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African Art and Art History

Delinda Collier. *Media Primitivism: Technological Art in Africa*.

Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 272 pp.; 16 color ills.; 63 b/w ills. $26.95 paper

Drew Thompson. *Filtering Histories: The Photographic Bureaucracy in Mozambique, 1960 to Recent Times*.

Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 360 pp.; 65 b/w ills. $34.95 paper

Art history has been held to account in recent years, from calls to address the legacies of slavery and colonialism, prompted by the Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter movements, to concomitant surveys of decolonization published in some of the discipline’s foremost journals.[[1]](#endnote-1) There is a pressing sense that a Western-oriented art history is a myth that cannot be sustained without denying centuries of globalization and the existence of other cultures and civilizations in artistic movements from the Renaissance to modernism. The demand to expand the discipline beyond its Eurocentric matrix has simultaneously given rise to a series of methodological problems. Two recent publications, by Delinda Collier and Drew Thompson, grapple with the place of African art in art history. In *Media Primitivism: Technological Art in Africa*, Collier takes the term “Africa” as a Hegelian antithesis to art history. She reasons that African art’s intermediality has long challenged modernism’s search for artistic autonomy. Alternatively, in *Filtering Histories: The Photographic Bureaucracy in Mozambique, 1960 to Recent Times*, Thompson confronts the Western normativity imposed on histories of photography, a subfield that has failed to grasp Africa’s role in the development of the medium despite the daguerreotype’s almost immediate adoption across the continent following its public introduction in 1839. Both books trouble the exclusion of Africa from mainstream histories.

In *Media Primitivism*, Collier presents a major study on technological media in African art. Her book weaves together three fields: media studies, African art history, and art history. The differentiation between the latter two is interesting and necessary. African art history has historically been the purview of anthropologists, gallery professionals, and increasingly art historians—it was for a long time performed outside the realm of art history proper. In addition to art history, Collier suggests “Africa” operates as an antithesis to media studies where the continent has been perennially excluded from discussions around technological media. She seeks out instances where these three fields converge and diverge through specific objects, challenging their racialized and gendered terms. The book confronts conceptualizations of African art as primary, noncritical, and nontechnological, the origins of which can be traced back to the Enlightenment. Collier disputes the assumption that technological art is Western and that this type of artistic practice beyond the West is derivative. Her central, groundbreaking claim is that technological art belongs to Africa and has a history that is African.

While the “global turn” in art history has sought to overcome the Eurocentric assumptions of modernism, it has often perpetuated the discipline’s methodological nationalism. Collier proposes an alternative framework to the nation-state based on technology, specifically electricity. Her study brings together artistic projects from Mali, Egypt, South Africa, the Congo, and Kenya in which electricity operates as either the subject of the work or the source that powers it, sometimes visible and audible, and, at other times, invisible and inaudible. Each of the book’s six chapters discusses various “new” media, from film to digital art, whose status as art has been contested at some point.

The first two chapters of the book address more historical work, including several films by the Malian director Souleymane Cissé from the 1970s and 1980s and the Egyptian composer Halim El-Dabh’s *Ta’abir Al-Zaar* (1944), one of the first works of electronic music. This structure provides a historical context for the contemporary work discussed in the following chapters.

Cissé’s 1987 film, *Yeelen*, (or “light” in Bambara, the unofficial language of the majority in Mali) opens with a soundtrack of wind paired on screen with images of the natural media of water and light. Collier contends that Cissé, through these sounds and visuals, challenges the division between nature and technology, a dichotomy that has rendered Africa as nature and therefore in opposition to technology. Alternatively, Collier proposes that Cissé reduces new media to natural media, specifically light—an equation evocative of the book’s title which plays with the overladen term of “primitivism.” In taking light as the origin of film, Collier connects it to Komo ritual ideograms and their representations of light, shown in the opening of *Yeelen*, as well as the concept of *nyama*. Members of Komo, an association of blacksmiths found among the Bambara-speaking communities in West Africa, are trained to command *nyama*, a vital force or “energy of action.” Collier links *nyama* to the control of light and electricity, which together constitute the essence of film. Through this emphasis on light, Collier claims film as indigenous to Africa.

