi and Cuban Wilfredo Lam. Seggerman critiques the usual Eurocentric presentation of modernism in a centre-periphery framework, whereby artists of the periphery are defined by their late and derivative participation in an art movement deemed to originate in Europe. The selected artists use formal easel painting combined with Surrealist techniques and religious imagery. The Surrealist idea of accessing truth via the subconscious is interpreted spiritually in the works of Al-Gazzar, El-Salahi and Lam. Pointing to the multi-cultural heritages of both Lam and El-Salahi, Seggerman raises the question of what traditions and heritages may be referenced by artists, revealing that heritage, as national and even personal identity, is a construct.

Holiday Powers continues the questioning of post-colonial identities and the referencing of various cultural traditions. Analysing a painting series by Moroccan artist Mohamed Melehi made in 1960s New York, she considers the persistent pressures post-colonial artists face to represent their natal heritage. The New York abstractions predominantly feature squares, a response by Melehi to an exposure to new communication technologies. However, when he returns to Morocco to become a leading figure in his country's modernist art movement and debates on national culture, Melehi contextualizes his abstract square paintings in relation to Amazigh local iconography.

Part 4 turns its attention to architecture – "Undisciplined Construction: Relocating 'Islamic' Architecture in Africa." Two essays complicate the boundaries of the discipline of architecture academically and geographically. Emma Chubb focuses on the work of Moroccan architecture firm Faraoui & Mazieeres, who between 1967-82 commissioned Moroccan artists to create site-specific artworks, called "Integrations," for a series of state-sanctioned building projects. The 1960s post-independence era gave way to a brutal dictatorship in the 1970s. Powers questions the possibility of post-colonial cultural expressions in this political environment, which specifically sought to define national culture as Muslim and Arab. By drawing inspiration from Morocco's Islamic, African, Amazigh, and European heritage, folk and popular cultures, "Integrations" offered a space of resistance by referencing Morocco's pluralistic cultural heritage.

The final chapter by Jacobé Huet considers a series of photographic collages by contemporary Algerian artist Kader Attia – "Following the Modern Genealogy" (2012–22). A series of modernist building projects were built in Algeria under the French colonial rule to relocate and modernize the local population. The concept was exported to France to accommodate the mass immigration of expats and Algerians post-independence. Foregrounding the actual lived experience in these building projects and providing stories of agency, Attia's collages provide a counter-narrative to the colonial architecture. The essay serves as a methodological reversal, questioning who has the right and power to narrate history: the architect, the political administrator, or the resident/artist.

Through ten case studies, "Decolonizing Islamic Art in Africa" provides a distinct voice in the current debate surrounding the decolonization of academic disciplines and cultural institutions. With a critical eye to Eurocentric historiographies, the varied methodologies employed serve to question constructs inherent in art historical categorizations, highlighting omissions and misrepresentations. Scholars introduce complexities and contradictions around the construction of national identity in a post-colonial context by introducing artists with multicultural heritage and lived experiences on the ground that conceive of culture, traditions and creative expression in terms of fluidity and continuity. On a critical note, almost all scholars represented come from institutions in the USA and UK and academic voices from the African continent would have been welcome.

Tightly edited and elegantly illustrated, using nuanced and concise yet accessible language, this is a book for those interested not only in Islamic art and African arts but also in questioning the constructs of art history and its colonial and post-colonial legacies.

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Trans-Methodologies and the Politics of Queer Heritage: A Review of *Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa*

Shanna Zhang

Butler, Anne Marie E., and Sascha Crasnow, eds. *Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa.* Critical Studies in Architecture of the Middle East. Bristol, UK Chicago, USA: intellect, 2024. 260 pp.; 48 illustrations, index. GBP 99.95.

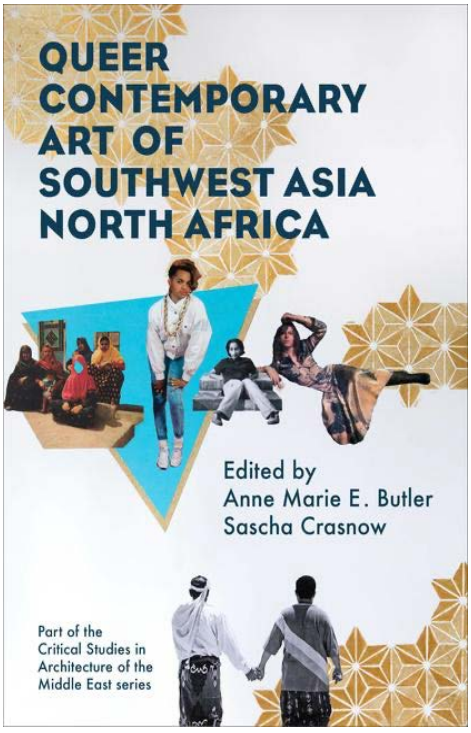


Fig. 1 Tanya Montefusco, *Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa* (book cover), 2024, cover design featuring artwork by Yasmine Nasser Diaz, © Yasmine Nasser Diaz and Ochi Gallery, image courtesy of Intellect Books.

Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa (Fig. 1), edited by Anne Marie E. Butler and Sascha Crasnow, includes 14 texts in various forms, containing academic essays, artist statements, conversations, and a textual experiment. It focuses on queer contemporary art in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, which encompasses both historical artistic forms of the region and contemporary artistic practices across diverse media. Attempting to construct a local queer aesthetic from a culturally specific one[1], the queer art narratives in this book diverge from the gender binary-based traditions of the mainstream global north. Beyond art historical analysis, the book's political and historical significance is evident. Through intertextual and reflective writings, it constructs, as Gopinath describes in the foreword, a powerful site of contestation and of imagining otherwise.[2] The editors have divided the book into three sections: The first, Unfixed Genders, highlights non-binary and trans expressions in the SWANA region; the

[1] Butler and Crasnow, *Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa*, 161.

[2] Butler and Crasnow, ix.

second, Intersectional Sexualities, links artistic expressions to more contextual issues of race, ethnicity, and religion; and the final section, Sites and Space, situates occupied queer bodies within broader global and historical contexts.

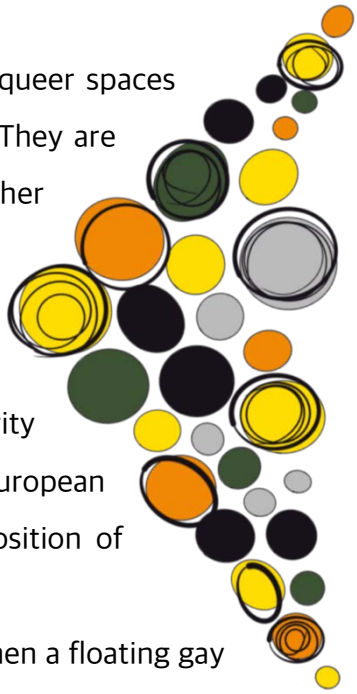
"How do the artists and artworks featured in the book perceive and engage with past 'heritage'? And how do they inscribe new 'heritage' in the context?"

Temporality, serving as a recurring theme throughout the book, views the heritage of the SWANA region as a genealogy of contemporary art. Rooted in the SWANA region, queer art continuously engages in dialogue, negotiation, and reconciliation with colonial history and Muslim traditions. In Stuart Hall's speech *Whose Heritage?* (1999), he considers heritage as a Eurocentric political practice. While heritage is constructed by official authorities, it becomes a process of cultural production and representation of the past affected by power dynamics within the society.[3] Later in the speech, however, Hall argues for a redefinition of heritage as a living activity that contributes to the formation of decolonial and decentralising practices. Regarding heritage in this sense, my following introduction will not follow the original structure of this book. Instead, this review will briefly analyse *Queer Contemporary Art of Southwest Asia North Africa* through two key questions, with a particular highlight on its methodology: How do the artists and artworks featured in the book perceive and engage with past 'heritage'? And how do they inscribe new 'heritage' in the context?

In the foreword, Gopinath identifies a discourse of neo-Orientalism: the global south, including SWANA, is imagined as a non-modernised region with singular, repressive gender and sexual ideologies, seemingly incompatible with queer art. The book disrupts the homogenising narrative from multiple angles, revealing the liminality in which gender diversity and same-sex desire emerge within the external heterosexual hegemony of the Arab world. For example, in Chapter 6, Kasem reflects on her artistic practice, discovering that within Arab traditional stories – including *Alf Layla Wa Layla* (*1001 Arabian Nights*) – while lesbian narratives often end in tragedy, there remains a blurred space of emotional tenderness and passion. Kasem, therefore, employs

[3] Ashley and Stone, *Whose Heritage? : Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall's Post-Nation Britain*, 2.

visual art to extend the storytelling narrative of Arab traditions, legitimising these hidden lesbianism desires. In her own words: 'their moments of intimacy can be more powerful and lasting than the demise or misfortune with which their desire is punished'.[4] Through the re-composition of images, Kasem's rewriting of the original texts is a healing process. In Chapter 7, Assali uses the diaries of a teacher, poet, and Arab nationalist Khalil Afandi al-Sakakini (1878 – 1953) from the Palestinian diaspora as an archival thread to construct a genealogy of brown homosexual bodies. Similarly, in Chapter 12, Bank highlights the garden as a metaphor for same-sex love and erotic encounters in Islamic art and poetry. The remarkable fluidity in the sexual expression of the premodern and early modern SWANA region, distinct from contemporary gendered social identities, is a product of Islamic aesthetics.



This approach to the archiving and re-engagement of historical queer spaces points to a notion that identity fluidity is inherently part of memory. They are not derivative, external, or secondary, but are just as significant as other defined forms of heritage. According to Giorgio Agamben, the sovereign places the very violence in exceptions of law and regulations, with violence being immanent to law and functioning as its ground.[5] Within this framework, the present marginalisation of minority groups points to the colonial aftershocks in the SWANA region, where European states utilised law to establish exceptions, further asserting their position of possession.

Cairo 52 is a historical event often referred to in this collection, when a floating gay discotheque on the Nile, known as the Queen Boat, was raided by officers from the Cairo Vice Squad and State Security Investigations.[6] The book argues that colonialism played a decisive role in the shift from an implicitly queer-inclusive heritage to contemporary overt anti-queer and anti-trans violence. In *The When, Where, and Why of Intimacy*, Gayed traces homocolonialism in Egypt under Victorian-era British rule. The biologically derived Western concept of gender leads to a rigid gender dichotomy that forced itself onto local traditions during the colonial period. So-called local sexual perversions were deemed obstacles to modernity and thus criminalised in legal texts, which erased the grey areas where same-sex desires could exist. Within this context, today's

[4] Butler and Crasnow, 107.

[5] Agamben et al., *Homo Sacer*.

[6] Butler and Crasnow, 130.

queer condition is, to some extent, a postcolonial predicament. In Chapter 8, Volk explores this postcolonial predicament by examining Mahmoud Khaled's installation *The Unknown Crying Man Museum* (Fig. 2), pointing to the irreconcilability between queer visibility and anonymity. Within colonial discourse, queer communities were stripped of agency and flattened into a social and legal subject who could be persecuted by the state or protected by an international agent.[7] The personal, intimate narratives within the house museum as the nature of Khalaf's installation attempt to reconcile this postcolonial predicament, yet the site inevitably renders the individual anonymous – an object to be gazed upon.

Fig. 2 Mahmoud Khaled, *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man*, 2017, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, © Mahmoud Khaled, image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Jousse Entreprise.

To negotiate with past heritage, Rafei proposes a concrete practical method in Chapter 1: counter-archive. One example discussed here is artist Sayegh, who creates a series of video works to reclaim the belly dancer in Egyptian cinema, challenging the male gaze and misogyny embedded in these representations. This practice is not only feminist but also prompts audiences to reconsider the Lebanese Civil War, offering a framework for revolutionary action that resists racism, capitalism, and sectarianism through gender justice. Similarly, in Chapter 10, Ula argues that Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's work subverts the heteronormative narratives of the global north by envisioning queer domesticity through everyday materiality. Such archival practices, by

[7] Butler and Crasnow, 133.

reassigning meaning to deeply ingrained symbols and systems, generate a deconstructive power that disrupts dominant structures.

When this complex and traumatic heritage is embodied in individual artists, it becomes part of their identity. Consequently, their stance and emotional choices regarding how to show this aspect of their identity are always challenging. Chapter 2 is a personal statement by artist Yasmine Nassar Diaz. Through her installation work, she seeks to express her hybrid identity as an Arab American queer. The tension between Western pop culture and Muslim family upbringing in her nostalgic childhood room shaped her gender identity, which later manifested in her artistic practice. Similarly, Kasem describes her longing to be engulfed in Arab-Muslim culture, particularly when her specific language barriers and upbringing prevent her from understanding Arabic-language pop culture jokes on Instagram. On the one hand, artists demonstrate solidarity and affiliation as a way to complete and affirm their subjectivity. On the other hand, the presence of race and religion in their work is also risky. In Chapter 3, artist Rah Eleh acknowledges that within the context of global economic integration, they must actively choose how to communicate their sexuality across different cultural settings. However, the Euro-American market in addition to the artist's ethnic or religious background considered them illegible, resulting in the further marginalisation of the artist.

"'Trans-' points to a recurring strategy 'intimacy' in this book, which represents a radically unique transcendence - a negation of the self and affirmation of the other as a form of subjectivity."

Whether through re-encoding traditional imagery and myths or embedding the personal significance of SWANA within artistic expression, these practices align contemporary visual culture with regional heritage, transforming heritage into an ongoing engagement. Going further, in Chapter 4, Butler and Crasnow propose a more subversive and universal argument: they advocate for adopting 'trans-' itself as a methodology. On the level of visual arts, this approach moves beyond the artist's personal identity, instead emphasising the instability and fluidity of the artwork itself. On the geopolitical level, this approach is inherently transcendent, as the way in which its

intermediary state of possibility dissolves fixed boundaries. The liminal forces of negotiation and deconstruction can thus be extended to broader structural issues. 'Trans-' points to a recurring strategy 'intimacy' in this book, which represents a radically unique transcendence – a negation of the self and affirmation of the other as a form of subjectivity. The book's final chapter, *Sa'dia Rehman's Queer Cartographies: Convivial Opacities*, forms an intertextual dialogue with this methodology: conviviality and opacity carve out a safe context zone within existing norms for queer and other marginalised communities.

"In this sense, becoming is not only an individual negotiation of identity but also a disruptive force that challenges and reconfigures the boundaries of heritage itself."

My concern regarding the 'trans-' methodology is how, when it emphasises extreme individuality and intimate strategies, it can be actualised as a force for addressing structural issues. Beyond community, could 'trans-' also extend to heritage, colonial aftershocks, and authority itself? If so, this brings us back to Hall's original strategy: heritage as an ongoing, contested narrative rather than a fixed inheritance. Deleuze argues that heterogeneous becomings, rather than forming rigid identities, collectively constitute a co-functioning assemblage: "it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind."[8] Such a framework suggests that queer practices in the SWANA region do not emerge in isolation but exist in dynamic relation to historical legacies – aligning not with the dominant, exclusionary narratives of heritage but with its so-called 'exceptions.' In this sense, becoming is not only an individual negotiation of identity but also a disruptive force that challenges and reconfigures the boundaries of heritage itself.

As the editors mention in the introduction, they intend for this volume to serve as an introduction to the field of queer SWANA art history and visual culture[9], and they have successfully

[8] Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues, 69*.

[9] Butler and Crasnow, 4.

achieved this goal. Editors have carefully chosen these chapters so that tension between them dances across this field. For this reason, I would personally recommend this book to anyone interested in queer conditions in the SWANA region or queer art in general. Beyond that, queer studies on SWANA have rarely focused specifically on contemporary art, making this book's visual perspective both innovative and thought-provoking. As Sophie Harman states, seeing itself is political. [10] Thus, images, films, installations, and other visual materials empower queer communities in their own unique sense.

