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Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora

Edited by Abimbola Adedokun · Toyin Falola

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African Histories and Modernities

ISBN 978-3-319-91309-4 ISBN 978-3-319-91310-0 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91310-0>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018942664

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

CONTENTS

- 1 **Introduction** 1
Abimbola Adedokun and Toyin Falola
- 2 **Rewriting Algeria: Transcultural Kinship and Anticolonial Revolution in Kateb Yacine's *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*** 15
Amir Aziz
- 3 **Revolution and Revolt: Identitarian Space, Magic, and the Land in Decolonial Latin American and African Writing** 47
Juan Manuel Ávila Concejo
- 4 **Family Politics: Negotiating the Family Unit as a Creative Force in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*** 69
Aaron Brown
- 5 **Auteuring Nollywood: Rethinking the Movie Director and the Idea of Creativity in the Nigerian Film Industry** 83
Adeshina Afolayan

- 6 **Nollywood in Rio: An Exploration of Brazilian Audience Perception of Nigerian Cinema** 103
Kamahra Ewing
- 7 **Re-producing Self, Community, and ‘Naija’ in Nigerian Diaspora Films: *Soul Sisters* in the United States and *Man on the Ground* in South Africa** 125
Olaocha Nwadiuto Nwabara
- 8 **“A Single Story”: African Women as Staged in US Theater** 151
Lisa B. Thompson
- 9 ***Silêncio*: Black Bodies, Black Characters, and the Black Political *Persona* in the Work of the *Teatro Negro* Group Cia dos Comuns** 167
Gustavo Melo Cerqueira
- 10 **New Orleans: America’s Creative Crescent** 197
Lucy Bartholomee
- 11 **The Hashtag as Archive: Internet Memes and Nigeria’s Social Media Election** 217
James Yeku
- 12 **Black Creativity in Jamaica and Its Global Influences, 1930–1987** 247
Bernard Steiner Ifekwe
- 13 **Ethics and Aesthetic Creativity: A Critical Reflection on the Moral Purpose of African Art** 267
Modestus Nnamdi Onyeaghalaji

14 From Saartjie to Queen Bey: Black Female Artists and the Global Cultural Industry	281
Olivier J. Tchouaffe	
Correction to: Rewriting Algeria: Transcultural Kinship and Anticolonial Revolution in Kateb Yacine's <i>L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc</i>	C1
Amir Aziz	
Bibliography	299
Index	321

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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 6.1	Questionnaire participant's demographic information	112
Fig. 6.2	Brazilian respondent's identification with Nollywood characters	114
Fig. 6.3	Audience responses to the quality of Nollywood films	116
Fig. 10.1	The Ninth Ward in New Orleans, July 2006. Photo by Lucy Bartholomee	205
Fig. 10.2	Mardi Gras Indians perform at Jazz Fest, New Orleans, 2013. Photo by Lucy Bartholomee	206
Fig. 11.1	Four more years. http://techcabal.com/2015/04/01/top-memes-from-the-nigerian-2015-presidential-election/	222
Fig. 11.2	Third World kid meme and some of its many variants	225
Fig. 11.3	A tearful image of former President Jonathan absolving himself of corruption	229
Fig. 11.4	A screen capture of two different memes satirizing President Jonathan	230
Fig. 11.5	A photoshopped image of Muhammed Buhari (Nigeria's current President), in one of his addresses to supporters, showing a self-indicting message about his past legacy as a military dictator	232
Fig. 11.6	An IStandWithJega meme. https://twitter.com/dupekillla/status/583331446124843011	234
Fig. 11.7	The head of Nigeria's Electoral Commission INEC is cast as a Jedi to show his dedication to fighting electoral fraud. https://twitter.com/famuyideolawale/status/583260624207155200	236