The following two chapters examine sound or the nonobject, downplaying the ocular centrism of Western art history. Chapter 2 takes as its subject El-Dabh’s *Ta’abir Al-Zaar* (*The Expression of Zaar*), a 1944 wire recorder piece which is now understood as being a foundational work of electronic music. In the book’s introduction, Collier addresses shifts in African art history, specifically a turning away from fieldwork, once the gold standard of this area of study, and its associated desire for closeness or proximity to one’s subjects. She contends that there is always a mediation that occurs, rejecting the myth of stability or the neutrality of contextualization. These issues come to the fore when she describes listening to *Ta’abir Al-Zaar*: “The larger problem is that my listening cannot replicate the kind of listening that was activated at the time [it] was made” (62). *Ta’abir Al-Zaar* is based on recordings of women chanting at a *zaar* ceremony common to North Africa and the Middle East, and, at the time of El-Dabh’s recording, the ceremony was regarded by some of Cairo’s elite as a cultural plague as it was practiced by working-class women and threatened the country’s plight toward modernization. *Zaar* operates as a therapeutic device to help the possessed cope with their possession. Bearing this definition in mind, Collier draws a parallel between *zaar* and the wire recorder as mechanisms through which foreignness is “postulated, animated, and then normalized (or recontextualized)” (64), giving this modern electronic device a longer history.

Collier describes sound art as a kind of abstraction in the way that it occludes sources and origins, and the book’s third chapter picks up on this abstraction as a form of erasure and violence against Black bodies. Collier turns to the South African artists Julian Jonker and Ralph Borland’s *Song of Solomon* (2006), an eight-channel sound installation. The work mixes and plays 2.18-second-long samples of seventy versions of Solomon Linda and the Original Evening Birds’ 1939 hit radio song, “Mbube.” Linda’s song was later discovered and adapted by several American songwriters highlighted by the Tokens’ 1961 version, “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” one of the most well-known sonic stereotypes of Africa. Now defunct as a work fully present in art institutions due to copyright protocols, *Song of Solomon* was produced to commemorate the 2006 out-of-court settlement Linda’s family reached with US-based Abilene Music to finally repatriate an undisclosed percentage of royalties to his surviving family. The work remembers Linda as a spectral ancestor to the hundreds of versions of the song in which his presence was consistently negated. Collier connects Linda’s unrecognized status in media circuits with an apartheid system that removed Black people from their land and transformed them into objects of labor, another type of abstraction.

The theme of abstraction continues in Collier’s aptly titled fourth chapter, “Artificial Blackness, or Extraction as Abstraction.” She examines Western myths of Africa as the dark continent in need of enlightenment through enslavement and colonization. Collier contends that light and darkness are analogous to the modernist tension between figuration and abstraction. Drawing on the South African artist James Webb’s immersive sound installation *The Black Passage* (2006) and the British artist and filmmaker Steve McQueen’s *Western Deep* (2002), Collier equates mining with darkness, a darkness akin to abstraction in the way that it collapses the figure/ground problem of modern art, literally through the descent of miners underground as well as the darkness that renders them inseparable from the ground. For Collier, mining in colonial and postcolonial Africa operates as the ultimate kind of abstraction in which Black people are again transformed into objects of labor and minerals are extracted and converted into their usable forms. These threads are exemplified in Kazimir Malevich’s painting *Black Square* (1915), which contains the beginning of the phrase, “A Battle of Negroes in a Cave,” concealed under a layer of white paint that frames the internal black square.[[2]](#endnote-2) Citing Hannah Black and other Black Studies scholars, Collier confirms the racialized mechanisms at work in modernist abstraction. The tension between light and darkness is given further consideration in Chapters 4 and 5. Collier discusses artists, including Webb, Ernest Cole, and Jean Katambayi Mukendi, who take electricity as the subject of their work, tapping into its racialized colonial histories in South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the failed postcolonial infrastructure in these countries that make rolling blackouts the norm. Collier succeeds in demonstrating the specific African histories of technological media.