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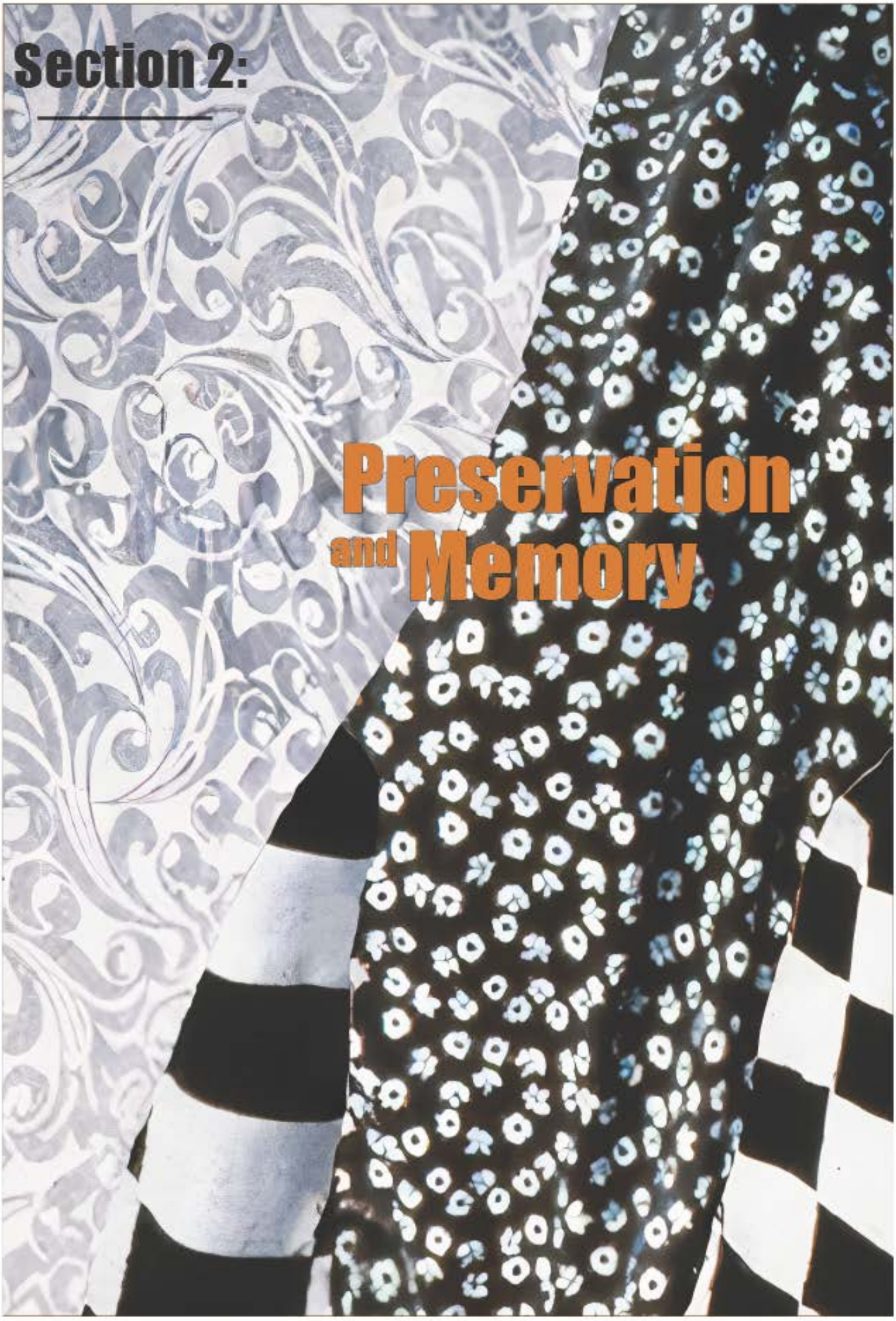
Section 2:

Preservation and Memory



Section 2:

Heritage Displaced: The Poetics of Exile in Salih Basheer The Homeseekers

Safiah Salih

This essay focuses on heritage in the African context, specifically looking at Sudan in the Second Civil War (1983 – 2005) and beyond, to understand how the impression of conflict on the land disrupts heritage. Subsequent displacement has meant that Sudanese refugees do not have a home to return to, whether due to prolonged conflict, political persecution, or exclusion because of one's sexuality. Difference is a constant, it weighs on the expressions of the 'subjects' depicted in Salih Basheer's *The Homeseekers,* a collection of monochrome photographs that depict the plight of seclusion, isolation, and displacement. To return is no longer an option, the way back no longer exists and nothing that previously stood remains. When I found Basheer's work, I, myself, was looking for a home, a place I have yet to know – a heritage left undiscovered.

Whose Heritage?

Heritage is fluid, unconventional, and unbound to monoliths. It represents the ebb and tide of time as a continually redefined construct. It provides an archive on a personal level, extending to the nation where narrative and dominant meaning is "double inscri[bed]," as an ongoing project of meaning-making to which we are subject[1]. The nation constructs identity within its borders first, by emphasising "memorable achievements" to the collective memory of its subjects, a "national story" is interwoven into the minds and lives of the people, to be redistributed as "tradition"[2]. The production and re-distribution of meaning create, what Benedict Anderson (1933) calls, "an imagined community," where shared ideas about what it means to be part of the nation are reproduced[3]. This process is not unintentional; rather, nations utilise "canonisation" to control the dominant narrative, excluding those individuals who do not fit the '*status quo',* thereby

[1] Susan L. T. Ashley and Degna Stone, Whose Heritage? (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 15.

[2] Ashley and Stone, Whose Heritage?, 15.

[3] Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage," in *Whose Heritage? The Impact of Cultural Diversity on Britain's Living Heritage: National Conference, Manchester, 1st-3rd November, 1999: Keynote Addresses*, ed. Chris Smith, Maya Jaggi, and Arts Council of England (London: Arts Council of England, 1999), 14.

othering or exploiting them[4]. Memory, identity, and belonging are tied to our shared national histories and "social memory," which are manipulated to reflect "the governing assumptions" of the period[5].

We explore this dichotomy by focusing on the photographic work of Salih Basheer, born in 1995, who taught himself the craft and whose archive "treats themes of home, displacement, belonging, and trauma"[6]. Focusing on *The Homeseekers* project, which captures the longing for a home that no longer exists in the same way as it used to. As he describes, "home was not home anymore", capturing the loss and devastation of conflict and subsequent displacement on his return to Khartoum[7]. The question of heritage is central to our argument: where do we belong? As it is the value of the "human individual" that is both literally and figuratively tied to the soil[8], unrealised, it is used by the coloniser to categorise the native as the *Untermensch* (subhuman). Heritage is tied to practices of 'modernity,' which originate in Enlightenment theory; this practice associates belonging with proximity to *whiteness*. Sovereign institutions partake in the justification of colonisation on moral grounds, for example, the 'civilising mission' of the Orient "involved assaulting and dismantling" the native society's knowledge production and language, replacing it with that of Western schools of thought[9].

[4] Hall, "Whose Heritage," 16.

[5] Ashley and Stone, Whose Heritage?,16.

[6] B. Jones, "Interview with Salih Basheer," *FOTOGRAFISK CENTER // BLOG*, September 24, 2024, https://fotografiskcenter.wordpress.com/2024/09/24/interview-with-salih-basheer/.

[7] Jones, "Interview with Salih Basheer."

[8] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967 [1961]), 34.

[9] Ashton Sinamai, John D. Giblin, Shadreck Chirikure, and Ishanlosen Odiaua, *Routledge Handbook of Critical African Heritage Studies* (London: Routledge, 2024), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003025832, 422.

Fig 1. Salih, Basheer. "The Home Seekers | Salihbasheer." Salihbasheer, 2018. https://www.salihbasheer.com/the-home-seekers.

Dismantling ownership

This hierarchy is naturalised into societies' consciousness, nestling into the governance of authority, deriving a "twofold citizenship" whereby the settler sets themselves apart, as the superior being, through myth, storytelling, and biblical decree[10]. The narrative dominates national heritage; here, heritage and memory play an important "political role," especially in periods of conflict, where the fabric of social memory is disrupted[11]. Sudanese heritage has been destroyed by civil conflict, disallowing refugees such as Basheer to return home. Prolonged violence has interrupted practices of heritage, belonging and identity construction. In the case of Sudan, which

[10] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 35.

[11] Sinamai et al., *Routledge Handbook of Critical African Heritage Studies*, 40.

has suffered from instability since its independence, heritage is continually reworked. When we consider how heritage is preserved, we must consider the imperial histories of the museums that house African artefacts. Note that Britain's imperial history has contributed to an influx of migrants and refugees, whose presence disrupts the dominant framework. The disposition of refugees is explored in *The Homeseekers,* using photographs depicting Sudanese refugees, some of whom look dejected, their hands drawn over their foreheads as if in defeat.

"I felt inside me it might be the last goodbye,"

The process of dismantling, that of decolonisation, is one fraught with violence, as we come to learn that "repositories of African heritage" during the colonial order, remain as a *zeitgeist* in the legal frameworks which 'protect' African heritage[12]. Museums inhabit "colonial entitlements to occupation, ownership and exploitation," as we see our histories and stories splayed out[13], we begin to feel the loss of our heritage. Ethnic minorities must reconcile their traditions and religion with their new home away from home, and artists who live in this intersection should be considered seriously. One of the core repercussions of conflict is displacement; those having to relocate may suffer racial violence as their bodies are marked as "threatening or savage," labels used to surveil populations *othered* by their difference[14]. The second civil war (1983 – 2005) was marred by ethnic violence between African tribes of the Southern region and the Arab forces of the North[15]. The result of the conflict is a prominent feature of Sudanese society since its independence from British colonial rule in 1956

Salih Basheer

[12] Sinamai et al., *Routledge Handbook of Critical African Heritage Studies*, 422 - 3.

[13] Sinamai et al., *Routledge Handbook of Critical African Heritage Studies*, 480.

[14] Thomas Gregory, "Dismembering the Dead: Violence, Vulnerability and the Body in War," *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2016): 944-65, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115618244, 950.

[15] Lesley Bartlett and Ameena Ghaffar-Kucher, *Refugees, Immigrants, and Education in the Global South: Lives in Motion* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 85.

Basheer's work speaks to this omen, he captures the juxtaposition of his "quiet" life in Denmark and his return to Khartoum, as *The Homeseekers* reflects on feelings of "alienation, longing and loneliness" in Egyptian society[16]. Recalling his time as a university student, where he struggled to come to terms with the loss of his home in Sudan, and the racial discrimination he was exposed to in Egypt. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was criticised for taking actions that resulted in the "returning [of] refugees to territories where their lives would be threatened"[17]. The monochrome images in this collection include shots of blurred and unblurred portraits, presumably of the two Sudanese men that Basheer followed on their journey to find home. These are Ali, who escaped political persecution, and Essam, who was expelled by his family from Sudan for his sexual orientation[18]. These are images from his "personal experiences, memories, and observations", which shed light on the deeper issues affecting Sudanese refugees[19].

"...there persists a disconnect from what I should recognise as heritage and home."

Other images depict unoccupied spaces, left seemingly abandoned, with remnants of clothes and bedding left behind in the absence of a 'subject'. A sense of dissonance washes over, images of the body, cut off from identifying markers such as the head and face, follow. They are, in a way, out of view, alienated and alone, as their body is cut up by the camera or positioned away from the camera in such a way that only permits a view of their naked backs. Some images show what looks to be a hotel or hostel bed, giving the impression that the body, displaced and unidentifiable, has no permanent address or home. As we waver between these images and textual materials that give us a glimpse of the devastation of the conflict, Basheer notes, "I felt inside me it might be the last goodbye," as he bid farewell to his family and friends[20].

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[16] Basheer Salih, "The Home Seekers | Salihbasheer," *Salihbasheer*, 2018, https://www.salihbasheer.com/the-home-seekers.

[17] Susan M. Meffert et al., "Feelings of Betrayal by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and Emotionally Distressed Sudanese Refugees in Cairo," *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 26, no. 2 (2010): 161, https://doi.org/10.1080/13623699.2010.491395.

[18] Salih, "The Home Seekers."

[19] Jones, "Interview with Salih Basheer."

[20] Salih, "The Home Seekers."

Reflection

Fig 3. My Father and his Mother (Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un)

In the pursuit of a new home, whether for Basheer or the two Sudanese refugees whose story he follows in these images, therein lies melancholy and a silent desolation. They occupy a space in-between, with no home, subsequently, there is no warmth of familial embrace in these images; what is missing is the warmth and embrace of heritage in the soul of the body. Being of mixed race, both Greek and Sudanese, has meant that access to my heritage has been a challenge to locate. The only connection between me and Sudan is through my father, with whom I have not yet had this conversation. Albeit our relationship as daughter and father, I used to recognise him by the lingering musk of cigarettes on his leather jacket, his quick pace, his disposition. What I know about him is that his parents fled from Sudan to Egypt, and his father passed before or shortly after his birth (*Inna Lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un) [Indeed, we belong to Allah, and indeed, to Him we shall return]*. The photo shown in *figure 2* is of my grandmother and father. I had not seen a photo of my father as a child in all my 25 years. Photos of the past are distributed between family members or lost to time, there persists a disconnect from what I should recognise as heritage and *home*.

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Susan L.T. Ashley, and Degna Stone. *Whose Heritage?* Taylor & Francis, 2023.

Appendix

The poem is an homage to refugees who have fled war, and are now left feeling disconnected, unable to move on. Tying a history of colonialism and the author's mixed race into the discussion of 'assimilation' - *'In reality, who am I?'*

Lineage

by Safiah S. Salih

‘In reality, who am I?’
Among you, who walk the earth unrestrained
Amassing the mileage of migrating birds,
Who am I?
Unbound
And unafraid of the soil
To which we will return
In the figure of shapeless spirits
Ruminating in the atmosphere
As one.
We are this season’s harvest
We beget but
We, too, shall pass.
Oh, You!
Who mimic the flock of travelling birds
On this strenuous journey
Like them, are you striving just to survive?
Do your wings shed their brilliance under a ceaseless sky?
Among you,
Who read tales of affection on the back of palms
And those who know it as second skin
As vibrations of rhythm and rhyme
With no strategised reason
Will you scold us for dreaming of a sun we can concur without scarring?
Oh, God!
In you,
Some place their hopes
Oh, Soil!
Skies!
And higher atmospheres!

To whoever can lend their listening ear
It is enough to know that you might be there
In your image
And by the grace of our splitting selves
Vessels are emptied
And replenished
And emptied
And …
To John and Joe Doe, who have not been found
To those who seek to remain undiscovered
To me, where am I?
Listen here,
Over yonder
A vessel is filled half-heartedly to the brim
with
loss
Home is no longer a place
We can visit during summer breaks
We do not return.
It simply ceases to exist.
Our universities have caved inwards.
Our streets are obscured by dust.
It has hung a permanent fog
A false sky
Drones have replaced birds
To make sure there is no escape.
We know no one will save us now
So, we write names and D.O.B's on our arms
With black markers
So that our mothers will know it is us,
When dust has turned us into statues
They will see our stiffened bodies
And fathers will become babies once more

Mothers will become daughters

Adults

Infants

We will return to what we once were.

Our memories are histories

They are for educational bodies

To summarise into textbooks

From which the West will design obscure monuments

That you will walk past

Without recognising their meaning

Do you see now

That they do not want you to know?

