

Africa North, South, and In Between

– Jessica Winegar & Katarzyna Pieprzak

It is by now a well-known and remarked-upon fact that there exists a problematic divide between north and south in the scholarship on Africa, a divide that ignores centuries-long continental circulations of people, objects, images, and practices. Another scholarly divide, which is well known to Middle East scholars, but less so to Africanists, exists between the eastern and western parts of North Africa. This regional partitioning is reproduced in the structuring of academic departments/centers, professional associations, funding organizations and publications, as well as in the often parallel structuring of visual-culture venues, such as museums and their collections, exhibitions, and film series. Visual-culture practitioners — artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians — also frequently experience and reproduce this divide.

The historical reasons for this compartmentalization of knowledge production are multiple: an environmental determinism that presumes a lack of activity in or movement across the Sahara; the association of North Africa with Islam — often accompanied by an assumption that Islam defines North African life and renders it distinct from the sub-continent; the association of North Africans with slave-traders — not as also enslaved; essentializing notions of racial and ethnic uniformity in the north, and difference from the south; and the association of the north with higher levels of modernization and modernity. Many of these constructions of difference are traceable to the colonial era, when territories were carved up into administrative units, with little regard for existing human relations and movements, when the people living within these territories were divided and placed into colonial ideological hierarchies of value, and when their material and visual culture was collected and organized according to corresponding thematic distinctions. These colonial spatial and hierarchical divisions were also often reproduced within the anti-colonial nationalist discourse of North African elites. Their reinscription continued into the post-independence period of nation — and geopolitical-alliance-building, most notably within the pan-Arab movement. Yet there were important early attempts to think across these boundaries, and these deserve further attention.

Africanity and North African Visual Culture

There are several central texts dating from the 1960s on the notion of Africanity. These manifestos and essays address the term's relevance in relation to North Africa. During the early post-colonial period, the term "Africanity" was coined by Africa's theorists as a way to talk about spatial and political affiliations on the continent. For instance, Jacques Maquet's work posited an African unity while stressing north-south difference and continental divisions; Léopold Sédar Senghor argued for common values and cultural exchange; and articles by the editors of the Moroccan cultural journal, *Souffles*, fundamentally questioned the terminologies of cross-continental engagement.

Jacques Maquet's well-known 1967 study, *Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, examined how histories and shared cultural and social practices unite peoples from sub-Saharan Africa. However, when it came to relations with North Africa, he argued that "It cannot be denied that the separation of these two worlds is definite and rests on well-established academic tradition."¹ For Maquet, the division between north and south of the Sahara is not due to racial difference, but rather to a lack of shared cultural grounds and to minimal cultural exchange, concluding that, "of course, the Maghreb civilization belongs to the continent of Africa, but it does not seem to me to belong to Africanity."²

While Maquet used the term Africanity to exclude North Africa from the cultural unity of “black” Africa, the very same year Léopold Sédar Senghor—first President of independent Senegal, and co-theorist of the concept of Négritude—spoke about the shared foundations and characteristics of *Africanité* and *Arabité* in his 1967 speech at Cairo University. Claiming that the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural values that these terms evoked were in fact shared and symbiotic, Senghor argued for a political continental unity supported by a similarly shared history of anti-colonial struggle and a humanist practice of cultural exchange. He argued that the time had come to deconstruct divisive colonial categories and constructions: “It is time for us, the ex-colonized, to rid ourselves of complexes inculcated by the former colonizers.”³ In order to do so, Senghor posited that African unity must be founded on “points of cultural convergence” and he identified two obstacles to African unity: linguistic divisions between Francophone and Anglophone Africa, and the “gap between Arab-Berbers and Negro-Africans.”⁴ Senghor did not believe that the—conventionally assumed—gap between these two latter identity categories should be erased. Instead he urged “Arab-Berbers” and “Negro-Africans” to move closer together through a recognition of cultural specificities combined with symbiotic values, stating “In order to give and receive. It is necessary that you remain *Arabs*. Otherwise you would have nothing to offer us. [...] But it is also necessary that we, sub-Saharanans, remain *Negroes*. To be specific, Negro-Africans.”⁵ Senghor valorized cultural specificity while also working toward a goal of unity through practices of exchange that would lead to the realization of an African humanism.

