Book Review: Rethinking African Cultural Production

Ekotto, Frieda and Kenneth W. Harrow, eds.
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What is African culture, where and how is it produced, and who defines it? *Rethinking African Cultural Production* sets out to explore answers to these questions in ten wide-ranging essays on African culture and the critical debates that surround it. An introduction penned by Frieda Ekotto and Kenneth W. Harrow explains the origins of the collection in a joint conference held at Michigan State University and the University of Michigan in October 2010, and highlights the problems of definition, reception, and critical vocabularies and epistemologies that have marked the study of contemporary African cultural production. Plotting a timeline for postcolonial African culture through struggles for decolonization, early post-independence, and an era of intensifying globalization coupled with the waning power of the national, the editors emphasize the need to reassess critical paradigms according to the changing location of artists, critics, and networks of dissemination. They highlight the proliferation of new technologies and patterns of circulation to inquire into the continued currency of paradigms of understanding and analysis that emerged in the final decades of the twentieth century, calling for models that account as much for situational or formal differences as for diversity in thematic content or style. These new models, Ekotto and Harrow caution, must reawaken awareness of rather than gloss over variable access to means of production, materials, and power among African cultural workers and critics. The collection is thus meant, the editors emphasize, to challenge existing hierarchies of value with a view to multiplying work on African cultural production and its relation to current formulations of global culture.

The essays that follow emblemize the trickiness of delimiting African cultural production by geographic location, encompassing as they do cultural production normally grouped under

regional categories such as Sub-Saharan, North, Diasporic, West and East African, and Indian Ocean. While the overall focus of the collection remains on literature and feature films and literary criticism, individual essays furnish a compelling overview of the evolution of key cross-media debates, touch on new media forms, and treat a number of issues of institutionalization and dissemination likely to be of interest to scholars of multiple media. These include the criteria for designating a work authentically African; the politics and economics of literary history; creative economies and public interest; the technology of writing and its relation to artistic politics; the unequal power of academic work in Euro-America and Africa; the lingering imperialist structure of academic instruction in the U.S.; film's relation to society; the value of ephemeral performances; and the challenges of representing home across globalized networks.

Following the lead of the introduction, all of the chapters, though some more explicitly than others, address the position of scholars and critics of African cultural production, revisiting key issues and debates in the fields of literary and cultural criticism. Authenticity, ethnographic burdens, the value of realism, rapidly evolving exhibition and publication trends; disparities in critical trends on the continent and in the United States and Europe, and the fraught position of African artists and critics at home and abroad are recurring themes. As a whole, the collection asks which forms of cultural production, which works, and whose criticism and evaluations really count, and who or what finally wields the power to assign value. As many of the authors make clear, older debates that originated in literary studies continue to evolve along multiple lines, reshaping our understanding and assessment not only of contemporary cultural production, but also of past works. The most compelling essays of the collection, and those most likely to be useful to media studies researchers, are ones that engage with others in the collection, whether to develop additional perspectives or contest their premises, with the result that they provide a vivid image of on-going debates.

Essays by Eileen Julien and Magali Compan bookend the collection and offer one such productive counterpoint. Julien's chapter calls for models of literary criticism that not only account for transnational production, but also destabilize truisms about the nature, formal approaches, and concerns of literature produced within and outside Africa. Compan's contribution offers a nuanced reading of how Mauritian writer Shenaz Patel's work exposes the unspoken dimensions of a "home" long structured by transnationalisms, globalizations, and attendant marginalizations. Meanwhile, Olabode Ibironke argues for a closer examination of how "extended and globalized channels of production and distribution" influence critical perceptions of how African literature emerged and who its audiences are as a way of examining more closely their purported influence on the content and form of these works themselves (41). Along related lines, Moradewun Adejunmobi's essay highlights how African artists, writers, and filmmakers have seized upon proliferating media forms and channels to develop new forms of creativity with which criticism has yet to catch up. Her treatment of problems of circulation, whether of poets who bypass traditional publication channels via online videos, or the increasing displacement of books by not only videos but also online magazines, is likely to be of particular interest to media industries researchers. Cameroonian novelist Patrice Ngangang's intriguing chapter, "In Praise of the Alphabet," refreshingly returns "to the basics," the writing that makes literature possible in the first place. Exploring two precolonial definitions of writing, Ngangang rejects the periodization of African literature set out in the editors' introduction in favor of a return to an artistic paradigm that perceives all the arts as part of the same system, while reasserting the intimate connection between art and thought.

Turning explicitly to the politics of criticism and western academia, Tejumola Olaniyan's essay probes the underpinnings, geographical presuppositions, and identity politics of the theory versus politics debates of the early 1990s, cautioning that much is lost when cultural critics disregard material realities as well as audiences on the continent. Lamia Benyoussef's chapter likewise scrutinizes academic politics, underscoring how the ingrained culturalist presuppositions regarding the value and values of creative and academic work in North Africa result in troubling re-enactments of sexist, colonialist paradigms in French Departments in the United States. To counter this impulse, she argues not only for greater breadth in course offerings, but also for strategic alliances among academics in historically marginalized literary fields. While both of these articles speak to institutional concerns of relevance as much to media as literature scholars, the articles that follow turn to specific cultural products. Safoi Babana-Hampton's essay advances the need to move away from primarily ethnographic readings of North African immigrant cinema and foreground issues of aesthetics, though she ultimately focuses more on content than on form in the film she examines. Valerie Orlando offers an overview of key developments in filmmaking in Morocco and their relation to civil society; she briefly invokes internet videos and difficulties of distribution and problems of piracy, before turning to an argument for analyzing these works within the parameters of francophone studies. Last but not least, Mária Minich Brewer's essay on African diasporic theater in France examines how theatre creates as much as represents an experience of threshold, highlighting how the ephemeral nature of theatre runs counter to the logic of dominant media platforms.

Regardless of readers' familiarity with African culture and the debates that surround it, *Rethinking African Cultural Production* offers a useful compendium of essays that traces trajectories of debate, identifies a wealth of understudied and emerging areas of scholarship, and exemplifies the diversity of African cultural production as much as scholarship on it. It will be helpful to anyone concerned to reflect on the positionalities and assumptions that structure past and present academic conversations and institutions.

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