Fig. 11.8	“Jega, Wait... What If I Bring Back Our Girls Before 8:00 PM” Twitter. 31 March 2015. https://twitter.com/iam_Rawlings/status/582918466732044289	238
Fig. 11.9	“Searching for the #MissingBudget is a National Task.” Twitter. 14 January 2016. https://twitter.com/Justinattor/status/687717589594849281	241
Fig. 11.10	#TheOtherRoom. https://twitter.com/234stars_/status/788122256316719104	243



CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Abimbola Adedokun and Toyin Falola

Questions have always been posed on the relationship between creativity and politics: Is art perpetually called upon to be a site of personal and cultural politics? Why is the social and political liberation of black subjects still being hinged on art expressivity? Through the decades, black artists and black productions in Africa(n) diasporas have been made, seen, and interpreted through a somewhat inflexible category of politics.¹ Does art by the marginalized, the subaltern, the excluded, the forgotten, the dominated, fulfill the liberatory potentials critics ascribed to it? What other possibilities do political art fulfill that transcends the politics? Beyond art as a symbolic system or creative strategies constructed towards fashioning, expressing, or supporting a political agenda, what about the goal of art and its creative processes as means of personal fulfillment or individual aggrandizement?

Contributors to the discourse have played around Murray Edelman's contention that, "art is the fountainhead from which political discourse, beliefs about politics, and consequent action ultimately spring."² This is evident in many ways, particularly, the ways art productions have been called upon to fulfill statist politics. Art production was part of the symbolic means of communicating the legitimacy of Obas' power and

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A. Adedokun and T. Falola (eds.), *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora*, African Histories and Modernities,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91310-0_1

majesty by objectifying social fulfillment and embodying social memory in ancient Benin empires.³ In seventeenth century, Japan art was part of the system of social stratification and power legitimacy by the state and political elite.⁴ Artistic productions were also integral to the imperial reign of notorious figures such as Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, who considered the “soft power” of art as a persuasive medium that could complement the brutal and aggressive force of militarism.⁵

Art is, therefore, innately political; it innovatively synchronizes life into abstractive, embodied, and visceral forms to both create and share meanings, values, beliefs, and political ethics.⁶ Art gives us a perceptible image or sets of images to perceive evocative messages sourced from the social and cultural milieu in which the artist is embedded and which forms the stock from which the transactions of political, cultural, and social identity issues are produced. As Judith Butler once noted, the processing of seeing images is itself never shorn of preemptive sociopolitical biases. When the field of vision is tainted by the schema of identity politics, the processes of viewing the end product is always steeped in the ideological impurities of the context that produces these images.⁷ Arts, its producers, consumers, interpreters, and the regulators, are all, therefore, subject to politics.⁸ As the meanings we take away from art are subjective, we, within the vast universe of broad meanings artistic production offers, take away an array of connected ideas that encapsulate a reality that we relate to, or which relates to us. While we can, therefore, agree with Edelman that politics is a production of art, we would also assert that art, especially, when it takes on a pedagogical mission, is produced by the politics against which it wages its ideological wars. Indeed, art generates the ideas of heroism, virtue, nobility, and cultural fantasies that we have come to suppose are intrinsic to human moral and cultural essence. These ideas are crucial to political rituals; they grant us a shorthand way of grasping complex materials. However, politics also pushes us to intuit the artistic images with which we discourse with the world to evoke, to provoke, to conscientize, to resist, and to conjure ideal images of the world while we condemn the insalubrious aspects of the real.

Art, therefore, produces politics and politics produce art; both are interlocked in a conjugal embrace of mutually reproducing images through which we understand our world, interpret them, compartmentalize broad and complex human experiences into relatable paradigms, stage our agency and assert the terms of our humanity within the context of our social temporality. Through art, we create and re-create realities of

our worlds, revise existing beliefs and assumptions to answer to ongoing anxieties, panic, aspirations, and desires of the audience. Art, therefore, is not merely adjunct to politics neither is it a stream from which political actions and processes flow. The creative processes of art, the poetics, the expansiveness of meanings that spring from artistic innovation are all an integral and interwoven aspect of the political milieu of the artist and his/her audience. Art and its inevitable political interpretation, contrary to assumption, are not floating signifiers per se, they are *floatated* signifiers discharged from a politically imbued imagination, filtered through embodied politics, and dispensed into an ethically charged space thus making the entire chain of artistic production a densely and politically overlaid one.