These monuments are art projects

Without words

Rusted

They make a pretty walkway

A pleasant bench

Holding no one to account

Blaming no one

They blend in.

Can you hear it spill out between the cracks?

A wilting

Potted plant

Is laid to rest

On the windowpane

It is rotted at the roots, as am I.

I am stateless

Shapeless …less.

Still

There are colourful crowds

Made up of youths and elders

Whose stories can be traced

On the wrinkles lining their faces

And in the tones of their mumbling
‘In reality, who am I?’
Among those,
Who go about a ritual routine
In collared shirts
And greying suits
Boarding subways
On spit-stained platforms
Hailing buses clad with dusty Moquette seats
The hustle of early-bird commuters
And late-into-the-night
Frayed
Monotonous workers
Among them, who am I?
Can you tell the single mothers apart?
They carry groceries over their shoulders
With children cupped between spare hands
They are overworked
And underpaid
Schwarz Arbeit
To make the deadline of this month’s rent
Without anything to spare for themselves
She lives on borrowed clothes
And not enough time
The wear on her soles
Tell a story
Spanning across generations of women
She walks with dampened clothes
It clings to her like a sickness
This she could not have known
That his eyes would wander
And his ego would consume him
So now she is all alone

In a country that shames her
Raising kids who will leave her
As teenagers make a mockery
Recording on their cell phones
I see her clearly
Mama clutches my hand tightly
Warning that we would lose this fight
The heavy groceries are a lesser burden
Then the growing worry inside her
Milk is spilt.
You see,
The other passengers watch on
And anger builds in my throat
The aftertaste sours
Our native tongue
And I grew to understand
That we are not welcome to seek refuge here
Mama greets the headteacher
The headteacher addresses me
During parent-teacher meetings
The accent which once adorned her
Becomes a thorn
We are not welcome here
And I begin to shame her too
“Why can’t I just have school meals instead?”
“Why do you hide your hair?”
“Why can’t you just speak fucking English… Mum.”
And here I am now
In some nameless place
With the luxury to ponder
The wonders of the world
Are lost on wanderers such as me
And in protest

To our migrant fathers
On long stays in the motherland
We know about the things that you do.
I wanted so much to belong
To some place
Or someone
So, I switched code
And spoke in softer notes
Used whitening creams
On knuckles and knees
Now I find myself blue
At the fingertips
Amidst indiscernible passersby
They can see tears in the rain
There is nowhere to hide
They know
The stench of bleach on my skin
The odour of comfort foods
They know.
They know.
Who are they?
Who am I?
The weight of the rubble
Would drown you too
If you do not doom scroll past it
Who am I?
Birthed from the coming together of two continents,
I am split apart by a colonial phantom,
Begrudged by my conveniences
I am an 'other'
Biding for refuge in a cement city
Under constant surveillance
It is one that never sleeps.

Our warriors mistook you for white devils
To mistake you for brothers
Only for you to forsake them
You weaponised religion,
Falsified our Gods
To place churches in our markets,
Taught oppression
By preaching of a white God
Who split the world in two
Light versus darkness
We are ‘they’
And you are democratic saviours
We are slaves
Created to serve you
So that you may take grace
And bring us into your light
White is civilised,
White is truth
White is right
Leave me charred
Beneath the warmth of golden sand
At the tips of pyramids
Still unexplored,
South of the desert.
In conversations with myself at 3 AM,
I hold a store-bought
Seashell souvenir to my right ear
To hear the animated rustling
And an unabashed surge
Of a fabricated ocean front
In a lull of comfort
The sound soothes the soul
All remaining senses sour

At the sight of an imagined vastness before me now
Swaying at the seabed
To this faux siren call
I give this body
The hollow under my cheekbones
Is sculpted by great Greek myth,
My eyes, coated in the deepest shade of coal
Are unable to perceive depths in light,
And my vibrato,
Woven together by a tribe whose tongue I was never taught
In the name of assimilating
To this colder climate,
Are set against the mixed pigment that texturises my skin
They demand a freedom without borders.
In years of searching,
I have failed to trace an origin in my features
And ambiguity follows me around
So, I ask, amongst you, what am I?
We carry the faces of those lost to displacement
To the engineering of a monolithic world
Decolonised by capital and violence.
Addresses divide class and race
A 21st Century apartheid,
Are you climbing too?
The seas remain crueler for it
Over all these years,
It continues to strip lives from lifeboats
To collect at the bottom of its bed
The hindrance of an inherited trauma
Gawks at shallow attempts on my wrist
And my mind is bested by a lingering phantom
It plays practiced tricks in the broad of daylight
And in the witching of the night,

My lineage comes in seasons
Marked by passive activism
Expendable trends.
I take slow strolls
Musing at a man-made pond
Disturbed by cigarette clouds
And visiting crowds
As with Dorian and Narcissus,
It takes me in
To paint an obscured portrait of the 'self'
I concentrate my stare to trace it
Forgetting the incessant ticking of the worker's clock
Falling for the allure of superficiality
And the temperament of a city that never sleeps,
I am strung into a tug of war with ebb and flow
For this city,
I trade the withered spirit therein.
The souls who accentuate my features
Remain unknown
Though you may know them as artefacts
Decking halls of the British National Museum,
I can no longer feel my face
At last
This weary body is wrapped in a white cloth
Shrouded in the relics of soil
6 feet beneath working life above ground
Will I be found?

Kola Nut in West African Cosmology

Obioma C. Iwuagwu

Fig 1. "*Red Kola Nut" by Nigerian painter Gbenga Offo*

The Artist

Gbenga Offfo is a Nigerian painter and sculptor of Yoruba ethnic heritage who has cultivated a unique style of working with wood and metal. Born in 1957, he studied at the Yaba College of Technology in Lagos graduating as best Art and Graphics student in 1984[1]. He is a leading contemporary artist and worked as illustrator for various top level advertising firms before venturing into full time studio work in 1996.

His work exemplified in 'Red Kola Nut', depicts subjects characterized by bulging eyes, elongated necks and compelling exaggerations of the human structure combined with a splash of vibrant colours.

"Offo's practice delves into developing a higher sense of identity and responds to global issues of human rights and migration."

The artist merges abstract expressionism and cubism to create works that shed light on navigating the complexities of life with resilience and offer subtle expressions of tranquility. Influenced by growing up and living in the South-Western region of Nigeria, Offo's practice delves into developing a higher sense of identity and responds to global issues of human rights and migration.

Offo emphasizes the power of love and unity to foster a harmonious society and preserve indigenous cultures[2].

Red Kola Nut depicts these expressions of love, longing and unity in abstract form very eloquently. This is a very important representation of our cultural and established heritage in West Africa and particularly in Nigeria and Ala Igbo.

[1] https://thewheatbakerlagos.com/artists/gbenga-offo/

[2] https://bloomartlagos.com/portfolio/gbenga-offo

The Kola Nut

Found mainly in the tropical rainforest regions of West Africa, the kola nut is the fruit of the kola tree of the plant family Sterculiaceae, having about 125 species of trees native to the tropical rainforests of Africa[3]. The fruit grows in pods which contain several embedded rows of nuts housed in fruit skin.

The kola nut is a highly valued fruit in Africa, particularly West Africa across all levels of society. It is prized 'by the poor and the affluent; by men and women; by Muslims, Christians and animists. It is a shared experience, a powerful cultural symbol. It is given to show respect and as a sacred offering. It is a crucial part of community meetings.'[4]

It is more than just a seed or nut or fruit; it is a symbol, a gesture, and a ritual, all rolled into one. In many African communities, the kola nut is much more than a snack or a casual offering. When visitors arrive, presenting a kola nut signifies hospitality and respect. It is a gesture that says, "You are welcome here, and we honour your presence." This practice is common in countries like Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Ghana, Mali, Senegal where the kola nut ceremony is a profound part of social life.

The above 2011 painting by Nigerian Yoruba artist, Gbenga Offo, illustrates this poignantly - it depicts several people from different appearances together embracing a bowl containing red kola nuts in a show of unity and human bonding.

The breaking of the kola nut is a ritual that brings people together, often accompanied by prayers for peace, prosperity, and unity. It is often said that kola nut does not understand English language but only African languages. Kola nuts are called different names in Nigeria; the Yorubas call it 'Obi,' Hausas call it 'Gworo' while the Igbo tribe calls it 'Oji.' [5]

The kola nut also plays a pivotal role in traditional ceremonies: Weddings, funerals, and festivals often feature the kola nut as a centrepiece. Its presentation and breaking are acts rich in symbolism, often performed by the eldest or most

[3] Ikenna Ukpabi Unya. The Historical Significance and Role of the Kola Nut among the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria. Journal of Religion and Human Relations, Volume 13 No. 1, 2021 https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jrhr.v13i1.13

[4] Kogwuonye Patrick Onyeka The-cultural-and-aesthetic-significance-of-kolanut-in-africa https://www.brootsmagazine.com/post/ Jul 10, 2024

[5] Editorial Team April 4, 2019 Kola Nut, the untold African story behind Coke and Pepsi https://thinkafrica.net/kola-nut

respected members of the community. This act is not just about sharing food; it is about sharing blessings and strengthening communal bonds.

“When broken open, its interior reveals a beautiful contrast of colors, ranging from pale white to deep red.”

As a product of nature, the kola nut is beautiful to behold. It comes in various colours and shades of colour from green to beige to brown to yellow to red.

It may have a smooth or coarse exterior, but the inner surface is always smooth and rubbery and the intricate patterns it sometimes bears make it visually striking[6].

When broken open, its interior reveals a beautiful contrast of colors, ranging from pale white to deep red. This natural beauty has inspired various forms of art, from carvings to paintings, capturing the essence of the kola nut's cultural significance.

The kola nut also holds medicinal value. In this respect, it is used for its stimulant properties. It helps one to stay awake and maintain concentration especially on long journeys, for example, for itinerant cattle, sheep, goat and camel herders along the grazing routes. In modern times drivers on long distance journeys especially for trucks, lorries and heavy goods vehicles. Its naturally high caffeine content has therefore made it a cherished companion for many.

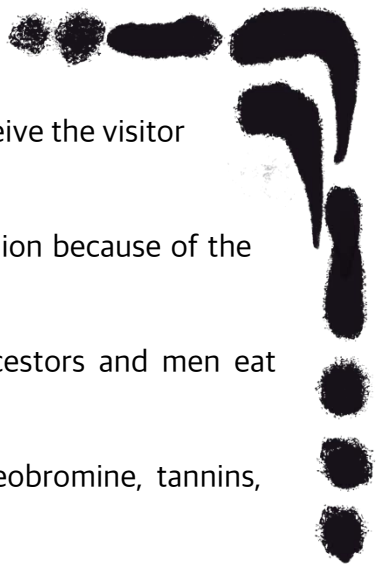
It is incorporated into many rites of passage and into ceremonies to cement treaties and contracts.

Much more than a fruit, the kola nut, once presented and split, plays a role in virtually every aspect of West African life, from birth to death.

The breaking of the kola nut is of particular cultural and spiritual significance in the Igbo speaking parts of West Africa especially in Nigeria.

[6] Ikechukwu Anthony KANU and Emmanuel Uchenna KANU. THE KOLA NUT IN IGBO-AFRICAN SYMBOLIC AND ARTISTIC UNIVERSE AND THE QUESTION PEACE-BUILDING in AMAMIHE: Journal of Applied Philosophy. Vol. 18. No. 5. 2020. ISSN: 1597-0779 Department of Philosophy, Imo State University [https://www.igwebuikeresearchinstitute.org/o_journals/amamihe]

As the heartbeat of the Igbo culture and tradition, the Igbo kola nut is used for several purposes, which include:



1. To welcome a visitor: To welcome a visitor with kola is to receive the visitor into one's life. It is also a sign that you wish the visitor life.
2. To open a prayer: It is used for prayers and sacred communion because of the special place it occupies among the 'gods'.
3. For rites, rituals and ceremonies: It is what the gods, ancestors and men eat together during these ceremonies.
4. Food and nutrition: It is a food that contains caffeine, theobromine, tannins, potassium, magnesium, glycosides, etc.
5. Commerce: It is bought and sold just like any other goods and services.
6. Cleansing: It is used for ritual of cleansing of a person, property or place.
7. Flavouring: It is used for flavouring food, drinks and beverages.
8. Oath-taking, covenant and settlement of disputes: When used during these circumstances, it is employed to call on God to be a witness.
9. Divination and prophecy: Usually it is broken into lobes and cast on the ground, then the diviner makes an interpretation.
10. Sacrifice and worship: This is very important as it is a sacred meal, the meal of the gods.
11. Receiving a new day: It is used in the morning during invocational poems and prayers.
12. Medical and mystical uses: Because of its nutritive value, it has health consequences. It helps strengthen the tooth enamel surface.

Structurally the kola nut is usually made up of 1 to 7 or more lobes which also have a specific significance to our people [Appendix 1].

Other views

Commenting on the centrality and importance of kola nut among West Africans, Sprague reports that one Portuguese explorer who visited the West African region in 1587, observed that many

people he encountered in his travels used the nut to relieve thirst and improve the taste of water by chewing it [7,8].

Other similar journals by explorers noted these same medicinal properties and documented African practices such as using the nut to strengthen the stomach and combat liver disease. In Nigeria, kola nut is not only grown in large quantities but is also articulated as a fruit of primary importance in the life of the people because of its many roles.

Thus, Nigeria is the highest producer of kola nut in the West African region.

Quarco[6] reports that about 90% of the kola produced in Nigeria is consumed within the country while 10% is exported.

Among the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria, kola nut is something bigger than that popular seed crop tree grown in the Central and Western part of Africa. The traditional oral history of the Igbo claims that the kola nut tree was the first tree on earth and therefore, its fruit, the first on earth.

As a food, kola nut is eaten with relish. Emotional and cultural attachment to kola nut in Igboland makes it religiously infectious. Adherents of the culture of kola nut, which without exaggeration involves every Igbo of religious belief, gender and caste find in the kola nut lobes a cultural vehicle that conveys the people's world view.

Conclusion

Gbenga Offo's 2011 painting, "Red Kola Nut", is described as abstract expressionism and cubism[9,10].

It depicts the cultural heritage of the West African peoples in the fruit of a natural tree native to the region. The symbolism of unity and communal bonding is eloquently portrayed in the attitude and expression of the faces depicted.

The spiritual context is also betrayed by the abstract lines and sharp features of the humanoid figures suggesting a transition from body to spirit.

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[7] Quarco, T. A Handbook on Kola. CRIN, Ibadan, 1973.