Returning to mining, specifically with regards to the Congo, and introduces concerns around visual representation, Collier discusses the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji’s best-known series, *Mémoire* (2006), which consists of black-and-white photographs of African workers taken by the Belgian mining company Union Minière du Haut-Katanga in the early twentieth century, digitized and superimposed onto Baloji’s color images of the former mining sites today. Collier asserts that Baloji’s work emerged at a time when there was an increase in images of mineral exploitation circulating globally, citing Edward Zwick’s American political action thriller film *Blood Diamond* (2006), starring Leonardo DiCaprio, and the United States’ subsequent introduction of the Congo Conflict Minerals Act of 2009. This positioning of Baloji’s work recalls Collier’s earlier contention about the myth of contextualization in African art history, as she situates *Mémoire* within her own sphere of reference as an American scholar. Alternatively, the archival photographs that surfaced through *Mémoire* had never been seen before in Lubumbashi, the Congolese city where Baloji was born and spends half his time, while in Belgium, where he spends the other half, the work gained traction thanks to a newfound awareness around the country’s colonial past that emerged at the end of the 1990s. Collier extends her discussion of visual representation to the Dutch artist Renzo Martens’s problematic film *Enjoy Poverty, Episode III* (2008), in which he encourages the Congolese to profit from their poverty by photographing it for the international press. However, the Congolese are ultimately blocked from doing so by the preferential treatment given to Western photographers, suggesting the limits of representation.

The final chapter summarizes several themes explored in the book through the Kenyan artist Wanuri Kahiu’s digital short film *Pumzi* (2009). Set in Africa thirty-five years after a Third World War – a battle waged over the scarce resource of water – the protagonist Asha, curator of the virtual natural history museum, mysteriously receives a seed that is viable, making her question official messaging that claims the outside world is dead. Asha escapes her enclosed pod community, traversing across an expanse of rubbish to plant the seed, which will eventually restore Africa to a fertile rainforest. Collier argues that, like the site of the mine, the trash pile, a common signifier of the derogatory concept of the “Third World,” complicates the figure/ground relation of modernism. Asha succeeds in planting the seed but loses her life in the process. Returning to *Yeelen*, Collier contends that *Pumzi* extends our consideration of film as the organization of light to the digital realm. However, Pumzi offers a Black feminist perspective of art and technology. The film challenges the dichotomy of life or nature and technology, as Asha sacrifices her human form for a tree and therefore the possibility of a future. Collier conceives of Asha as practicing a kinship that crosses species boundaries and therefore technological and medium boundaries.

While *Media Primitivism* is vested in the intermediality of African art, *Filtering Histories* focuses on one specific medium: photography. In his study, Thompson explores the significance of photographers and their images to the making of Mozambique, first as a Portuguese colony and then subsequently to the process of decolonization and state development after colonial rule. The research presented in the book is based on fieldwork Thompson carried out in Mozambique between 2008 and 2016 and interviews conducted with photojournalists and participants in the country’s liberation movement Frenta da Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo), such as Ricardo Rangel and Jorge Rebelo. Thompson often depends on his interlocutors’ reconstruction of events, creating a productive tension with Collier’s contention about the desire for proximity to one’s subjects and the associated myth of neutrality in African art history. The book responds to the photography theorists Allan Sekula and John Tagg whose understandings of photographs and photographers as agents of the state don’t transfer well to non-Western contexts such as Mozambique. Over the course of five chapters, each one dedicated to a historical event, Thompson takes up the theme of filters and filtering to discuss the use of photographic equipment and the circulation of printed photographs. Drawing from political and photographic theorist Ariella Azoulay, he adopts an expanded definition of photography, addressing it as an event that does not necessarily produce a printed image.

In Chapter 1, Thompson proposes the concept of “photography as infrastructure” (38) to consider the circulation of photographs between metropole and colony. He argues that photographs created bridges and roads between Portugal and its colonial state in Mozambique. Thompson considers the types of images that were permitted to circulate during and after the unrest that unfolded in 1961 across the Portuguese Empire. Certain photographs were censored as a way to de-escalate tensions. However, the images in circulation differed between Mozambique and Portugal, suggesting that the colonial state’s surveillance was not absolute.

The following two chapters demonstrate the significance of photographs to Frelimo. Thompson argues that Mozambique’s liberation movement engaged in a “paper diplomacy” (75) to combat its own illegitimacy born from an absence of images depicting a Mozambique independent of Portuguese control. The liberation movement trained its soldiers as photographers. They produced images that suggested Frelimo was in control of photographic production, showing its leaders looking at images as well as operating printers, and others that captured them interacting with local populations, countering Portuguese illustrations that attempted to instill a fear of these soldiers in their viewers. Thompson pays specific attention to the technical means that shaped the appearance of images and enabled them to circulate, from single-lens cameras to the previously mentioned printers. He connects the images produced by Frelimo to the anticolonial struggle in Vietnam, which similarly depended on photographs to garner global support. He addresses the way Frelimo attempted to legitimize its control of Mozambique through the production and circulation of photographs in venues such as *Tempo*, a weekly illustrated magazine. Thompson chronicles a nervousness that emerged during this time of transition around the openness of images and attempts to tie them down through text.