This book, *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora*, a product of an extensive dialogue on the politics of artistic creativity, examines how black artists in Africa and the African diaspora create art as part of the procedures of self-making in their respective universes. We consider that art, whenever it is re-interpreted against the conditions of the present, stimulates ideas, rejuvenates rational stances, reinforces and upturns definitive perceptions, and poses new ways of seeing. Critics, in investigating creativity in art, have, therefore, tried to expand their analyses beyond the definition, aesthetics, practices of production, and the immediate visceral impacts of art, to considering other ethics of creativity such as how the conditions that contribute to creative process also engenders the possibilities of its efficacy or not.⁹ *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora* goes ahead to investigate the political aesthetics of art and the creativity of black artists and culture that spans across spaces and places. By weaving together chapters and analyses from various regions such as North America, North Africa, West Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora* examines the efflorescence of black culture and creativity in both national and global contexts.

Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and the Diaspora emerged out of inquiring the politics of black creativity in the twenty first century. Already, anthropologist, Stuart MacLean, urges an understanding of creativity that transcends the mere implication of a facility to solve problems, one that is calibrated to the demands of global capital. Instead, creativity should be considered regarding its force to impel a rethink of both the syncopation of the human imagination and the making of the material universe. By mapping an “experimental, multiagentive, and

pluralistic vision of creativity,” MacLean offers a critical means of escape from the constrictive ideas of creativity. He conceives creativity as a timeless conception of the universe that does not merely replicate originary or cosmogonic models of action but a relational process of interacting actions between non-individuated humans and non-humans.¹⁰ In this collection, the essays go further to explore creativity as an outcome of the contentious yet “intangible chemistry” between art producers, their cultural milieu, and the reactive ways the latter impugns on the consciousness to stimulate art production. The writers focus on identity politics, social, and cultural changes going on in black cultures in African Diasporas (with its evolving meanings),¹¹ migration, transnationalism, multiple belongings, and consciousness. These forces, we acknowledge, are no mere backdrops to artistic production just as art is not reducible to a foil to politics. Both art and politics are self-constituting and mutually influencing, thus making political culture integral to art and the creative instinct of black cultures.

This collection is necessitated by the imperatives of investigating black culture in an era of increasing globalization, migration, the flux of identities, and increasing interconnection in radical and novel ways. These essays move us to question how the context of black creativity and functions as a propellant of new cultural creations. How does the nostalgia of shared African heritage become a raw resource on which new identities and creative outputs are founded? What are the new black experiences and how are they conjugating radical meanings of creativity, identity, and black culture? Taking off of Paul Gilroy’s ideas on the Black Atlantic that employed the diaspora as a theoretical concept to explore how forced and voluntary migrations, travels, discontinuities, cultural exchange, and appropriation form a worldwide web of black cultures in the US, UK, Caribbean, and Africa, some of the chapters analyze how migration, displacement, and creative refashioning of “home” is currently shaping postmodernist notions of “black” and “African” arts in different contexts and temporalities.¹²

Taking seriously the political aesthetics that underline these artistic expressions, the chapter contributors read creative works of literature, films, performances, music, and other forms of popular culture against the grain of ethnocentric analysis to embrace the iterations of the dynamism of the shaping of contemporary black culture. *Art, Creativity, and Politics in Africa and its Diaspora* places the complex and mundane concerns of the artists and their creation within the broader national and

transnational conversations of anti-black racism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, migration, resettlement, resistance, and transnational feminisms. These writers make a thoughtful and reflective analysis of black cultures in Africa and the African Diaspora, sorting through the aesthetics of daily life to build a thesis that reflects the desire of black artists and cultures to remake themselves. While the contributors do not merely hark back to an essentialist or absolutist mode of constructing blackness or African identity, these chapters situate their contentions on how “black” and “Africa” continue to inform the arts and creativity of Africans and Diaspora Africans through various spatialities and temporalities.