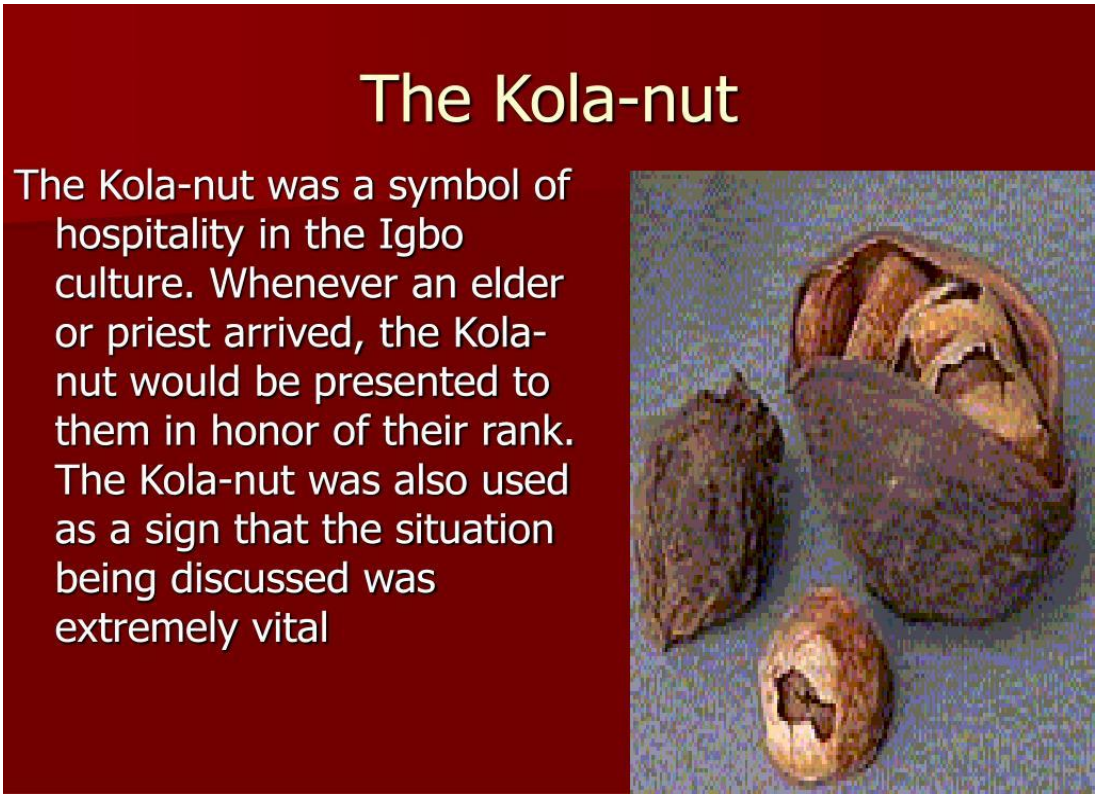
[8] Sprague, K. The Kola Nut: West African Commodity in the Atlantic World. African Study Centre, Los Angeles, USA, 2018.

[9] bloomartlagos.com/portfolio/gbenga-offo/

[10] Tajudeen Sowole. Escaping To 'Freedom' Of New Offo Period. Sunday, 20 November 2016 www.africanartswithtaj.com/2016/11/escaping-to-freedom-of-new-offo-period.html

The kola nut maintains a place of uncontested dignity in our sublime consciousness from generation to generation and from cradle to grave. In addition to the social values it represents, the physical and medicinal attributes of the fruit continue to make it a choice snack and utility.

Appendices



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7. Sprague, K. The Kola Nut: West African Commodity in the Atlantic World. African Study Centre, Los Angeles, USA, 2018.
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Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings by Lina Iris Viktor

Ella Tritton

10 July 2024 to 19 January 2025
Sir John Soane's Museum, London

In *Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings,* Lina Iris Viktor's contemporary artworks are dispersed between the antiquities collected by Sir John Soane at his home at No. 13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. This article will discuss how the inclusion of the temporary exhibition of contemporary works by Viktor within the Sir John Soane collection, which has remained untouched since Soane's death in January 1837, challenges notions of heritage and tradition. The interweaving of sources of art and design from across time periods, countries, ethnic groups and cultures, confronts and questions ideas of closed communities with singular ideas of their heritage and tradition tied to group identity.

Born in 1753, Sir John Soane was an architect. He was also an avid collector of 'paintings, sculpture, architectural fragments and models, books, drawings and furniture'.[1] He collected these objects from across times and places, including Ancient Egypt and Ancient Rome, but also his contemporary London.

Soane stored his collection in his own home, within the labyrinth of rooms he constructed, which are now open to the public. The collection is not ordered by theme, nor is it in any particular chronological order. Bruce Boucher, writes that the "overriding logic" of Soane as a collector, "seems one of a visual association and even opportunism rather than a purely antiquarian impulse".[2] The result is that connections and dialogues between objects and ideas across time and place are created within the museum - there is no prevailing narrative or chronology.

Perhaps this makes it the perfect setting for Viktor's exhibition. Viktor is a Liberian-British artist, who works in sculpture and painting. Although Viktor is not a collector of objects in the same way that Soane was, Viktor collects ideas, symbols and materials from sources across time periods and

[1] "Our History," Sir John Soane Museum London, accessed 11 February 2025, https://www.soane.org/about/our-history.

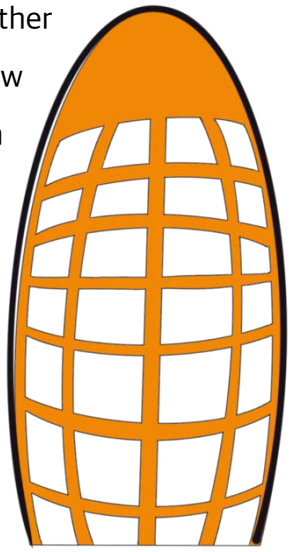
[2] Bruce Boucher, "Sir John Soane's Cabinet of Curiosities," *Rhodes Trust,* 10 June 2024, accessed 11 February 2025, https://www.rhodeshouse.ox.ac.uk/unlikeminded/john-soane-s-cabinet-of-curiosities/.

locations for her work. She speaks of time being a "continuum" with "no beginning and no end"[3] and therefore no chronology. She explores this idea of the "continuum" by drawing connections across the vast range of sources she draws inspiration from.

"Viktor's artworks become an extension of the Soane archive"

When I first entered the museum, there was little evidence of the exhibition, as most of the works are displayed within the museum collection. As I worked my way around the treasure-trove of antiquities, the artworks became clear. Once the artworks are found, they are striking, as Viktor works with a vibrant colour palette, often contrasting deep blacks with bright reds and shining golds.

Although Viktor's works are striking in their colours, and they look fresh and bold next to some of the more faded antiquities, the works are not in juxtaposition to the collection, but an assimilation. Viktor's artworks become an extension of the Soane archive - further objects to draw connections to and from. Lucy Waterson writes in her review of the exhibition that "were Soane still alive, it's not hard to imagine him making Viktor's work a permanent feature."[4]



The positioning of each of Viktor's works within the museum is considered, and each encourages a conversation between the exhibition and the Soane collection. Viktor's sculpture *Nbiru,* stands "between two casts of the Medici Venus"[5] and the gold disc, the head of the sculpture, reflects light onto them. *Ritual Thrones*, two sculptures of chairs made from gold on iroko wood, sit back to back with two gothic iron garden chairs located in Soane's

[3] "Lina Iris Viktor: Foyle Space audio guide," Sir John Soane Museum London, accessed 11 February 2025, https://www.soane.org/exhibitions/lina-iris-viktor-mythic-time-tens-thousands-rememberings/foyle-space-audio.

[4] Lucy Waterson, "Lina Iris Viktor strikes gold at the Soane Museum," *Apollo International Art Magazine*, 11 September 2024, accessed 11 February 2025, https://www.apollo-magazine.com/lina-iris-viktor-soane-museum-review/.

[5] Sir John Soane Museum, 'Sir John Soane's Museum to present Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings by Lina Iris Viktor, her first solo UK museum exhibition,' press release, undated.

(Above)
Lina Iris Viktor
Ritual Thrones (2024) in *Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings*
23 carat gold on Iroko wood
Photo: Gareth Gardner courtesy of Sir John Soane Museum

crypt, in the basement of his home.[6] In *Constellations*, three large gold and black relief paintings surround Viktor's sculpture of a woman, *Web Weaver*. The artworks in the room create a temple-like atmosphere, evoking the ambience of Soane's crypt. *II On Golden Stool* is a clay and marble vase on a bronze stool, placed in an alcove next to a window where it is easy to imagine a similar shape vase would have been placed in Soane's era. Other similarly shaped Greek and Roman vases also exist within the Soane collection. Even Viktor's works in the final exhibition room, which is solely dedicated to her works, draw connections with the Soane collection. Viktor's relief paintings are placed above the original fireplaces and the arch shape of the works "evoke the arches found throughout the museum."[7]

Situating the contemporary artworks within the Soane collection of antiquities, and encouraging connections to be drawn between them, inspires interesting questions about heritage and tradition.

(Right)
Lina Iris Viktor
Nbiru (2024) in *Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings*
Bronze (aged with patina), India ink, Iroko wood
Photo: Gareth Gardner courtesy of Sir John Soane Museum

[6] "Sir John Soane's Museum Collection Online" Sir John Soane Museum London, accessed 13 February 2025, https://collections.soane.org/object-xf290.

[7] Sir John Soane Museum, press release.

In their introduction to their collection of essays on heritage, Susan Ashley and Degna Stone define heritage as 'a social imaginary' used to define "identities in relation to the past".[8] Or in other words, "signification or valuations of the past that all humans employ".[9] As a private collection, Soane was gathering what he thought to be the most esteemed examples of art and design to draw inspiration from for his own architectural work. As former director of the museum, Bruce Boucher writes, Soane was creating a "repository of all that was best for the formation of a modern architect".[10] He was creating his own idea of heritage, a collection of objects of value from the past and present, and situating his own work within this.

"both Viktor and Soane challenge this idea of a singular collective memory and shared narrative."

You could say that in her work, Viktor is doing the same, as she collects sources from numerous different cultures and timeframes, and in doing so she creates her own idea of her heritage, which she draws inspiration from and uses as symbolic visual reference points in her artworks. The exhibition artworks are dense with these symbols. This is an individual idea of heritage - a heritage that we create ourselves from the objects that we consider of value to draw our inspiration from.

However, there are other ways of looking at heritage. Perhaps heritage is not individual, but established for us by our community. In 'Whose Heritage?', Stuart Hall argues that heritage is often seen to be a way that communities create a group identity, such as a nation-state, by the establishment of a collective memory and a shared narrative of our past. Hall writes that "objects and artefacts" are "made to stand for and symbolise" the group's "essential values".[11]

In their own ways, both Viktor and Soane challenge this idea of a singular collective memory and shared narrative. Viktor's inspiration is not tied to a particular nation, culture or group identity. She freely draws from different locations and time periods and interweaves them, in the

[8] Susan L T Ashley and Degna Stone, "Introduction," in *Whose Heritage?: Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall's Post-Nation Britain,* ed. Susan L T Ashley and Degna Stone (Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 1.

[9] Ashley and Stone, "Introduction," 1.

[10] Boucher, "Sir John Soane's Cabinet of Curiosities," *Rhodes Trust.*

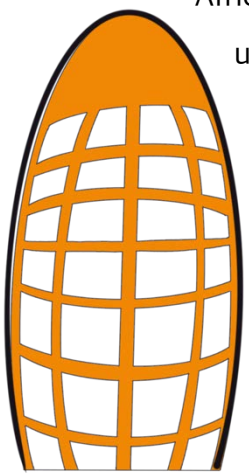
[11] Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation" in *Whose Heritage?: Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall's Post-Nation Britain,* ed. Susan L T Ashley and Degna Stone (Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 13.

same way that different cultures and communities have always drawn inspiration from each other in a mishmash of connections, with no singular chronological narrative.

In its labyrinthine, non-chronological and non-typological layout, the Soane museum also defies ideas of a single chronological narrative. Viktor said that the museum made her contemplate the "cyclical nature of time," and even how the collection "transcends time."[12] In situating Viktor's artworks within the miscellany of Soane's collection, countless more narratives and "memories" are drawn. Perhaps the title of the exhibition, *Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings,* is a nod to this idea; there is no singular collective memory to which we can define our heritage.

Viktor often takes inspiration from art and design forms from the African continent in her work, and in the exhibition press release, she speaks of wanting to pay homage "to the African modernist architectural traditions and the parallel histories of West African goldsmiths, woodworkers, craftsmen and women."[13] For the intricate symbols in *Constellations,* Viktor takes inspiration from numerous sources including works of the Dogon of Mali, Egyptian hieroglyphics, West African textiles like the hand-painted mud cloth of Mali (also known as a bogolan) and Nigerian Àdìrẹ fabrics.[14]

There has been, and still often continues to be today, an assumption that 'traditional' African art and design is derived from a heritage of "closed communities" with unique "tribal styles."[15] Yet this idea of "closed communities" has been continually challenged by academics and artists. Okwui Enzewor describes how this mode of thinking negates the history of exchanges of creative processes between ethnic groups and cultures in Africa.[16] Viktor freely draws from and interweaves sources of art and design from across countries, ethnic groups and cultures, and in doing so, challenges the idea of closed African communities with unchanging identities.



Viktor's artworks are impressive on an individual level, as they each interweave layers of symbols and meaning from numerous sources from different times and places. Hosting the exhibition at the Sir John Soane Museum, and situating her works within the

[12] Sir John Soane Museum, press release.

[13] Sir John Soane Museum, press release.

[14] "Lina Iris Viktor: Foyle Space audio guide," Sir John Soane Museum London.

[15] Okwui Enzewor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction" in *Contemporary African Art Since 1980,* (Damiani, 2009), 5.

[16] Enzewor and Okeke-Agulu, "Situating Contemporary African Art: Introduction."

collection, adds further layers of complexity, and challenges how we understand heritage and tradition.

(Left)
Lina Iris Viktor
Constellations (2016)
24 carat gold, acrylic, gouache, print on matte canvas
and
Web Weaver (2024)
Gold gilded Iroko wood, Indian ink patina, resin impregnated fabric
in *Mythic Time / Tens of Thousands of Rememberings*
Photo: Gareth Gardner
courtesy of Sir John Soane Museum

The exhibition was on display from the 10th July 2024 to the 19th January 2025. A catalogue to accompany the exhibition is available.

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Perceiving 'Heritage' in Yto Barrada's Artworks

Hafsa Emire Kanbur

Yto Barrada (b. 1971) is a Moroccan-French multimedia visual artist living and working in Tangier, Morocco, and New York City. Her artistic practice is deeply rooted in Morocco, with a particular emphasis on her hometown of Tangier, which she has extensively studied. Barrada's work explores how symbols influence daily life in Morocco and how they can reflect the country's colonial past. Her work also examines the effects of rapid urban expansion on Morocco's architectural heritage as it evolves under postcolonial influences and the gentrification of areas for tourism.[1]

This paper examines the theme of heritage through Yto Barrada's modern and abstract works, aiming to illustrate how the heritage manifests in various forms across her selected pieces and projects. The definition of heritage can be highly variable and multifaceted; in this essay, the concept will be explored through the lens of its interconnection with tradition, identity, and memory. Although heritage is a powerful concept on its own, it gains deeper significance when considered alongside these notions, revealing it not as a static or fixed entity but as a dynamic and socially constructed cultural process. Given that all these concepts are inherently tied to human existence, heritage should be understood as an active, evolving, and context-dependent phenomenon that varies across societies and historical periods. It is, therefore, a continuous and participatory cultural practice shaped by collective experiences, social memory, and shifting identities.

Moreover, this article traces this theme through Barrada's abstract paintings while questioning the position of modern African art in a globalized world. Finally, the paper reflects on Morocco's architectural modernization and transformation during the post-colonial era, led by French architects and administrators.

[1] *Yto Barrada* https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/display/materials-and-objects/yto-barrada (accessed 20/02/2025)

Barrada's works are strongly rooted in historical and political narratives. Her artistic approach is closely connected to Morocco's, and especially Tangier's, strategic location, where the Atlantic meets the Mediterranean and Northern Africa borders Southern Europe. In 1998, she launched *The Strait Project* (Fig.1), a series examining the physical, psychological, and political impact of the Strait of Gibraltar. Through this work, she documented the consequences of Morocco's tightened border controls after the European Union's 1991 Schengen Agreement. The photographs in this series expose a silent yet pervasive violence that escalated with the increasing restrictions on Moroccan travelers and African migrants.[2]

"Heritage is not solely based on a narrative or way of life inherited from the past."

