

# BOOK REVIEW

**Frieda Ekotto and Kenneth W. Harrow, eds. *Rethinking African Cultural Production*.** Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 170 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$30.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0-253-01600-3.

*Rethinking African Cultural Production* is a compelling and welcome volume of ten incisive essays that were presented at a symposium on “critical theory and the production of African literature and cinema” (17) held at Michigan State University in 2010. Ekotto and Harrow’s introduction sets the terrain for the essays in rather categorical terms, based on their view that African and global “conditions of production today represent a new configuration” (2). The editors proclaim the need for new creative and theoretical imperatives, aesthetics, and paradigms in order to grapple with the implications that these changes present for the production, circulation, consumption, and appreciation of African arts. The argument is that previously dominant critical paradigms are passé, from negritude to nationalism (uniformly associated with the specters of authenticity and territorial boundedness) to even hybridity. The new era, as presented here, is propelled by a range of key historical, socio-political, and technological developments, such as the awareness that more and more African artists are located in western metropolises; the proliferation of new technologies and media; and the creative and institutional limits and possibilities that stem from the specific locations and geopolitics of Africa and the globe. These developments, according to the editors, raise questions regarding the apprehension and practice of problematics such as identity, authorship, sexuality, and the aesthetic options and choices that artists have at their disposal.

The first six chapters coherently map the intellectual traditions that characterize the practice and appreciation of African literature and cultural production, while the last four (by Safoi Babana-Hampton, Valérie K. Orlando, Mária Minich Brewer, and Magali Compan) present nuanced case studies on Maghreb / French Cinema, African Theatre in France, and Mauritian literary production, respectively. Inasmuch as the contributors concur with the “shifting paradigms” that the editors note, they make a number of salient and cautionary observations about the degree(s) of change(s) and their implications for creativity and criticism.

© The Author(s) 2020. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of African Studies Association

Eileen Julien and Olabode Ibrinke question the significance attributed to location as a new factor. They recall that the works produced by foundational writers at the turn of the twentieth century were enmeshed within cosmopolitan and transnational currents of mobility and ideology, circuits of dissemination and interpretation, as well as multiple and fractured audiences and readers.

Patrice Nganang, in a fascinating discussion that draws on a longer historical lens and on the works of Mediterranean and Cameroonian writers since 1377, questions the reification of “African” in identitarian and cultural pronouncements on what African literature is or should be. Instead, he poses the generative question “What is writing in Africa?” (80) and points to a more varied and expansive sense of practices and genres that qualify as writing (rather than the restrictive modern idea of literature) and how these may be instructive for the possible ways in which current practices and concerns in African arts can be read.

Moradewun Adejunmobi teases out the mediations that flow from new technologies and media, elaborating a layered argument that demonstrates the range of creative, authorial, political, and aesthetic choices, tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes that analyses need to consider and that exceed the binarist ways in which location is often considered. Tejumola Olaniyan and Lamia Benyoussef present intriguing analyses on positionality within the academy. Both explore how the geographic and discursive locations of academics are riddled with power and epistemological contradictions and contestations that are based on the articulations between history, politics, class, gender, and race, among other elements. Both discuss how these social factors deeply influence the intellectual paradigms and institutional trajectories that shape scholarship on the continent and elsewhere.

The coherence of the volume hangs on the political and ideological threads of two related challenges: the socio-political and institutional asymmetries that are key determinants in the production of culture and knowledge and its reception at home and abroad; and a critique, for the most part, of Northern and universalizing scholarship that is, often, thin on contextual, historical, and archival grounding (as is the case with variants of Critical Theory). What is also laudable is that the perspectives of the contributors are at times in political and theoretical tension with each other in ways that are potentially generative for further reflections. For example, the suggestion that African writers based abroad are more formally experimental and treat a wider and more taboo range of themes is disputed. Numerous examples of innovation on the continent are pointed out and, as especially Benyoussef and Orlando caution, art produced in the North that is supposedly groundbreaking can also be viewed as variations of orientalism.

*Rethinking African Cultural Production* is a thoughtful collection that scholars and students interested in cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and Afropolitanism will find illuminating.

Bhekizwe Peterson 

University of the Witwatersrand  
Johannesburg, South Africa

[Bhekizwe.Peterson@wits.ac.za](mailto:Bhekizwe.Peterson@wits.ac.za)

doi:[10.1017/asr.2020.29](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.29)

**For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- Ali, Nada Mustafa. 2019. "Sudanese Women's Groups on Facebook and #Civil Disobedience: Nairat or Thairat? (Radiant or Revolutionary?)." *African Studies Review* 62 (2): 103–26. doi: [10.1017/asr.2018.146](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2018.146).
- Bergère, Clovis. 2020. "From Street Corners to Social Media: The Changing Location of Youth Citizenship in Guinea." *African Studies Review* 63 (1): 124–45. doi: [10.1017/asr.2019.3](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.3).
- Sacks, Susanna L. N.d. "Evan Mawarire's #ThisFlag as Tactical Lyric: The Role of Digital Speech in Imagining a Networked Zimbabwean Nation." *African Studies Review*, 1–20. doi: [10.1017/asr.2019.44](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.44).