Amir Aziz’s chapter, titled “From Peasant to Revolutionaries: Transcultural Kinship and Anticolonial Revolution in Kateb Yacine’s *L’Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*,” is a critical study of identity and its concomitant politics of language, literature, performance, and political power in the postcolonial context of Algeria, North Africa. Aziz dissects one of the works of the renowned writer and playwright, Kateb Yacine, to critique the notion of transcultural kinship he forges in one of his best-known plays, *L’Homme aux Sandales de Caoutchouc* (The Man in Rubber Sandals). Drawing on the shared histories of Vietnam and its anti-colonial struggles with that of Algeria, Yacine connects a narrative that maps the transnational struggles of Vietnam and Algeria, and its interconnections with the intrinsic fissures within the racial politics of the USA at a time it was making its own history of colonial aggressions. Aziz, plotting the negotiations of French and Arab identities which Yacine embodied, plots the chart of the evolution of a literary and performance career of one Africa’s greatest writers through an imbrication of national and personal histories. Through textual and critical analyses, Aziz illustrates how the artistic and creative vision of Yacine, birthed through his anti-colonial politics, became a canvas for an envisioning of anticolonial resistance and transnational kinship among oppressed populations. Aziz raises the question of if and whether the oppressed of the world can band together against their oppressor, the political implications of transcending other contending identities to challenge a common enemy.

In “Revolution and Revolt: Identitarian Space, Magic, and the Land in Decolonial Latin American and African Writing,” Juan Manuel Ávila Conejo breaks down the interconnected themes, symbols, and motifs in revolutionary writings among Latin American and African writers whose works were a revolution against colonial rule. These writers,

facing similar struggles even though their historical trajectories and independence varied, employed similar symbols in their literary imagination to critique the colonial establishment. By connecting the motifs of the land, ritualism, spatiality, metaphysics, and transcendence in this body of works, Conejo exposes the threads that interweave different literary devices. The diversity and similarity of this range of works by different writers in different historical and cultural contexts show how the literary imagination and human inspiration was stimulated by similar ideologies of anti-colonialism and decolonization, sovereignty, freedom, and dignity.

Aaron Brown carries out a study of the family as a creative and political force by reading the works of two well-known Nigerian writers, Chigozie Obioma (author of *The Fishermen*) and Ben Okri (author of *The Famished Road*). These two books are a study in the nation's politics using the family unit and their sufferings to interrogate the notion of unity. Brown, in the chapter, "Family Politics: Negotiating the Family Unit as a Creative Force in Chigozie Obioma's *The Fishermen* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*," extrapolates the challenges and the trauma the families in both books suffer to the national politics and notes that the two writers convey a similar ideology differently. Brown studies the writers' critique of the nation, the ethnic and cultural divides, and the ominous fissures that have haunted the people since the beginning and at certain critical junctures, turned the country into a bloody arena. Brown argues that both books, with their themes of family bonds, have an underlying message that applies to the larger Nigerian politics. While a reading of Obioma's book articulates that individualism and separatism ultimately lead to more suffering, collectivism, and unity within the family—and the nation can produce triumph for members of the family/national unit.

Adeshina Afolayan, in "Auteuring Nollywood: Rethinking the Movie Director and the Idea of Creativity in the Nigerian Film Industry," advocates the auteur theory as a counter epistemology to existing discourses on the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood. He critiques scholars who argue that the material worldliness of Nollywood is a reflection of the socio-economic and socio-cultural context in which it exists. Afolayan argues that the mirror of cultural productions in which Africans peer to see their social and political conditions reflected back at them, can do much more than the basic function of reflectivity of Africans' lived and embodied postcolonial realities to them. The auteur theory, Afolayan

shows, can serve as a veritable take-off point from where Africans can find radical and philosophically grounded ideals to forge a vision. This vision of progress, he says, can propel them to transcend the material worldliness Nollywood is being asked to valorize and celebrate. By giving prominence to the role of the director as an auteur, Afolayan argues that the director takes the position of a political theorist who creates the artistic images and visions that mediates Africa's modernity.

