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Positively Popular: African Culture in the Mainstream

Introduction

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African popular culture resists analysis because of the profoundly unsettling histories of these three ideas: “Africa,” the “popular,” and “culture.” In addition, linking terms that are already, in varying ways, mutually constitutive triggers an uneasy terminological feedback that originates in Romanticism and the tension between Herderian cultural nationalism and Rousseauian universalism. This tension is evident in one of anthropology’s founding fathers, Edward B. Tyler. While he posits that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law custom, and any other capabilities [. . .] as it is acquired by man as a member of society”(1), thereby suggesting that culture is a universal human attribute, he also argues that “a transition from the savage state to our own [sic] would be practically, that very progress of art and knowledge which is one main element in the development of culture” (27). In the latter citation culture is not universal but the sign of progress, a teleological movement towards a clearly European ideal. The concept of culture, and its study in cultural anthropology is haunted by this conceptual distinction and (con)fusion between culture as a human attribute and as an exclusively European achievement.

Like “culture,” the notion of the “popular” does not have unambiguous valence. Its vexed status originates in its appearance with the emerging urban proletariat, in the shift from folk to mass culture that accompanies capitalism’s advance.¹ In contrast to folk culture (a static idealization), popular culture, particularly as mass culture, is from the outset—overtly or covertly—a negation—or worse, a regression in which the integrity of nature is lost and the human achievement of (high) culture degraded. As the most developed critical apparatus of capitalist material culture, the Marxist tradition provides two useful and conflicting conceptions: that proposed by the Frankfurt school and that of the Gramscians and subsequent Manchester Cultural Studies School. From the first group’s perspective, popular culture breeds a false consciousness in the proletariat.² In this context it is synonymous with the fake, the aesthetically barren, and the narcotic. Conversely, while Antonio Gramsci is in many ways ambivalent about it, he is also keenly aware of its importance. Picking up on Gramsci, the Manchester School sees popular cultural practices as sites of struggle and, ultimately, of counterhegemonic potentiality. The Manchester School also challenges anthropology’s monopoly, bringing the field within the purview of politics, philosophy, and criticism.

Here, then, is why the specific idea of African popular culture represents such a challenge. While the concept of culture is ambivalent, it is largely informed by a (European) history that places Africa at its outer edge, making the continent the border dividing the inside and outside of culture. It is, as Christopher Miller has shown, the West's constitutive negation. Likewise, while the idea of the popular has been the source of contention, that debate has taken place within an industrialized context. Even the Manchester School focuses on class conflict in a manner that excludes Africa because it is pre-industrial.³ Consequently, a comprehensive look at the idea of popular culture in Africa has come only lately, particularly outside the realm of cultural anthropology.⁴ New looks at television (Adeleye-Fayemi, Harding), magazines (Lindfors, Nuttall), music (Diawara, Coplan, Graebner), and literature (Newell, Ricard), to name but a few examples, are increasingly showing the richness of the field and the need to continue what has just barely begun. Accordingly, the essays collected here cover important developments in, and new approaches to, the field. Beyond adding to and/or updating earlier material, this collection nevertheless distinguishes itself by exploring a broader range of works than may have been previously considered.

Stephanie Newell, for example, here powerfully challenges the traditional axes of race, class, and place by which we determine African popular culture's boundaries, by investigating the autobiographical travel narratives of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century working class palm oil traders, or "white ruffians." According to Newell, these texts are paeans to the colonial project that question it as well; they are defenses of white privilege, and yet uneasy about it; finally, they adhere to notions of class privilege while undermining them.

Olivier Bourderionnet also challenges questions of belonging and popularity by examining two musicians, Tiken Jah Fakoly and Corneille. In the process, Bourderionnet uncovers the complex esthetic and financial circuits that influence the production and reception of African popular music in Africa and the West. He emphasizes the ways in which the personal migration and/or exile of the singer intersect with the nomadic ebb and flow of his music and how issues of exile and identity become a subject matter for these artists' songs.