Barrada's relation with Tangier's architectural, environmental, and cultural heritage and her effort to revive and restore the heritage becomes evident in the project of *Mothership.* It is a project set in the northernmost part of Africa in Tangier, overlooking the Spanish border, which remains closed to Moroccans now. It serves as a residence, retreat, dye garden, experimental lab, and family home—a space where artists, gardeners, writers, and poets can find the time and environment to rejuvenate, create, and learn.[3] It serves as an experimental space for exploring policies and Morocco's agricultural connections with the European community. The approach is based on rethinking production methods in Morocco while rediscovering and reviving traditional techniques for creating dyes, pigments, and paints— knowledge that has long existed in North Africa. In this sense, the theme of heritage has been examined based on historical narrative and knowledge that passed down through generations.

Another aspect of tradition and heritage is that they are never neutral. They tend to be biased towards those who create, sustain, and preserve them, forming a reciprocal relationship with those who shape or 'select' this heritage. It is shaped by the values it upholds and the priorities it establishes—defining what is recognized as valuable or virtuous. As Stuart Hall states, while tradition may suggest shared heritage, it does not imply uniformity or complete agreement.

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[2] https://www.moma.org/artists/42323-yto-barrada#fn:3 (accessed 20/02/2025)

[3] *Yto Barrada's Mothership* https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/yto-barrada-14953/visit-the-mothership-yto-barradas- tangier-garden

Instead, it thrives on tension and debate, serving as a space of both conflict and consensus, discord and harmony.[4]

Heritage is not solely based on a narrative or way of life inherited from the past. However, what is crucial here is the criterion for determining what is worth preserving. Heritage inevitably reflects the dominant beliefs of its time, shaped by those in power who have controlled historical narratives. These perspectives often appear natural and timeless, yet over time, shifting contexts and historical reversals expose them as specific to their era—open to challenge, reinterpretation, and revision.[5]

"Society does not simply inherit tradition; it actively shapes it by choosing specific historical events and figures, sometimes even constructing fictional pasts."

In this context, how can we perceive these themes in Yto Barrada's highly abstract artworks? Is it necessary for an artist to create representational paintings to reflect the theme of heritage in their artworks? Barrada's abstract painting series named *Autocar-Tangier* (Fig. 2) are good examples for answering these questions. In the creation of this series, Barrada turned her focus to the business logos displayed on buses traveling between Morocco and Europe. For illiterate individuals in Tangier seeking to cross the border illegally, these bold modernist logos act as navigational aids, marking bus routes and destinations and assisting migrants in mapping their escape paths. These abstract visuals function as powerful symbolic representations of global migration and the lasting impact of colonialism in Africa.[6] Here, heritage aligns with diasporic memory and identity. As Benedict Anderson described it, "an imagined community"; even though we often remain strangers to one another, we form such a community by sharing a collective vision of the nation and its significance, which we can mentally visualize.[7]

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[4] Susan L. T. Ashley and Degna Stone, eds., *Whose Heritage? : Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall's Post-Nation Britain*, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soas-ebooks/detail.action?docID=7245677.

[5] Ibid

[6] *Yto Barrada* https://www.moma.org/collection/works/165148

[7] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).

A shared national identity is therefore built upon cultural meanings that individually link each member to the broader national narrative. Like personal memory, collective memory is also highly selective.[8] Society does not simply inherit tradition; it actively shapes it by choosing specific historical events and figures, sometimes even constructing fictional pasts. While the past holds significant cultural authority, societies continuously reinterpret, modify, and redefine it to align with their present needs and identities.[9]

Contemporary African art fundamentally represents the search for a new identity in the modern and post-colonial world while also aiming to preserve the heritage of the pre-colonial era. However, it cannot entirely detach from the legacy left by the colonizers. The dilemma is that African artists who follow contemporary global art are accused of losing their originality, just as they are criticized for being stagnant when they adhere to their traditions. In this sense, the relationship between tradition, heritage, and art is problematic. The issue is not the inability of African artists to engage with the West after all; modern European artists had no difficulty absorbing African art or connecting with its past. Rather, the real problem lies in the failure to understand and interpret contemporary African art without framing it through the lens of traditional art.[10]

Another problematic aspect is the perception of modern art as superior to traditional art, while African art is often associated solely with traditional arts and crafts. The same applies to Modern and Contemporary Art museums, which have appropriated and framed 'the modern,' 'modernity,' and 'modernism' as solely Western creations.[11]

The classification of African arts imposed on African artists parallels the process of shaping cultural heritage, as both are subject to selection by authorities, evaluated based on specific criteria, and deemed either valuable or not. Moreover, this type of taxonomy, which focuses on race and ethnicity, remains superficial as it overlooks the transnational status of African artists working within contemporary global conditions. Additionally, presenting and discussing an entire

[8] Ashley and Stone, *Whose Heritage?*, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[9] Salah Hassan, "The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-Cultural Aesthetics," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*,1995 30-74.

[10] Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* (2009), 10-18.

[11] Whose Heritage?

continent—where each region embodies distinct heritages—under the single category of 'Contemporary African Art' reinforces stereotypes and rigidifies the field.

Another artwork by Barrada highlights the decolonial heritage, serving as a complementary element within the broader discourse when considered alongside other artworks. In *LYAUTEY* (Fig. 3), the theme of heritage does not focus on continuing or reviving Morocco's pre-colonial past but rather on addressing the urban architecture created in the post-colonial period and the heritage that has consequently emerged from it. These painted wooden units, titled Lyautey, are named after Marshal Hubert Lyautey, the first Resident General of French-occupied Morocco from 1912 to 1925. During his reign, Lyautey oversaw major urban development projects and performed detailed assessments of Morocco's cultural heritage and archeological sites. During this period, Lyautey worked alongside French architect and urban planner Henri Prost (1874–1959) to develop and build colonial Rabat and Casablanca. The building bricks in this installation mimic a city skyline or an aerial perspective of an urban area. Lyautey's interpretation of the popular "Arabisance" style in Casablanca emphasized basic shapes and sharp edges, drawing on aspects of so-called Arab or Islamic art rather than the ornate decorations commonly applied to create a local aesthetic. The work reflects this artistic approach and incorporates the structure of a classic building block set.[12]

"While modernization remains central, it is no longer about blindly adopting Western models;"

To understand post-colonial reformulation of architecture, it is important to discuss the French colonial system. French governance in Morocco prioritized economic exploitation rather than seeking to alter the indigenous society. This approach was explicitly articulated by Lyautey, who stated that the French provided a superior administrative framework, the benefits of an advanced civilization, material resources to better utilize the country's wealth, and a stabilizing force to uphold order against chaos.[13] During the post-colonial period, the notion of modernization continues to be a key driver of urban policy, though it has evolved into a discourse focused on

[12] *Lyautey Unit Blocks* https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/716497

[13] Djerbi, Ali, and Abdelwahab Safi. "Teaching the History of Architecture in Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco: Colonialism, Independence, and Globalization." 102-9.

identity and the pursuit of "true authenticity." While modernization remains central, it is no longer about blindly adopting Western models; instead, it aims to build upon the historical legacy of cities and their architectural heritage. This approach emphasizes the importance of tradition and heritage in urban development. Lyautey's primary concern was to maintain clear spatial divisions, ensuring that each area remained distinctly defined. He emphasized the preservation of indigenous quarters while ensuring that the "façade of the European town," characterized by grand properties designed in the French style, would stand out as a symbol of colonial authority.[14] Under the pretext of bringing civilization and modernity, transforming cities are now confronted with a new kind of heritage—one shaped by the colonizing countries, reconstructed and deemed worthy of preservation as "colonial heritage."

In conclusion, Barrada challenges traditional classifications of African art, highlighting how colonial legacies and contemporary contexts continuously reshape heritage. Ultimately, her work calls for moving beyond mere preservation to actively reinterpreting and reclaiming history. Shaped by their personal histories and current circumstances, Yto Barrada's works reflect diverse perspectives on modernity, various reactions to colonial and postcolonial experiences, and an ongoing challenge to Western dominance.

[14] Richards, David, Taoufik Ahmed Agoumy, al-ȯTayyib Bin al-Ghāẕī, and Jāmiʿat Muḥammad al-Khāmis Kullīyat al-Āḏāb wa-al-ʿUlūm al-Insānīyah. Urban Generations : Post-Colonial Cities

Fig 1., *The Strait Project,* Belvedere 2, Tangier (above), *Ceuta Border* (below). Image from here

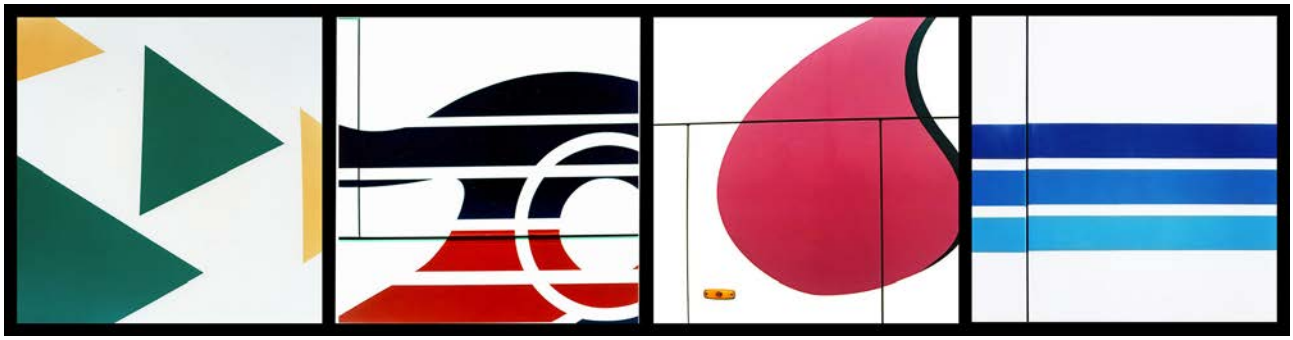

Fig 2., Yto Barrada, *Autocar—Tangier, Figs*. 1-4 2004. Image from here

Fig 3., Yto Barrada, *Lyautey Unit Blocks,* 2010. Image from here

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Section 3:

Futurity and Generative Practice

Section 3:

Everlyn Nicodemus' *Självporträtt, Åkersberga* (1982) & *Birth Mask 3* (2002): Inheritances and the construction of identity

Leah Saltoun

Everlyn Nicodemus (b. 1954) is a Tanzanian-born artist of British nationality. She left her *Chagga* community aged 19 for Europe, later returning from 1979-1980, with a conscious intention to research her cultural roots. Her art practice works at the intersection of African cultural identity, feminism and European Modernism. It stands alongside her academic research on the development of modernist art in the African continent.

This paper focuses on two works. One earlier painting, *Självporträtt*, *Åkersberga* (oil on canvas, 1982, Figure 1) in a loosely representative modernist style and *Birth Mask 3*, (2002, an assemblage of dress, hat, mask, cotton, galvanised metal, sisal on canvas, Figure 2). These works will be used to discuss her modernist and African heritages and her engagement with European feminism. This paper examines how Nicodemus uses materials and techniques in these two works to construct and express her complex identity as an African artist adopting European traditions, while challenging Western perceptions of African art.

Figure 1. Everlyn Nicodemus, *Självporträtt*, *Åkersberga*,1982, oil on canvas, 82 x 62 cm, © Evelyn Nicodemus, image courtesy the artist and Richard Saltoun Gallery

Självporträtt, Åkersberga

Självporträtt, Åkersberga [Self-portrait, Akersberga] is an early painting – her first acknowledged work is from 1980 – and was completed at the age of 28 without formal art training. This was about ten years after her arrival in Sweden. The portrait was made approximately ten years after she first encountered the racism of white Europeans towards black Africans.[1] In it, she adopts the European artistic tradition of the self-portrait.

Figure 2. Everlyn Nicodemus, *Birth Mask 3*, 2002, assemblage of dress, hat, mask, cotton, galvanised metal, sisal on canvas, 120 x 100 x 15 cm, © Evelyn Nicodemus, image courtesy the artist and Richard Saltoun Gallery

Portraiture – the depiction of individual identities – has been argued to reflect the development of individualism in Western thought.[2] Individualism, that is, the tradition of thought that values individual selves rather than collective identities, is a characteristically Western tradition. African cultures are considered collectivist[3] and have no tradition of individual likenesses. Further, the phenomenon of the artist's self-portrait is supposed to mark the changing identity of the artist from (anonymous) craft producer

[1] Everlyn Nicodemus, interview by Leah Saltoun, February 12, 2025.

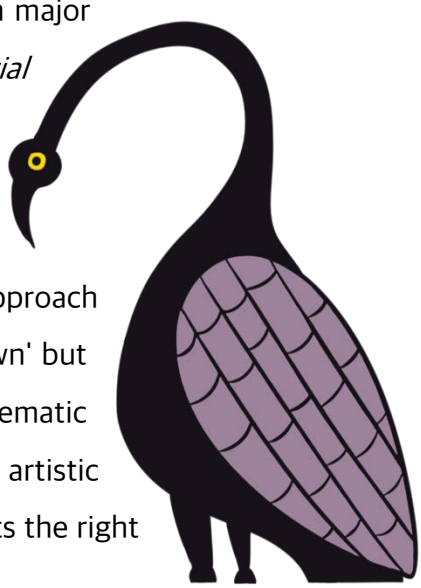
[2] Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance self-portraiture: the visual construction of identity and the social status of the artist*. (Yale University Press, 1998).

[3] H. C. Triandis, "The self and social behaviour in differing cultural contexts," *Psychological Review, 96*(3), 506-520 (1989): https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.96.3.506

to identifiable intellectual. Her adoption of this genre can be understood as consciously placing herself within this tradition.

“These features suggest that the portrait can be understood as a purposeful claim for a place within the Western and Modernist canon”

The National Portrait Gallery, which holds the painting in its collection, describes it as an exploration of ‘her identity and her sense of self’.[4] The different heads are supposed to reflect ‘the various roles she is expected to play, and her identities as a mother, lover, friend, daughter - alongside her identities as a writer and an artist’.[5] My reading of the work suggests that her identity as an artist and intellectual are dominant. This is evident in her deliberate adoption of modernist tropes, such as the overlapping and juxtaposed faces that echo Picasso’s treatment of faces after Cubism (Figure 7). By engaging with these modernist techniques, Nicodemus demonstrates her knowledge of the development of Modernism, positioning herself as an artist who is “in the know.” Picasso's influence was prominent at the time of this portrait, with major exhibitions such as the MOMA *Retrospective* (1980) and *Essential Cubism* at Tate Britain in 1983. Nicodemus’ engagement with the debates arising in relation to Picasso’s use of African sources is evident in her critique of Rubin’s ‘Primitivism in 20th Century Art’ (1984).[6] In 'Meeting Carl Einstein,'[7] she criticises Rubin's curatorial approach for treating African art as having no history, and 'no role of [its] own' but merely ‘walk-on parts in a Western play.' She questions the problematic power dynamics inherent in Western appropriation of African artistic traditions while simultaneously denying contemporary African artists the right to engage with global artistic concepts.



[4] “Everlyn Nicodemus (‘Självporträtt, Åkersberga’) by Everlyn Nicodemus ”, National Portrait Gallery, accessed March 18, 2025. www.npg.org.uk/schools-hub/everlyn-nicodemus-sjalvportratt-akersberga-by-everlyn-nicodemus

[5] Ibid.

[6] D Rubin, *Primitivism in 20th century art: affinity of the tribal and the modern*. (Museum of Modern Art, 1984).