Kamahra Ewing, in her chapter, "Nollywood in Rio: An Exploration of Brazilian Audience Perception of Nigerian Cinema," also explores the potentials of Nollywood. She argues that the pervasive negative anti-black media narratives within Brazil can be combatted by the productions of the Nigerian/African film industry, Nollywood. Given how Eurocentrically biased the Brazilian media is, she argues that Nollywood could fill a void in black diaspora representations by providing diverse images of contemporary and a heterogeneous Africa. Nollywood, as it is presently constituted, has been a viable connector of Africa to its diaspora. By bypassing global and institutionalized channels of image distribution, Nollywood disrupts dominant and negative western media's representation of Blackness. In the survey she conducted among Afro and Euro Brazilians, she explores the potential of Nollywood to provide alternative images of black culture and identity in Lusophone Brazil and its significant black population. This study is a contribution to existing literature on Nollywood, transnational black identity in twenty first century Africa, and global reception of popular culture and representation.

Still on Nollywood and the engagement with the black identity, Olaocha Nwadiuto Nwabara's chapter, "Re-Producing Self, Community, and 'Naija' in Nigerian Diaspora Films: *Soul Sisters in the United States* and *Man on the Ground in South Africa*," studies two films by two Nigerian diasporan filmmakers—Rahman Oladigbolu and Akin Omotosho. Both filmmakers are, respectively, based in the US and in South Africa and are invested in the Nigerian experience in the universe of the black diaspora. By chronicling the immigrant experiences of Nigerians, these artists socially construct the 'Naija' identity as an Afropolitan one. 'Naija' is a colloquial renaming of Nigeria by Nigerian youths and popular cultural artists and Nwabara's theorizing it in this chapter shows how the transnational experience of Nigerianness (along with its colonial baggage) is re-forged by the diaspora experience with the ingredients of ethnic and racial identities and the awareness of it. By focusing on the lived experiences of these diasporan filmmakers,

Nwaobara examines the repertoire-making traditions of these cultures, the process of cultivating an identity as a black minority in the Diaspora, and the fashioning of the ‘Naija’ aesthetic in the Nigerian art of filmmaking and Diaspora storytelling.

Lisa B. Thompson, in her chapter, “A Single Story: African Women as Staged in US Theater,” also provides more ways of considering Afropolitanism and its iterations in theatrical performances. She explores the modes by which the African imaginary circulates in contemporary theater and film by African-American cultural producers. She argues that historically, Africa in the African-American mind has been bracketed between tropes that either romanticize the Motherland, or has envisioned the continent as a wasteland and dystopia. African women, she notes, have been at the receiving end of the dominant and persistent narratives of a dysfunctional continent. Thompson explores US black women playwrights who are pushing beyond these single stories by exploiting the immediacy of theater to narrate more nuanced and complicated stories about the lives of African women. Beyond the worn stories of sexual assault or sexual abuse that the African women as theater characters experience, Thompson lays bare works by contemporary playwrights who engage what she describes as an Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic, a mode of representation that is as artistic as it is cultural and political. The Afropolitan theatrical aesthetic, she notes, challenges the constrictive representation of African women and creates a universe of narratives that advance performances of African identity, pushing against stereotypical representations of Africa and Africans.