Returning to a more exclusively African context, Uzoma Esonwanne provides us with interviews of three major video directors from Nigeria. The three, Amaka Igwe, Tunde Kelani, and Kenneth Nnebue, tell us how they arrived at this medium, the reasons for video's success, their objectives, the conditions under which they work, and the relationships they perceive between their own expressive choice and other popular forms.

Carina Yervasi, in turn shows us how Dani Kouyaté's 2004 film *Ouaga Saga* creates a comic narrative that addresses a broad Burkinabe audience. She argues that the filmmaker combines humor and magical realism to speak to the reality of everyday conditions. What particularly interests Yervasi is Kouyaté's use of "mixing, layering, overlapping, and overdubbing" and the ways these techniques disturb the expected mimetic assumptions of filmic realism in a manner that both appeals to mass audiences and breaks down representational expectations of African cinema.

Dominic Thomas interviews the award-winning novelist Alain Mabanckou about his immensely successful blog. The interview offers an informal and highly productive exploration of what Thomas calls "new technological contact zones."

Prompted by Thomas, Mabanckou discusses audience, modes of address, textual ownership, as well as the practical, ideological, and even ethical issues an author faces when intervening in this new technology.

Tom Odhiambo in turn uses the rise of the popular novel in Kenya in the 1970s as a gauge of the radical changes in social, economic, and political conditions that gripped the country after independence from Great Britain. In particular, he focuses on what he calls the figure of the “underdog” in these novels as a means of assessing Kenya’s dramatic urbanization and the ways in which the urban poor, those largely excluded from the national economy, cope or survive in the face of adversity.

Devin Bryson focuses on Cameroonian-Swiss author Simon Njami who has experimented with the detective novel, children’s literature and, in the text that interests Bryson, *African Gigolo*, a deconstructive postcolonial pornography. *African Gigolo* plays with and challenges what he calls a “heteronormative postcolonial discourse” as it specifically applies to the black male subject.

Bogumil Jewsiewicki continues the topic he explored in Karin Barber’s *African Popular Culture* on the role of painting in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa. There, the author followed a pictorial esthetic derived from the advent of a mercantile economy. Here, Jewsiewicki examines what has happened to this tradition following the fall of Mobutu and the rise of Kabila. He argues that earlier ideals give way to pessimistic representations of overcrowded spaces. In the process, paintings move from private back to public space, from the living room, symbolic of bourgeois success, to the street, symbol of its failure or inaccessibility.

Lydie Moudileno uses the *Adoras* romance series to examine the ways in which the category of the popular and the field of francophone literary studies are historically intertwined—how francophone literature has been repeatedly equated with the popular while trying to make a place for itself in the high-literary sphere. She then demonstrates how these novels underscore where writers and theorists of francophonie are always-already in danger of recreating modes of exoticization and marginalization.

Finally, in my own essay, I show how Malian author Aida Madi Diallo’s 2001 crime novel, *Kouty, mémoire de sang*, employs the detective genre to question literary representations of the African continent. Of equal importance is the way she challenges the misogyny of the crime genre, including works by fellow African crime writers. To accomplish this, Diallo breaks down the boundaries between “masculine” crime fiction and the “feminine” romance novel.

These essays confirm that speaking of African popular culture is a challenge. Nevertheless, while the specific object remains difficult to define, it is a rewarding, not to say necessary, task. The question of the popular when situated in Africa reveals the complex ways in which the discourse of analysis is imbricated in a historical continuum that brings together, for example, class, race, gender, and sexuality, not as isolated categories, but as specifically constituted through the juxtaposition between a same and an other in which Africa has always, perhaps, played the most dramatic role. Thus, locating the popular in Africa is, as the essays repeatedly show, a radical and necessary gesture precisely because it insistently underscores the degree to which Africa is and always has been an integral component of a modernity that it has helped—and continues to help—produce.

NOTES

1. See Gramsci, in particular, the section entitled "People, Nation, and Culture."
2. For a particularly striking example of this, see Adorno's reading of the popular music industries.
3. This absence is perhaps most dramatically evident in Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* where Africa never really transcends its role as idea.

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