[7] Everlyn Nicodemus, “Meeting Carl Einstein”, *Third Text* (1993): 31-38

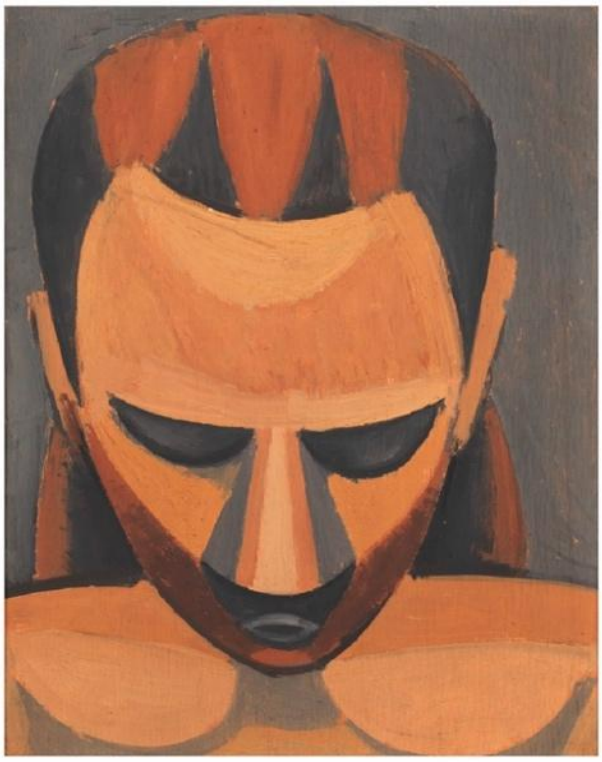


Figure 4. Pablo Picasso, *Head of a Man*, 1908, oil on wood, 27 x 21 cm, © Sucesión Pablo Picasso, VEGAP, Madrid, 2016, image courtesy Guggenheim Bilbao

Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Pierrot and Red Harlequin, Standing* from *Dix Pochoirs*, 1921, pochoir, 27.5 x 21.3, © Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, image courtesy MoMA, New York

Figure 6. Edward Saidi Tingatinga, *Untitled (2 birds with a pot)*, 1968–72, enamel on board, 60 x 60.5 cm, © The Estate of Edward Tingatinga, image courtesy the artist and Circle Art Gallery, Nairobi

Figure 7. Pablo Picasso, *Girl before a Mirror*, 1932, oil on canvas, 162.3 x 130.2 cm, © Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, image courtesy MoMA, New York

Birth Mask 3

Nicodemus started the *Birth Mask* series (2002) three years after relocating to Brussels. There, she developed connections with textile manufacturers who provided her with high-quality linen and other fabrics for her work.[11] These were used in her *Inter-netting* series (1997), and subsequently in the *Birth Masks*. These assemblages relate to Nicodemus' own biography, the personal trauma of her inability to carry pregnancies to term with her husband, Kristian Romare.[12] Traditionally, death masks are created to preserve the likeness of the dead individual, serving as a memorial and means of commemorating identity. The '*Birth Mask*' concept invokes this tradition in the title and the colourless linen and sisal but also inverts it so that the works connect birth and death. Nicodemus places objects associated with birth, such as christening gowns, her infant daughter's shoes and rounded forms suggesting pregnancy, in still, caged arrangements that invoke museum display.

"The grimace of the mouth and staring eyes can be readily understood in the birth context as depicting the extremity of labour."

Birth Mask 3 has stretched Belgian linen and positioned found objects, such as an Asian mask (acquired from a Brussels flea market) and a Palestinian child's dress (a gift to her from a visit to Negev in 1978).[13] The objects are secured to the linen foundation using the cage-like grid of metal wire. Nicodemus calls this technique 'inter-netting' and connects it with 'being a prisoner behind chicken wire'.[14] Sisal string is woven or sewn across the grid, a technique that connects her work with feminist art's interest in textile and sewing,[15] and to the sewing and knitting of clothing that traditionally accompanied preparation for birth.

[11] Stephanie Straine, *Everlyn Nicodemus* (National Galleries of Scotland, 2024).

[12] Everlyn Nicodemus, interview by Leah Saltoun, February 13, 2025.

[13] Ibid

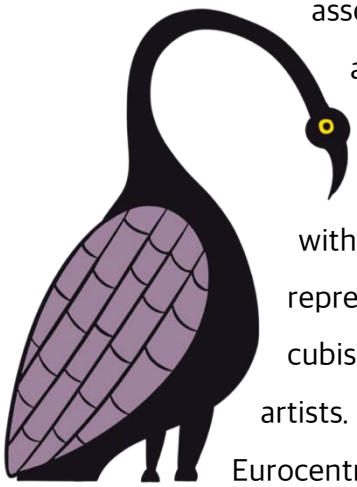
[14] Everlyn Nicodemus. "Can Visual Art Intensify the Existential Debate on Genocide? With Reproductions of Several Art Works." *Genocide Prevention Now* (2012).

[15] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. (London: Women's Press, 1984).

The mask is stylistically Indonesian, but its use is tied to its expressive potential, regardless of provenance, according to the artist.[16] The grimace of the mouth and staring eyes can be readily understood in the birth context as depicting the extremity of labour. The use of a mass-produced, culturally ambiguous mask subverts any expectation of essential 'Africanness' in the work of an 'artist of African origin', and positions her work within a global, contemporary framework. The Palestinian dress adds another layer of cultural hybridity and underlines her international identity and mobility. She describes the dress as a treasured object kept for decades before finding its place in *Birth Mask 3*.[17] The embroidered dress and the woven sisal connect this work to broader feminist traditions, which reclaim a place for textiles and the craft of sewing - associated with women and with craft – within contemporary art practices.

"Feminist artists often sought to elevate historically feminised crafts of sewing and embroidery into fine art addressing themes of female labour, identity and the female body."

Everlyn Nicodemus' *Självporträtt, Åkersberga* (1982) and *Birth Mask 3* (2002) represent two distinct phases of her artistic practice, representing a transition from representational painting to assemblage with found objects. I see both works as representing the artist's identity as a contemporary figure in an international context who sees herself as entitled to take part in the developments of Modern and contemporary art. *Självporträtt, Åkersberga* engages with Western Modernism through its fragmented, multi-faceted representation of the self, situating Nicodemus within the modernist and cubist canon while challenging its exclusion of Black, female and African artists. The painting asserts her identity as a Black female artist within a Eurocentric art historical framework, free to adapt the language of Modernism to critique the system itself.



[16] Everlyn Nicodemus, interview by Leah Saltoun, February 14, 2025

[17] Ibid

During the time she was creating *Birth Mask 3,* Nicodemus had moved from painting to assemblage, bringing her work into line with contemporary feminist practice. Feminist artists often sought to elevate historically feminised crafts of sewing and embroidery into fine art addressing themes of female labour, identity and the female body. Like Nicodmeus they also engaged with themes of race, sexuality and social justice through textiles. For example, Magdalena Abakanowicz had been working with hemp and sisal, making organic forms blending textiles and sculpture and Tracey Emin made textile and sewing assemblages addressing personal biography and experiences of trauma. The shift signals Nicodemus' evolving understanding of contemporary art practices, but also her continuing interest in pursuing aspects of her own personal experience and identity.

Everlyn Nicodemus asserts her right to belong in the mainstream of contemporary art, challenging Western perceptions of African art as primitive and ahistorical. Through *Självporträtt,* she engages directly with Modernism, claiming a right to belong to that tradition as an African woman. The painting adapts Modernist techniques, blending them with references to her African identity, such as the mask-like features and textured surfaces reminiscent of *Tinga Tinga* paintings. By adopting the self-portrait tradition, Nicodemus positions herself as an intellectual and cultural figure, within a Eurocentric art historical framework. She aims to claim this intellectual heritage in defiance of what she understood as its efforts to exclude her.

In *Birth Mask 3*, she shifts her approach, moving away from overt self-representation to explore intimate themes touching her identity, through the assemblage. This work stands firmly within the contemporary art canon, engaging with concerns characteristic of feminism, shaped by her sense of herself as a person implicated in issues of contemporary interest such as international identity, mobility and psychological trauma. The use of culturally hybrid objects, such as the Asian mask and Palestinian dress, reflects her ongoing negotiation of heritage, blending African, European, and global influences. These themes, her collaborative projects and her role as an artist-activist align with both her personal history and with contemporary practices. Ultimately, Nicodemus' work embodies her claim to be an internationalist, firmly rooted in the mainstream of contemporary art's concerns.

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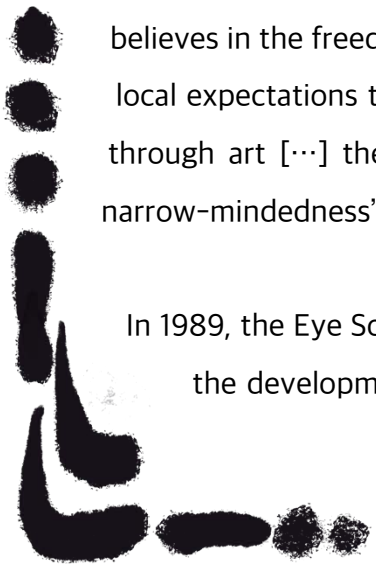
Gani Odutokun: shaping a philosophy of freedom, in conversation with spontaneity, subalternity and tradition

Anjali Chudasama

Gani Odutokun (1946–1995) was a Nigerian artist and a member of the Eye Society who championed the artist's right to unrestricted expression. As Chika Okeke, founding member of the Zaria Society, observes, for Odutokun:

> the world was his constituency [⋯] The only determinants of the sources from which he drew inspiration are technical – studio exigencies and the changing environment. He reclaimed the individual freedom of the artist: the freedom to absorb or reject any particular art tradition, also the freedom to combine all since the modern artist is a product of many cultures, the new global experience.[1]

While Okeke was a member of the Zaria Society, founded in 1959, his observation of Odutokun remains accurate, as it corresponds with the manifesto of the Eye Society – also founded in Zaria – which emphasises the liberation of the artist. Their manifesto states: 'The Society believes in the freedom of the artist' and 'does not expect artists to be tied down to mere local expectations to the detriment of other dynamic cultural developments of mankind through art [⋯] the Society believes that the artist should not be seen to propagate narrow-mindedness'.[2]



In 1989, the Eye Society was 'founded out of a need to address some obvious threats to the development of the visual arts, particularly in Nigeria. The country's economic crash in the 1980s and the subsequent unsolved problems' led to 'a monstrous game of money-chasing by almost every citizen,

[1] Chika Okeke, 'A Story from Nigeria' in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss, Flammarion, (1995), 61.

[2] Jacob Jari, 'The Eye Manifesto', in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss, Flammarion, (1995), 212.

including artists'.[3] This was paired with 'increasing expectation locally for artists to create distinctly African Art' and 'a growing interest in the West for collectors to acquire kitsch'.[4] Guaranteeing sales, prominent galleries offered substantial financial incentives for artists to create pieces which adhered to their preferences '- essentially, eviscerated works which are immediately shipped to the West'. Jacob Jari notes the artist's predicament: 'for artists to survive [,] they have to produce saleable works - and this means, largely, saleable in the West'.[5] Pieces become 'a commercially viable commodity'; creativity risks being buried, and alongside it, aesthetic evaluation.[6] Responding to this, the Eye Society sought for contemporary art to be appreciated independently of heritage, politics, and tradition.

Figure 1, Uche Okeke, *Nza the Smart*, pen and ink, 1958

The Zaria Society, the opposition to the Eye Society, believed in the Natural Synthesis manifesto, which advocated for reworking elements of Nigerian and African, and European traditions. This philosophy culminates in the production of pieces like founder-member Uche Okeke's, *Nza the Smart* (1958), which is 'composed from a bewildering range of abstract motifs' and depicts characters from well-known Igbo folktales.[7] Okeke's use of 'crisp pen-and-ink' visually harkens traditional art practices like uli and brings it closer to the European line drawing tradition.[8] This insight compels me to recollect Henri Matisse's *Visage* (1952).[9] Both societies wanted to give a voice to the Other - the subaltern - but differed in defining 'voice'. Where the Zaria Society promoted artistry built upon 'folklore traditions [⋯] from the ashes of the rich traditional art works that were destroyed by foreign acculturation', the Eye Society were dedicated to 'the emancipation of the Nigerian contemporary artist'; for an artist can

[3] Jacob Jari, 'The Eye Society', in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*, ed. Clementine Deliss, Flammarion, (1995), 213

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism*, Duke University Press, (2015), 101.

[8] Ibid.

[9] https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2017/dessins-modernes-et-contemporains-pf1706/lot.17.html?locale=en

Figure 2, Henri Matisse, *Visage*, 1952, India ink and brush on paper, 65 x 50 cm

produce a 'meaningful contribution' only when *they* possess the autonomy to translate *their* vision to *their* chosen mode of expression.[10]

Chika Okeke argues that Odutokun has applied the philosophy of his Western, expatriate tutor, Charles Argent.
When the members of the Zaria Art Society and the other artists sympathetic to the doctrine of Natural Synthesis left the school in the early 1960's, there remained the old Zaria that had existed before the Rebels (whose impact on the school did not last).[11]

Argent's stylistic principles had a lasting impact on Zaria's artistic output. Argent 'insisted that the painter must explore colour in order to understand fully its nuances, its hidden character'.[12] Via this, 'the artist unites established theories of colour with his own personal experience with painting processes and media'. By removing pressure to engage with heritage, notably bearing similarities to the Eye Society's manifesto, Odutokun carries out 'Argent's precepts to their logical conclusion'.[13]

"Importantly, the artists' inclination and objective fuels this flux; 'everything else is variable'."

Argent and the Eye Society encourage artistic independence, and this manifests itself in Odutokun's method of 'accident and design', observable in *Friendly Whispers at Sunset* (1980), which depicts a 'colour splash landscape' awash with sunset-coloured hues.[14] Jari argues that Odutokun's painting embodies

[10] Jari, 'The Eye Society', 214.
[11] Okeke, 'A Story from Nigeria', 59-60.
[12] Ibid, 60.
[13] Ibid, 61.
[14] Jacob Jari, 'The Eye Society', 214.

> his philosophy of life. [⋯] Odutokun sees world cultures being brought together by ever-greater achievements in communication - such achievements, and even existence itself, are possible through accident and design. [⋯] He pours liquid colour on the canvas to begin a symbiosis of accidental flows with directed ones. These eventually culminate in a picture that can be representational or non-representational.[15]

To create *Friendly Whispers at Sunset,* Odutokun used oil pigments that had been thinned and rendered fluid, and he dripped them directly upon the canvas. This metamorphosis of the pigment encapsulates Odutokun's artistic philosophy: a desire to cultivate outside of the bounds of African tradition, to allow the artist to be the sole possessor of the canvas. Colours ooze and merge, producing a labyrinth of 'vertical, horizontal or whirling lines', from which familiar forms are perceived.[16] 'In them we see the artist speak of the complexities of modern, existential man'; we are shown that there are: 'no boundaries between what is African and what is not'.[17] Importantly, the artists' inclination and objective fuels this flux; 'everything else is variable'.[18]

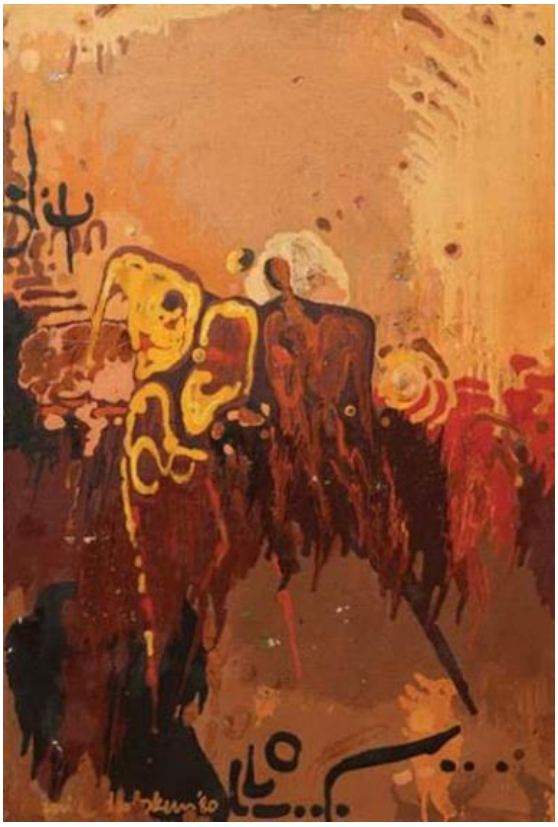


Figure 3, Gani Odutokun, *Friendly Whispers at Sunset*, 1980, oil on board, 75 x 45cm, Collection of the Odutokun Family

The concentrated mass of dripping mahogany in the middle ground is highlighted, to the left, with honeyed yellow, and to the right, with saffron. Odutokun's linear motifs allow for figures to be perceived. The transitional period of sunset suggests the romantic themes of introspection and existentialism. However, this tranquillity is eclipsed by the main body of the figures being a reddish brown, which reminds the viewer of dried

[15] Ibid.