In the chapter by Gustavo Melo Cerqueira, “Silêncio: Black Bodies, Black Characters, and The Black Political *Persona* in the Work of the *Teatro Negro* Group Cia dos Comuns,” he makes an analytical critique of *Silêncio*, a play by one of Brazil’s most prominent black theater group, Cia dos Comuns. The play questions the racism embedded in the Brazilian society by amplifying the silences lodged in the body of the black person whose identity is constituted in fear and the embodied trauma created by oppressive racism. Cerqueira dissects the play, its political critique, and the innovativeness of its aesthetics by looking into the notion of the black political persona in Brazilian black theater culture. By delving into the Cia dos Comuns’ founding philosophy, performance history, and political engagement in Brazil’s racist society, Cerqueira shows how Cia dos Comuns use the *Silêncio* as a radical argument to shift the interplay between existing notions of the black persona and

the black character. *Cia dos Comuns* thus offers us a critical and highly creative means of using theatrical aesthetics to engage existential and ideological issues. *Silencio*, Cerqueira argues, is a marshal of theatrical innovation, history, culture, ideology, and resistance strategies to engage racism in Brazil by (not) deploying the black body it oppresses.

Lucee Barthlomee explores the concept of artistic creativity in contemporary age by challenging the ideas that creativity is a thing of the mind, serendipitously sparked at the right moment to unleash a genius idea. She argues that creativity is vitally located within the active body, and when the body is positioned within a spatiality or a temporality, it is stimulated to create or innovate. In her chapter, “New Orleans: America’s Creative Crescent,” she peers through the phenomenological lens of scholars such as Merleau Ponty, Dylan Trigg, and Rebecca Solnit to examine the nature of America’s creative hub, Louisiana, New Orleans, to understand how the creativity of the body is intertwined with the space it inhabits. By considering the history of Louisiana as a melting pot of race, ethnicities and cultures from different parts of the world through phases of American history, and the subsequent emergence and practices of Mardi Gras Indians in select African-American neighborhoods of New Orleans, she argues that it is no coincidence that it was the city of Louisiana that gave America a vibrant cultural product such as Jazz music. Barthlomee’s argument in this essay has a huge significance for arts education, challenging the time-worn belief of arts educators who believe creativity is innate, and is neither taught nor cultivated.

James Yeku, in “The Hashtag as Archive: Internet Memes in Nigeria’s Social Media Election,” extends the meaning of art production to internet chatter to follow the tracks of a new form of citizen engagement in Africa. He studies the socio-political activities of citizens who have made the Internet a sub-political zone where they perform active and engaged politics by weaponizing the ubiquitous internet medium. Yeku explores photo-based Internet memes and viral social media hashtags in Nigeria’s recent history to show how the social media has created a canvas for the envisioning and enacting of new political aesthetics. From Nigeria’s general elections and the subtle and satirical analysis of politicians’ manifesto to #bringbackourgirls that became a global campaign, Yeku shows how the young Nigerian citizen steadily bypass the orthodoxy of traditional media and uses the internet as a zone of dissent and citizen engagement that affirm their political subjectivity. This emerging political and cultural production combines visual and popular culture with satirical rhetoric,

and the result has enabled the evolution of a new cultural politics that provides democratic space to even marginalized populations to perform their civic agencies.

Bernard Steiner Ifekwe looks at creativity as both an artistic and political activity. In his chapter, “Black Creativity In Jamaica And Its Global Influences: 1930–1987,” he considers Jamaica in the twentieth century where all creative activities were geared towards the mental, economic, religious, and political emancipation of black people after many centuries of servitude to white domination. This creativity came in different forms: Garveyism, with its philosophy of race pride and black redemption; Rastafarianism, a black religion, which venerated the late Ethiopian monarch, Haile Selassie I as the god of Africa; and reggae music, with its militant lyrics, which expressed the black experience in slavery, colonialism, and post-colonial periods. He argues that political and temporal contexts in themselves can be stimulators of black creativity.