In the 1960s, the immediate post-independence era in Africa also witnessed numerous artistic and cultural festivals on the continent. Many of these public platforms strove to highlight cultural exchange and convergence across the erstwhile Saharan divide. The Moroccan cultural journal *Souffles* not only documented these events but also moved beyond Senghor’s perspective. In *Souffles* the writers questioned the success of these pan-African festivals when it came to actually uniting artists or working across conventionally established cultural, ethnic, and political divides. For instance, Abdellah Stouky’s essay—published in *Souffles* in 1967—on the 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, that was organized under the guidance of then-President Senghor, questions the founding principles and terminology of the festival, particularly Senghor’s overarching—and essentialist—concept of Négritude, going so far as to ask, “Does the Negro exist anymore? Are we still at the point where we must racialize thought?”⁶

In another essay, this time on the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival held in Algiers, the *Souffles* editorial board—founded and lead by Abdellatif Laâbi—collectively addressed the lack of substantive activity in the wake of the 1969 festival. They bemoaned how important resolutions articulated by artists and intellectuals remained purely discursive. For the *Souffles* group, Africanity would have to signify more than just a statement about shared values, cultures, and practices of exchange. For them, Africanity was a rallying call for concrete political action.

Today, scholars, artists and other producers of visual culture continue to grapple with the partitioned discursive and institutional structures handed down in part from colonialism—divisions further exacerbated in recent contexts of local, national, and global conflict. At present, impatience with these partitions, combined with significant post-Cold War changes in the intensity of certain kinds of transnational circulations, have converged to make an unreflective stance towards north/south and east/west divisions untenable. Although the shortest route for an artist from Cairo to meet an artist from Abidjan is still through Paris, the current continental circulations of culture producers, art objects, and visual media are more numerous and more frequent than at any other point in the modern period. At this time, we must not only actively seek to break down scholarly divisions based on false assumptions with suspect historical roots, but we must also examine—in a more concerted way—how such divisions get reproduced in multiple contexts within a range of histories and contemporary contingencies.

We cannot take enduring divides for granted, but rather examine the multiple ways in which they have been both created and transgressed in visual culture and through its complex circulation. By taking how the notion of Africa has been constructed, circulated, and challenged as our starting point, we must work against essentialist notions of the Maghreb in the west or Mashreq in the east of North Africa. There are several common themes that we believe constitute a productive basis for future research on how visual culture in and of North Africa is linked to the rest of the continent, and vice versa. These common themes are politics, circulation, and performance/commodity.

Africa as Politics

During the immediate post-independence period, unified notions of pan-African and of pan-North African culture were created through the concepts of *Africanité* and *Arabicité*. The discourse of these terms may be understood as attempts to reconcile a desire for modernization with a politics of cultural decolonization. Indeed, no full discussion of the contemporary visual culture of North Africa can ignore how Africa comes to be expressed as a representation, a category, and a practice in relationship to political histories, structures, and struggles that have either divided, or traversed divisions. Along these lines, we can think about how cultural production may alternately create or disable the concept of Africa with regard to colonial histories, modern nation-states, political movements, and racial/ethnic hierarchies. New scholarship and artistic practice can examine how Africa has been imagined as part of a political transnational visual practice, especially within configurations of race and ethnicity.

Africa as Circulation/Africa in Circulation

While Jacques Maquet claimed that “exchanges between the peoples living on the borders of the Sahara were not sufficiently intense or numerous to create cultural unity,” subsequent scholarship has challenged this contention and identified the movement, displacement, circulation, and exchange of peoples, images, and ideas across the Sahara and across the continent as fundamental characteristics of Africanness in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁷ In current work, we need to address the political nature of transnational movement, and analyze recent histories of cultural and visual exchange and restrictions on exchange. For example, manufactured borders and areas of arbitrary detention and criminalization have accompanied the contemporary desires of indigenous communities for mobility—forms of policing that limit image circulation abroad and restrict the production of the visual within local national discourses. Intra-African identity and the continental circulation of people, images, and ideas are often positioned as responses to the political work of the individual nation-state and its dominant cultures. But, ironically, Africa is also often erased in the interest of a larger transcontinental politics. This phenomenon bears further scrutiny.

Africa as Performance and Commodity

Africa is not only a visual construction, political category, or institutionalized identity, it is also a performance and a daily practice that can be, and increasingly is, commodified. Africa is performed by artists and peoples as a means to seek recognition from various nation-states, NGOs, and businesses in order to move beyond post-colonial nationalism and to claim membership in a larger, more cosmopolitan and trans-national marketplace of ideas. Africanness is an identity that, through performance, may be used to navigate daily life. People perform and enact discourses of African belonging as they seek agency in nation-states that simultaneously exclude and subsume minority cultures into dominant models. When notions of Africa are engaged in the visual culture of/in North Africa, these notions are frequently commodified ones. Moreover, many times such engagements with Africa are only made possible through the very process of commodification. Certainly, the new forms of categorizing and circulating ideas, objects, images, and bodies discussed earlier cannot

be fully understood without examining the multiple ways that they attach to marketing agendas, consumer desires, and commodity circuits. For example, growing Western interest in “contemporary African art” has converged with practitioner interest in bridging north/south divides, leading in part to the development of new institutions and exhibitions that bring artists together from all over the continent.