[16] Okeke, 'A Story from Nigeria', 61.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

blood. Subsequently, this echoes the bloody history of colonialism and the Biafran War (1967–1970).

"Odutokun's philosophy, and by extension that of the Eye Society, repositions the artist as a free creator whose production is compelled by their own vision rather than inherited traditions or expectations."

The trickling paint resembles an oil spill, which aligns with Odutokun's having produced this piece three years after Nigeria's second Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC). Festac Town 'was intended to evoke modern age [⋯] and there was the promise of state sponsored economic development fuelled by oil revenues'.[19] FESTAC wrote local festivals and village dances into

> a modern framework of regional, national, and global "communities". Moreover, in remapping the African diaspora, FESTAC produced a vision of the black and African world [⋯] that reflected the global circuits of oil in an expansive model of racial equivalence and inclusion. [⋯] FESTAC broke from the earlier discourses of negritude and Pan-Africanism by placing their essentially oppositional strategies within an emerging black world that shaded into lighter hues at its edges.[20]

Interestingly, the latter observations are present in the colouring of Odutokun's supposed figures. The puddle-like application of colour corresponds to the above political connections made by the viewer, illustrating that Africa's heritage cannot help but be woven in, despite active rejection. Furthermore, the fluidity mirrors the arbitrary borders of Africa; how it was not demarcated by ethnic or linguistic lines, and the displacement of identities. A concluding question is posed: How can one possibly create an identity if the borders of one's country have been shaped by colonialism?

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[19] https://festaconline.com.ng/festac-town-history-and-background/

[20] Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria,* Chicago, Chicago University Press, (2005), 13.

Odutokun's visual language is reminiscent of 'the action or automatic painting that blossomed in the west'. [21] Odutokun's spontaneity evokes Jackson Pollock's 'distinctive drip paintings' like *Number 1A* (1948). [22] 'Contact with the Surrealists encouraged Pollock to experiment with Abstract Expressionism – a European movement that denied the influence of canonical art through its painterly, non-figurative effects'. It 'was seen as the art of the free world' much like how the Eye Society, unlike the Zaria Society, rejected heritage-based artistic expression. Drawing inspiration from Chinese calligraphy, like how Islamic calligraphy and architecture influenced Odutokun, 'the free-form movement of the painter's arm created patterns over the picture's surface[23] Significantly, this practice was

Figure 4, Jackson Pollock, *Number 1A*, 1948, oil and enamel paint on canvas172.7 x 264.2 cm, MOMA New York

> improvisatory, being influenced by the Surrealist idea of 'automatism', a kind of spontaneous drawing that came from the artist's subconscious. The description of this technique indicates the way in which the traditional academic reliance on reason and rationality was removed from the process of art. Instead, the canvas became a record of an artist's own creative processes.[24]

Where Pollock drew on Surrealist philosophy, Odutokun drew upon that of the Eye Society, and both were affiliated with movements that sought to expand the scope of art by rejecting expectation.

Édouard Glissant's theory of the 'right to opacity' is harkened by my discussion of spontaneity, particularly his conclusions of 'privileging the notion of agency while understanding hybridity in the contemporary world'. [25] The Martiniquan writer posits that reality is theoretical; 'this

[21] Okeke, 'A Story from Nigeria', 61.

[22] https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78699?artist_id=4675&page=1&sov_referrer=artist

[23] Dana Arnold, *A Very Short Introduction to Art History,* Oxford, 2020, 74.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Anjali Prabhu, "Interrogating Hybridity: Subaltern Agency and Totality in Postcolonial Theory." *Diacritics*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2005, 76-92, 77.

transforms the thinker into an agent'.[26] Impulsivity is probed through Glissant's statement: 'I think and I exchange. This is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics is not provided in advance'.[27] Thus, truly spontaneous pieces cannot be produced if the artist is pressured to engage with heritage. For Glissant, opacity is necessary 'for the constitution of the Other, just as uncircumventable difference is the basis for relations between all things'.[28] Ergo, he defends abstraction. Opacity does not preclude representation. This can be read alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's statement: 'When we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work cannot say becomes important.'[29] Odutokun's piece is opaque in its ambiguity, but it is *whole*. *Friendly Whispers at Sunset* denies its viewer certainty of what is being portrayed, but this very denial of transparency allows for a successful portrayal of the Other, and this ambiguity illustrates ultimate artistic agency.

Odutokun's philosophy, and by extension that of the Eye Society, repositions the artist as a free creator whose production is compelled by their own vision rather than inherited traditions or expectations. Conversing with notions of opacity and representation, Glissant and Spivak highlight the importance of portrayal. While Odutokun's precise intentions behind *Friendly Whispers at Sunset* remain indeterminate, this very ambiguity is an assertion of artistic freedom, and it embodies the right of the artist: *to simply create*.

[26] Ibid, 86.

[27] Ibid.

[28] https://www.frieze.com/article/opazität

[29] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader,* (Routledge, 1995), 24–28, 28.

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Barn, diverse peers and unbridled artistic freedom – DIY decolonial heritage by Triangle workshops

Ruut Nurk

The Triangle Network is a small London-based organisation that supports intensive art workshops led by local artists. It currently receives its base funding from Arts Council England, but has also been supported by various public and private foundations and individual donations.[1] The initiative dates back to the summer of 1982, when sculptor Sir Anthony Caro and art-collector businessman Robert Loder conceived a free-form intensive workshop in an old barn near New York.[2] Though the initial idea was to hold only one workshop, it has since grown into the Triangle Network and being part of 90 projects in 41 countries with over 4500 participating artists.[3]

The Triangle Network primarily supports the creation of intensive, short-term, non-didactic spaces of co-creation for artists, which are deliberately informal and non-institutional. The primary focus is on experimentation and practice rather than results, within an atmosphere of discussion and "learning by exchange" - the sharing of practices and ideas through horizontal relationships.

The focus of this article is whether, and how, Triangle Network workshops partake in the production of contemporary heritage. Taking the early Thupelo workshops of 1980s South Africa as a case study, I propose that Triangle Network workshops create a space for self-expression that is conducive to moving beyond colonial and other inherently oppressive conceptual frameworks.

[1] Alessio Antoniolli, the Director of Triangle Network, email message to author, March 25, 2025.

[2] Mitch Albert et al., eds., *Triangle. Variety of Experience around Artists' Workshosp and Residencies* (UK: Triangle Arts Trust, 2007), 79, 85.

[3] "About the Triangle Network | Triangle Network," www.trianglenetwork.org, n.d., https://www.trianglenetwork.org/triangle-network/about/.

Heritage

Following Stuart Hall's conception of heritage, it is the active and continuous preservation, presentation, and creation of culture. Heritage is not a given - not simply a valuable material and intellectual collection passed down with varying degrees of accuracy - but a social construct in constant remaking.[4] Whoever decides what is included in "heritage" also determines which identities and ways of living are valued and made visible, regardless of whether one takes a specific interest in "heritage" or not. Heritage is therefore inextricably linked with decolonisation, given its role in determining the representations and vocabulary through which individuals can describe their identity, the world, and their place within it.

"Whoever decides what is included in "heritage" also determines which identities and ways of living are valued and made visible"

Decolonisation

Decolonisation is the struggle for emancipation from the colonial intellectual heritage that has denigrated colonised peoples on multiple levels: culture, religion, physical and mental capabilities, social structure, appearance, and more. It aims to "radically reconstruct knowledge, power, being, and life,"[5] creating new ways of seeing the world that restore the pride of the previously colonised people.[6] By refusing both sides of the colonial dichotomy - the colonial subject over-determined[7] by colonial discourse, and the coloniser's conception of the ideal rational, cultured man - decolonisation enables individuals to become self-determining and self-reflexive persons with both individual and collective agency.[8]

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[4] Stuart Hall, " Whose Heritage? Unsettling 'the Heritage', Re-Imagining the Post-Nation," in *Whose Heritage? : Challenging Race and Identity in Stuart Hall's Post-Nation,* ed. Susan L.T. Ashley and Degna Stone (Taylor & Francis, 2023), 14-15.

[5] Sian Hawthorne, "The Margins of Philosophy. Week 20: Decolonial Epistemology: The Future of Philosophy". (Lecture, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, March 18, 2025)

[6] Pramod K. Nayar, Frantz Fanon (New York: Routledge, 2012), 96, 104.

[7] I.e. their identity is defined by the stereotypes created by the coloniser, denying them self-determination.

[8] Sian Hawthorne, "The Margins of Philosophy. Week 19: Decolonisation and the Radicalisation of Thought: Frantz Fanon". (Lecture, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, March 18, 2025)

Triangle Network's potential in creating heritage aligned with decolonisation

Though seemingly simplistic at face value, the steadfast commitment of Triangle Network workshops to artistic freedom and their determined avoidance of epistemic hierarchies ensure their decolonial potential in the creation of new heritage. It is the participants who decide everything from the medium and content of their work to the schedule and nature of social interactions.[9] Though it requires extensive personal contribution, it enables participants to create a communal working space that responds to the particularities of their individual backgrounds, as well as to the physical and social context of the workshop.

"For decolonisation to occur, people need the opportunity to create something radically new, without any guidelines constraining their intellectual or material creation, while also having the possibility to engage with other realities previously denied to them."

Decolonisation is not a prescribed theme of the workshops, nor a criterion for the selection of artists, yet I believe it to be an especially appropriate term to describe Triangle Network workshops. Indeed, it would go against the ethos of decolonisation to attempt to further it through institutional or otherwise hierarchical relationships which, even with the best intentions, convey fixed knowledge from an epistemic authority rather than co-create it within an epistemically equal environment.[10] The role of a teacher inevitably confines the discourse within predetermined conceptual boundaries. It would be contradictory if, in the process of re-establishing *agency,* one were only permitted to create new knowledge under the guidance of someone else and within their conceptual framework.

[9] Albert et al., *Triangle,* 82

[10] Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2005), 72.

For decolonisation to occur, people need the opportunity to create something radically new, without any guidelines constraining their intellectual or material creation, while also having the possibility to engage with other realities previously denied to them. Triangle's self-driven, dynamic exchange enables precisely this: the comparison and expression of different lived experiences in an environment that does not place demands regarding an artistic or social "result." This is further supported by the organisers only 'intervention' in the workshop's autonomy. Namely, the organisers' aim is to select artists who would be positioned to benefit and contribute to such a non-didactic workshop and whose backgrounds are as diverse as possible in terms of gender, practice, origin, and more.[11]

"The artworks that "stand for and symbolise" the essential values heritage embodies stem directly from, and represent, the lived experience of the artists."

Triangle workshops have the potential to make a significant contribution to decolonial heritage, as the artworks created are not constrained by goals and ideas predetermined by cultural-political institutions. The artworks that "stand for and symbolise" the essential values heritage embodies stem directly from, and represent, the lived experience of the artists. Such an approach to art creation not only leads to a more inclusive and representative heritage, but also, more broadly, to the creation and proliferation of new, more inclusive and precise frameworks of meaning. These frameworks provide feasible decolonial alternatives for understanding oneself and one's environment.

Does the theoretical success of the workshop model correlate with the personal experience of the audience and the artists?

The potential for decolonial space and the creation of a more representative heritage will be noteworthy, provided it is felt and actualised by both spectators and participants. Audience

[11] Jill Trappler, Thupelo and other Triangle workshops, interview by Ruut Nurk, March 15, 2025.

response will be briefly discussed at the beginning. As for the artists' experience, I will focus on the Thupelo workshops, which took place in South Africa between 1985 and 1991, drawing on background information and interview excerpts from participating South African artists.

The exceptional popularity of the Open Days at Triangle workshops rhymes well with the hypothesis of inclusive and democratic heritage, which is closely related to decolonisation. The public is invited to visit the participating artists for a day, with attendance ranging from hundreds to as many as a thousand people, interested not only in the artworks but also in conversing with the artists. To the extent that the artists are, or come to be, connected with local communities and their problems, they are able to reflect those voices, ideas, and preoccupations.[12] Robert Loder describes the beneficial flexibility afforded by the lack of any prescribed theme, taking the Wanchai, Hong Kong workshop as an example. The location – a building due to be demolished – led the artists to question what should be done with disused buildings that remain important to the "fabric of the local community."[13]

"...described the workshop as a challenge to white academics who wanted to direct the art of Black people."

Although any artist could still work on topics entirely unrelated to the local or any other community, the decisive openness of the workshop is able to create an atmosphere of inclusion and dynamism. This was particularly true of the Thupelo Triangle workshop, which took place during the politically charged climate following the South African apartheid government's declaration of a state of emergency in 1985.[14] Jill Trappler, co-organiser of Thupelo and an artist,

[12] Crucial here is the attitude that the artists, coming from outside the community, take – namely that they would be mindful of their position where they can *give* their perspective, but that the final word would always be left to the local, however ambiguously defined. The out-group artist can *contribute*, but may not claim an equal, let alone "objective" view on the ways of the local community.

[13] Albert et al., *Triangle,* 79.

[14] South African History Online, "State of Emergency – 1985," Sahistory.org.za, July 21, 2015, https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/state-emergency-1985.

describes how Thupelo and its Open Days were significant for their inclusiveness.[15] People – regardless of being Black or white, subculture artists[16] or academics – could come together in an easy and dynamically creative atmosphere.[17]

David Koloane, another artist and co-founder of the Thupelo workshops, echoed that people came from "all backgrounds" and described the workshop as a challenge to white academics who wanted to direct the art of Black people.[18] The radical break from the established approach to art education was also highlighted by Jill Trappler, who commented on the relationship between Thupelo and cultural-political institutions. Specifically, the incongruence between conventional art education formats and Thupelo's emphasis on artistic freedom – over institutional oversight and measurable results – led to a cold reception from universities and political institutions. Despite Thupelo's huge impact, it was neither embraced by these institutions nor incorporated into school curricula at the time.[19]

"…a space to "paint without any restrictions," giving him "freedom and boldness" among expectations that Black artists should only focus on figurative township art."

Crucially, the artistic and social openness was deeply felt by the participating artists. Many described it as their first occasion to meet people from different, and at times historically segregated, backgrounds and socio-cultural groups in a space where everyone was an equal participant in a shared activity. Jade Gibson, a researcher and visual artist, noted in her PhD thesis that she and many other participants viewed one of the workshop's major strengths as its ability to facilitate encounters with other identities and ways of being, within a neutral and intimate setting where prejudices and disagreements could be openly discussed – if not resolved. The

[15] The difficulty of creating such a space is well illustrated by the fact that the records of the organisation of the early workshops were disposed shortly after to avoid persecution by the apartheid state.