Modestus Nnamdi Onyeaghalaji, reflecting on the aesthetics of African art in his chapter, “Ethics and Aesthetic Creativity: A Critical Reflection on the Moral Purpose of African Art,” focuses on the problems of ascribing moral intent to artistic creativity in African Aesthetics. Traditional African art, he says, is conceived to be functional, community-oriented, depersonalized, and contextualized and, therefore, serves practically moral and meaningful purpose. However, this morally contemplative purpose to African art is being undermined within the artistic creativity and appreciation in contemporary times. Onyeaghalaji employs the philosophical methods of conceptual and critical analysis to interrogate this emergent phenomenon in African aesthetics. He argues that contemporary African art, more than a hybrid of cultures, is influenced by the Western predilection and modeled to feed the Western interest. This factor abdicates its traditional role of art being a codification, unification, and objectification of African cultural experiences and values. He identifies the moral consequences and value problems arising from this colonizing trait of African art to conclude that for African art to achieve a higher level of moral consciousness and dignity, it must take on a prognostic intent of the unification, synthesis, and interpretation of African experience.

In the final chapter, Olivier J. Tchouaffé weighs the intangible factors that encircle the success of iconic black female artists in the global cultural industry by drawing semiotic parallels between Beyonce and Saartjie Baartman, the South African Hottentot woman who was

exhibited in Europe as a freak. His chapter, “From The Queen of Freak Show to Queen Bey: Thoughts on Black Feminism(s) Canons, Pop Culture and Pedagogy”, tracks the notions of race, gender, and cultural work the symbolic economy of black female enterprise and the role that exogenous structures such as capitalist relations of production, corporate administrative hegemony, and social arrangements play in mediating their global acceptance and artistic success. By reflecting on how Beyonce and Baartman mirror each other, and the history of white male gaze, financial power, legitimating codes of visual aesthetics of desire, he explores the modes of knowledge and practices that produce these women could also be brutally exploitative of these artists. He asks, what is black female creativity and how does it operate within a global economy where capitalism and white supremacy are the primary denominators of cultural labor?

Altogether, we sum that as black people all over the world have experienced various forms of exploitations—from slavery to colonialism, apartheid, racism, and various forms of subjugation—their bodies and their lands have been denuded by external rampaging forces. This shared history of abuse and profiteering at the expense of black populations has, over the century, resulted in dispersal, displacement, and migration—forced and voluntary—that have triggered—and are still triggering—creative flows of expression. The flux of identity and the consequent identitarian politics spurs a desire to transcend roots to recreate one’s space while at the same time, it plays a crucial role in the ways black artists and communities create new artistic cultures based on the experiences, insights, ideas they accumulate and the new identities they forge. Going back to Gilroy, this collection examines a post-Black Atlantic thesis. In the new age, with new migration patterns, new movements, and new technological devices that guarantee instant connectivity to cultures around the world, what is Black Atlantic and how are black people inscribing themselves into the contemporary social history of modernity and modernism using the expressive tools of art?

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CHAPTER 2

Rewriting Algeria: Transcultural Kinship and Anticolonial Revolution in Kateb Yacine's *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc*

Amir Aziz

In Kateb Yacine's 1970 play, *L'Homme aux sandales de caoutchouc* (The Man in Rubber Sandals), Mohamed, a shepherd of North African origin contracted by France to fight in Indochina, is attacked by Viet Cong rebels. Mohamed, in a sudden moment of realization, recognizes that the rebels are not so different from the men of his village and refuses to fire, proclaiming solidarity with their cause. In another scene, a similar pattern of cognizance occurs for Alabama, an African-American soldier serving in the Vietnam War. Alabama draws parallels between the African-American liberation struggle and the Vietnamese reunification

The original version of this chapter was revised: The author name and email address were updated. The correction to this chapter is available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91310-15>

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© The Author(s) 2018, corrected publication 2022
A. Adhlakun and T. Falola (eds.), *Art, Creativity, and Politics
in Africa and the Diaspora*, African Histories and Modernities,
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91310-2>

movement and transforms into a Viet Cong rebel: “J’ai déserté / Je suis un Viet / À ma façon / Que tous les Noirs américains / Tuent leurs officiers / Et la guerre sera juste.”¹ (“I have deserted / I am a Viet / In my own way / May all Black Americans / Kill their officers / And the war will be just.”) In both moments exemplifying the spontaneous embodiment of transcultural kinship, Mohamed and Alabama see their own struggles mirrored back to them, prompting their conscientious objection to violence exerted onto populations whose struggles they consider to be not unlike their own. The textual transformation of these characters, from poor shepherd to anti-war pacifist for Mohamed in French Indochina and from Black Panther to Viet Cong fighter for Alabama during the Vietnam War, reveals that *L’Homme* is provocative in motif as it is calculatingly purposeful in its selection of historical context and political overtone. It is not mere happenstance that Yacine chose to tap into the rich depository of anticolonial fervor circulating in Vietnam and adapted it into the theatrical form.