In our view, “contemporary African art” has become a highly marketable art/commodity status for new collections and funding initiatives. This has in turn compelled a number of North African artists to explore—and embrace—African identities and linkages. This plays out in terms of how they interpret or present their work, as well as through their relations with other artists. While on the one hand this development has helped artists escape some of the boxes into which North African artists had been placed—e.g., Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern—it also expands another already existing category of “African” that persists as a box nonetheless. This is not to say that North African artists merely make themselves out to be African to gain exposure, or that we should forget that sub-Saharan artists will have a significantly more difficult time dropping the Africa label when they want to. Rather, we feel it is critical to question the ways that certain artistic subjectivities are enabled by and produced within markets, while not being completely determined by them. It is also important to question the effects of new markets on older cultural forms, such as *gnawa* for example.

Future Interventions

We call for moving beyond merely lamenting the myopic north/south and east/west divides into an era of continued and concerted research directly on this topic. We argue for proceeding in a way that does not simply look for and uncritically celebrate continental circulations, but rather investigates them in all of their differences, contingencies, and blockages. Such a project will necessarily involve some unpleasant moments, as the pernicious persistence of continental inequalities is recognized, utopian visions disintegrate, and as scholars and practitioners are forced to cede control over geographic regions and institutional territories. Fortunately, this project is already underway. In the summer of 2009, Cynthia Becker organized a joint conference in Tangier between scholars from the American Institute of Maghrebi Studies and the West African Research Association—based in Dakar—on the subject of “Saharan Crossroads: Views from the North,” which was followed by a conference in 2011 in West Africa on “Views from the South.” It is precisely this type of cross-continental academic cooperation and exchange that is necessary in order to open the dialogues that will start breaking down persistent academic barriers.

We find it relevant and important that scholars and artists considering the question of Africa in relationship to North Africa have found it productive to focus on the Sahara as a territorial space of intra-continental human interaction and as a source of iconographic images of that interaction. We suggest that future research could more directly consider how the Sahara becomes central to different groups’ imaginings of the continent as viewed from the north. A focus on the Sahara enables us to uncover historical and contemporary continental circulations of culture. We can also pay more attention to how these circulations are not always “free-flowing,” but are instead continually structured by group divisions, nation-state boundaries, and political and economic inequalities. Finally, we suggest that it would be fruitful to think more about the ways in which attempts to break down north/south divides are still rooted in a potentially limiting territorial imaginary. While we believe the shift to Saharan studies is a valuable intervention, surely there are continental circulations of visual culture and ways of thinking about north/south connections that are not necessarily related to the desert’s sands or its imagery.

The most important future intervention that we identify at this point in scholarship and artistic practice centers on race. In our view, we need to pay special attention to the thorny, but important, issues of racism and stereotyping in the construction of Africa in visual culture, especially

that emerging from North Africa. Africa is most frequently signified in various forms of pejorative visual culture tied to problematic depictions of race and culture. Depictions of Africa as a remnant of a past from which the modern North African has emerged, or depictions of Africans as threatening internal others—the celebration of which constitutes a strategy of containment—need more critical dissection. Likewise, the construction of Africa as black and/or traditional for putatively positive ends, such as the construction of transnational and/or transcontinental artistic movements, needs more critical analysis in terms of race theory. Colonial era stereotyping of sub-Saharan Africa not only still adheres in both of these formulations but also continues to be overwritten by new post-colonial and post-Cold War stereotypes of Africa and Africans. Rather than ignoring race, assigning problematic race constructions to the colonial period, or desiring that the era of racialized thought be over, scholars of North Africa should carefully and rigorously examine racial ideologies present in contemporary North African visual culture and substantively engage with race theory emerging from the linked disciplines of Atlantic studies, Africana studies, and African-American studies. It is crucial for future research to take seriously the continued, changing, and contingent ways in which racial ideologies continue to shape the visual culture in an of North Africa.

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| <p>1 Jacques Maquet, <i>Africanity: The Cultural Unity of Black Africa</i>, trans. Joan Rayfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 15.</p> <p>2 Ibid.</p> <p>3 Léopold Sédar Senghor, <i>The Foundations of Africanité</i>, trans. Mercer Cook. (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1971), 83.</p> | <p>4 Ibid., 86.</p> <p>5 Ibid.</p> <p>6 Abdellah Stouky, "Le festival mondial des arts nègres ou les nostalgiques de la negritude," <i>Souffles</i> 2 (1966): 45.</p> <p>7 See <i>Critical Interventions</i>, no. 5 (Fall 2009).</p> |
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