[16] Namely, the lack of formal artistic education or affiliations with art institutions was not an obstacle to participating in Thupelo.

[17] Trappler, interview.

[18] Polly Savage, *Making Art in Africa: 1960–2010* (Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2014), 160.

[19] Savage, *Making Art in Africa*, 206.

informal and self-directed manner of the exchange ensured a more comfortable environment, making it more likely to influence participants' attitudes, especially among those who had felt alienated in formal settings.[20]

Dumisani Mabaso, a printmaking artist and educator, described how Thupelo affirmed his artistic freedom and enabled him to pursue abstraction and experimentation in a political climate that had initially denied Black people even the right to become artists, and later encouraged them to "paint politics", typically in a figurative style.[21] A similar sentiment was expressed by Sam Nhlengethwa, who described his experience of Thulepo as a space to "paint without any restrictions," giving him "freedom and boldness" among expectations that Black artists should only focus on figurative township art.[22] Finally, Kagiso Pat Mautloa spoke of his elation at the abundance of resources and peers in an open atmosphere, which for him marked a "breaking point" in becoming "more liberated" in his artistic practice.[23]

Currently,

the organisers of Thupelo workshops are unable to access their space and archives which were closed to them five years ago, most probably related to political tensions. Thupelo workshops have thus continued on a lesser scale under the name of Siyabonana workshop together with Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town. The need for such a space of creating together over all other divides, however, is there strongly still as it was when Thupelo was initially created - which gives hope that it will be re-established!

The intended informality and open-endedness were perceived by "almost every" participant in the Thulepo Triangle Network workshops and had a profoundly positive impact - both on the participants' artistic practices and their awareness of people from other socio-cultural groups.[24] Firstly, the workshops successfully encouraged participants to develop uncompromisingly personal methods and styles, enriched by experimentation and input from a diverse range of artists. Secondly, the process facilitated the

[20] Jade Gibson, "Making Art to Make Identity: Shifting Perceptions of Self amongst Historically Disadvantaged South African Artists" (2005), 129-131.

[21] Savage, *Making Art in Africa*, 163.

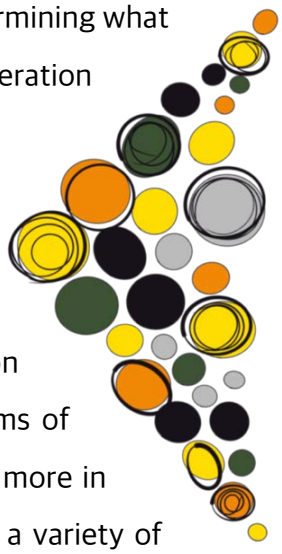
[22] Savage, *Making Art in Africa*, 167.

[23] Savage, *Making Art in Africa*, 173.

[24] Albert et al., *Triangle,* 126.

dismantling of long-held prejudices by mending the lack of understanding between historically segregated communities. Thus, I believe Thupelo can be seen as a place conducive to decentering oppressive conceptual frameworks - colonial and otherwise - that construe stark and stereotypical distinctions between people. It fosters the creation of decolonial heritage rooted in the personal and lived experience, rather than in externally guided and perpetuating ways of thinking that lack individual engagement and contribution.

Triangle Network workshops, as exemplified by Thulepo, can therefore be seen as possessing strong potential to question and move beyond the vestiges of colonial thinking - more specifically, the hierarchical monopolistic position of cultural-political institutions in determining what constitutes valuable artistic work, and what forms of art education and cooperation are deemed legitimate.



However, the wider impact of the work created through the experience of Triangle Network workshops - particularly in enriching the cultural vocabulary through which identities and worldviews are shaped - depends on how heritage is understood by society at large. In other words, which forms of heritage are *presented* and *exist in public consciousness?* To bring heritage more in line with the diversity of those participating in a culture - so that it affirms a variety of socio-cultural identities - decolonisation, democratisation and decentralisation need to take place in a *redefinition of heritage* within cultural institutions as well as political, journalistic, and educational spheres.

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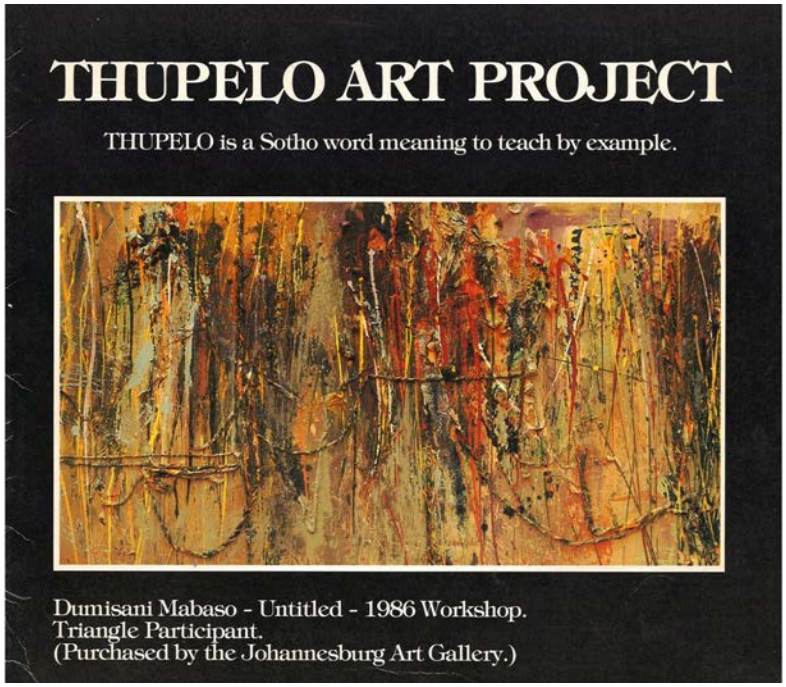
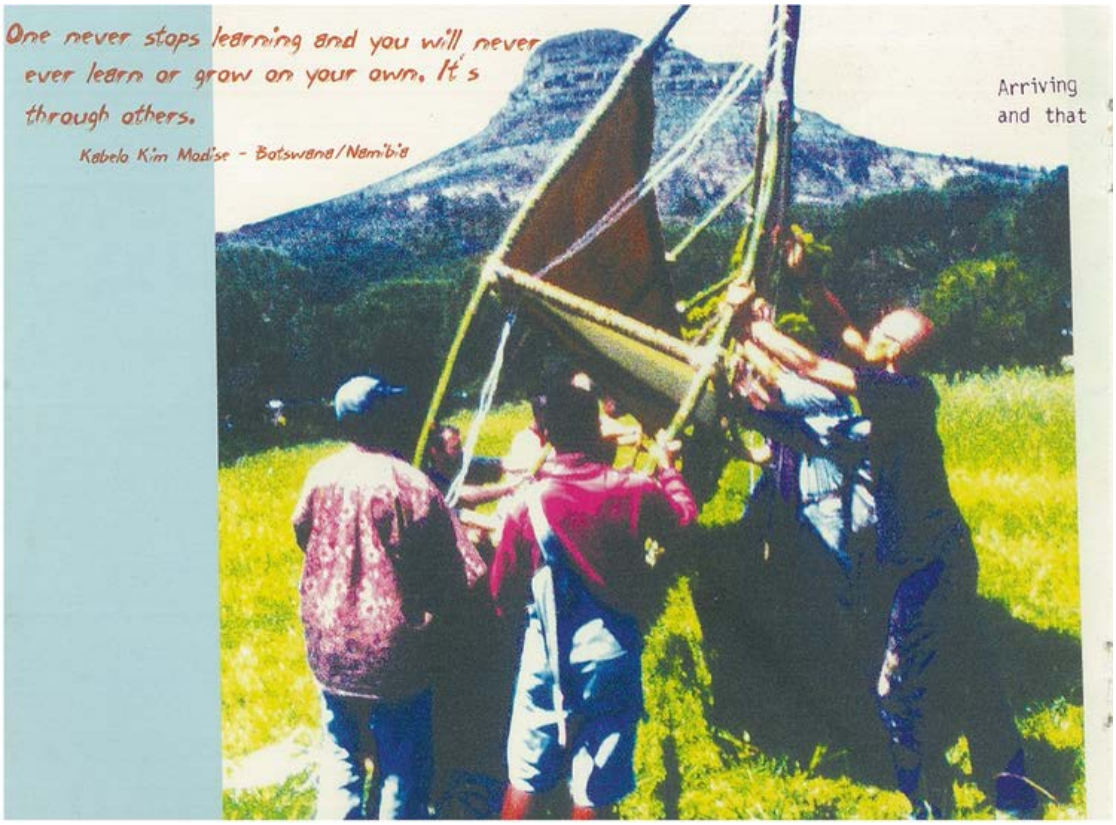
Illustrations

Group painting in the clay studio during the first Triangle workshop in Mashomack Fish and Game Preserve, near Pine Plains, 100 miles north of New York City from 11–25 July, 1982 © Working Group of Triangle Workshop in New York



Thupelo catalogue from the 1985 workshop © Working Group of Thupelo, South Africa



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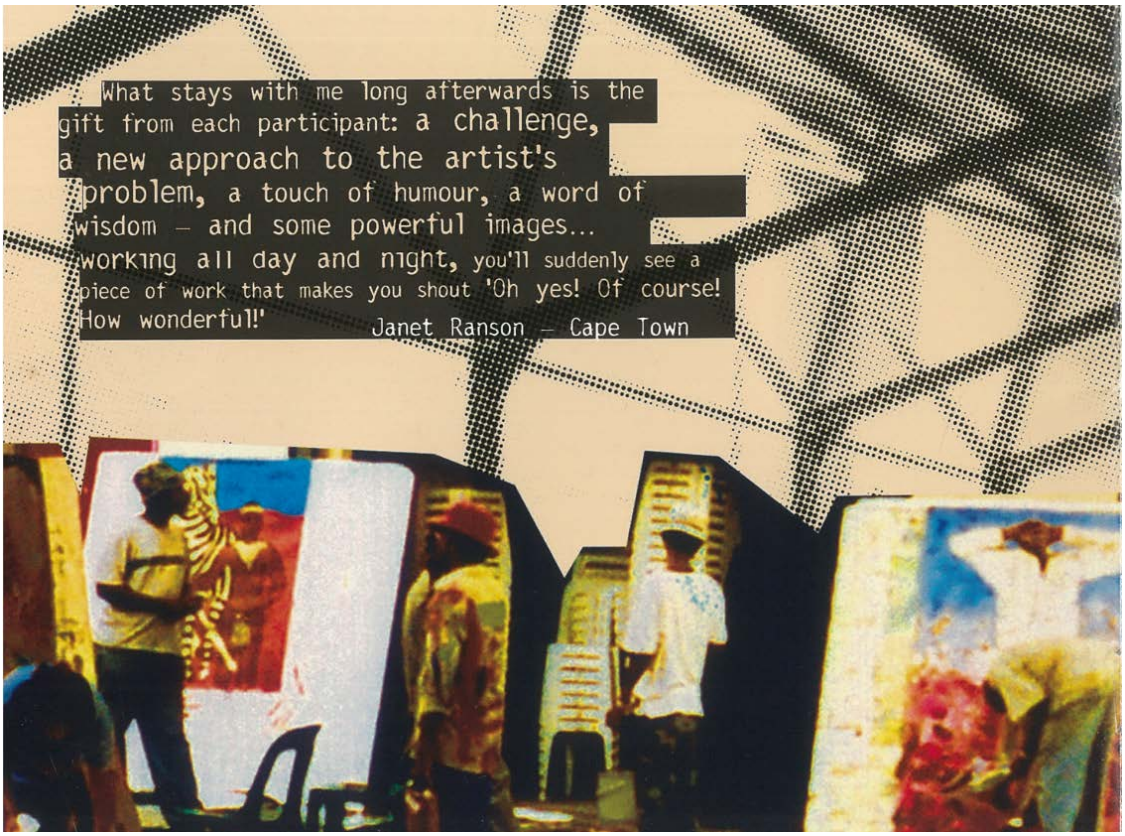

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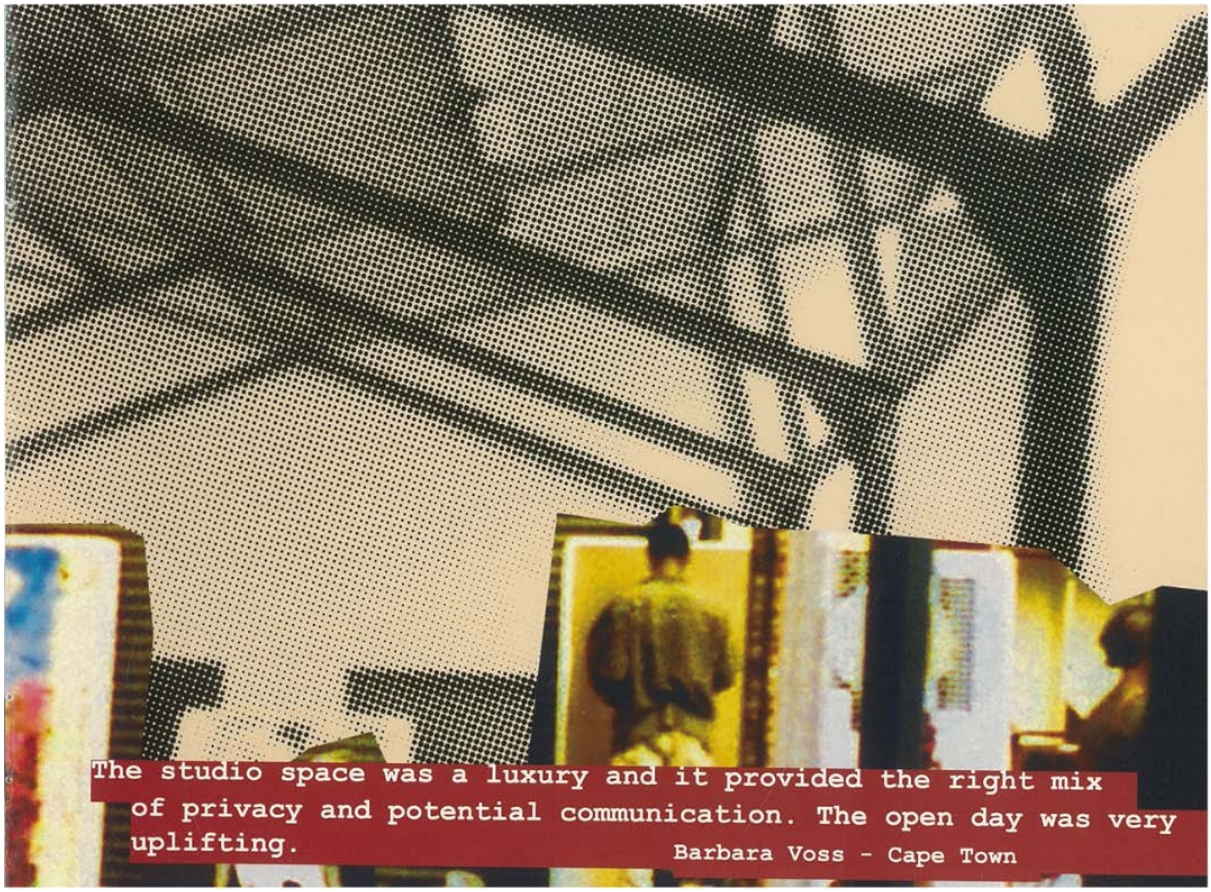

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