Thompson also considers the forms of identification that the Frelimo state introduced from 1975 to 1994, including photographic headshots necessary for government-issued IDs. This theme is given a contemporary take in the book’s epilogue, where Thompson chronicles his own experience with identity documents in Mozambique. The book’s fourth chapter notes the disappearance of family photos and full-body shots as studio-based photographers adjusted their services to the government’s demand for headshots. This disappearance distinguishes Mozambique from other histories of African photography that privilege self-construction within the space of the photographic studio.[[3]](#endnote-3) Thompson argues that the concept of portraiture, including headshots, conflicted with Frelimo’s socialist sensibilities and collectivist ethos. However, these claims are made without any recourse to images, solely justified by a quote from Rebelo. The possibility that photographs could tell a different story to the one advanced in retrospect by Thompson’s interlocutors is often overlooked in the book. Thompson goes on to relay how the government used identification documents to recognize and forcefully relocate Mozambicans from urban to rural areas, which, in turn, bred a sense of resentment toward headshots and photography more generally. Despite its purported collectivism, Frelimo produced and circulated images of its leader, Samora Machel, who, like many other African heads of state at this time, recognized the importance of photography in spreading his influence.

The book’s final chapter turns to Mozambique’s involvement in wars in southern Africa between 1975 and 1980 following its offer of support to liberation movements in neighboring countries. The government developed the wire service Agência da Informação de Moçambique (AIM) to provide international news agencies with articles and photographs related to these struggles. However, as Thompson demonstrates, the distribution of photographs did not ensure that they would be published widely, thanks in part to quality issues and Cold War prejudices. He accordingly refers to these photographs as “dead” (197) as they were never publicly viewed and had little value in terms of reproduction and republication. Many of the dead photographs showed dead bodies, specifically South African–armed Mozambicans killing other Mozambicans. This violence between Mozambicans undermined the government’s line that the conflict was the creation of South Africa. However, AIM and local media reframed photographs of the dead as showing the perpetrators of war. Thompson ends the chapter by considering the way these dead photographs have found a new life in postwar exhibitions.

While discussing the misuse and mislabeling of Frelimo’s circulated images, Thompson describes an incident where an Algerian editor claimed that Mozambique and Angola were the same. Responding to complaints by the Frelimo representative in Algeria, the Algerian editor stated: “I understand your point, but we are all Africans, Angola, Mozambique, [and] South Africa” (106). With this incident in mind, there is a compelling tension that emerges between Collier’s and Thompson’s books. While Thompson’s account depends on the specificity of photography in Mozambique, Collier’s study brings together a geographically diverse group of artists. Her analysis often dissolves time and distance. Comparable to the Algerian editor, Collier states that “the hypermediality of electricity-based art is an *African* way of doing art” (original emphasis, 5). Much like the Frelimo representative who disputes the sameness of Mozambique and Angola, I wondered at times if the artists discussed by Collier could be spoken about as a cohesive unit, grouped together as “African” in identity and style even though many were educated and live and work outside the continent. Following Collier, if we are to return to Enlightenment theory in which Africa operates as a Hegelian antithesis to Europe, to what extent do these vast continental frameworks perpetuate both an inherent sense of sameness between artists and a difference from others elsewhere? Both books demonstrate that artistic production does not occur within continental isolation, prompting one to ask: when does “African art history” just become “art history”?

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1. Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, eds., “Decolonizing Art History,” *Art History* 43, no. 1 (2020): 8–66; and Huey Copeland et al., (eds., “A Questionnaire on Decolonization,” *October* 174 (Fall 2020): 3–125. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This phrase was found by researchers in 2015 while preparing the painting for its centenary. It is believed to be a reference to Alphonse Allais’s 1897 book *April 1 Album*, where seven ornately framed monochrome squares are captioned with text. The first is a black rectangle and reads: “A Battle of Negroes in a Cave on a Dark Night.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See, for example, Clare Bell and Okwui Enwezor, eds., *In/Sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* exh. cat*.* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996); Michelle Lamunière, ed., *You Look Beautiful Like That: The Portrait Photographs of Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé*, exh. cat*.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Erin Haney, *Photography and Africa* (London: Reaktion Books, 2010); and Jennifer Bajorek, *Unfixed: Photography and Decolonial Imagination in West Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)