In this essay, I argue that *L’Homme* is a critical piece of creative writing in North African Francophone theatrical literature by its deliberate deployment of Vietnam as the narrative setting and its compelling messages of transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution. First, I describe Yacine’s upbringing and discuss the variegated influences shaping his foray into theater. Second, I embark on a textual analysis of *L’Homme* by discussing the play’s structure, its recurring themes, and the narratives of several major characters. Because the play features a monumental cast of characters, rather than analyzing all of them, I engage in an intersecting mapping out of the diverse origins, historical contexts, and narratives of major characters that I contend serve to unify and epitomize the play’s broader themes of transcultural kinship and anticolonial revolution. Even though *L’Homme* may appear oddly discordant in cast and momentum, I demonstrate how a comparative textual analysis reveals a consistent articulation of the play’s recurring themes. Third, I problematize the play’s message of an anticolonial solidarity transcending space and time by speculating on the implications of narrative co-optation. I ask if Yacine’s attempts at refashioning the struggles of colonized groups result in a streamlined narrative that collapses differences and particularities in culture, history, identity, and language, or if its archive of literary figures may be achieving a different goal. Fourth, I locate *L’Homme*’s overt political themes as exemplifying Yacine’s commitment at developing a creative theatrical form that transmits instructive lessons in post-independence Algerian national unity.

KATEB YACINE: BACKGROUND AND FORAY INTO THEATER

Born in 1929 to an Algerian family of Kabyle-Amazigh origin in Constantine, Kateb Yacine was from the outset an individual situated between divergent worlds: the French-speaking milieu dominant in colonial-era Algeria and the Arabo-Islamic world maintained at home by his family. Yacine spent his initial school-going years at a Qur'anic school where literary Arabic was the principal language of instruction. At the age of seven, Yacine was sent by his father to a French colonial school, where he first learned French. Yacine's father envisioned that French would serve his son well in the future, as it was, at the time in the 1930s, deemed an essential language of communication and social mobility in colonial Algeria if one desired to succeed.²

Later in his life, Yacine gained literary fame throughout Africa and Europe as a novelist writing in French—most prominently for his debut novel *Nedjma*, published in 1956. For Yacine, French served as a vehicular container for developing a versatile Algerian literary voice he believed had yet to flourish: He believed that wielding and mastering French along with knowledge of its culture was not antithetical to Algerian identity, but rather a *butin de guerre* (“spoil of war”) that could be harnessed to cultivate new generations of culturally mobile Algerians who could employ French and the fields of knowledge it provided access to for gaining national liberation. When Algeria gained independence in 1962, however, the political turbulences and censorship that followed pressured Yacine to temporarily leave the country and move to Paris, where he continued writing.

Yacine's rich body of works reflected the talents of a writer of considerable versatility and intellect. Cognizant of his influential public role as a writer and the potentiality for change in his home country, Yacine returned to Algeria from exile in 1970, ceased writing in French, and began producing theatrical plays performed in vernacular Algerian Arabic. He traveled around Algeria throughout the 1970s to stage his plays with his theatrical troupe. Because he was not fully comfortable in Algerian Arabic, Yacine would first write in French or latinized Arabic, and later worked with members of his troupe more well-versed in the vernacular to polish his work.³

Vernacular Algerian Arabic is a non-standardized, colloquial dialect derived from standard Arabic, and is considered to transmit a distinctive sense of “Algerian-ness,” articulating the more intimate aspects of