

Condition Report 3: Art History in Africa

Debating Localization, Legitimization and New Solidarities

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all photos by Ruth Simbao except where otherwise noted

Ruth Simbao: Following on from the *African Arts* dialogue, “Zimbabwe Mobilizes: ICAC’s Shift from Coup de Grâce to Cultural Coup” (Simbao et al. 2017) this dialogue considers another important event in the visual arts that recently took place on the African continent. Like the International Conference on African Cultures (ICAC) that was held in Harare in 2017, this event in Dakar contributes in important ways towards a shift of the center of gravity of the global academy, particularly the study of art history in and of Africa.¹

The Raw Material Company’s Condition Report 3 symposium took place at the Musée des Civilisations Noires (Museum of Black Civilizations) in Dakar, Senegal September 20–22, 2018 (Fig. 1). Organized by Koyo Kouoh (Fig. 2) and Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, the workshop was themed Art History in Africa, and discussions focused on ways of localizing art histories; the role of Senegal—in particular Dakar—in shaping the arc of art history in Africa; the history of “African art history”; platforms that expand conventional praxes of art history; and the importance of situating Africa as the legitimizing site of knowledge creation. Invited presenters were Salah Hassan (Fig. 3) and Paul Goodwin (keynote speakers), Sylvain Sankalé, Massamba Mbaye, Peju

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Laiwola, Elizabeth Giorgis, Suzana Sousa, Ruth Simbao, Babacar M. Diop, Emi Koide (Fig. 4), Dominique Malaquais, Zulu Mbaye, Yaëlle Biro, Susan Gagliardi, Dulcie Abrahams Altass, Eva Barois de Caelvel (Fig. 5), Iheanyi Onwuegbucha, Sean O’Toole, Ntone Edjabe, Bonaventure Ndikung, El Hadji Malick Ndiyaye, and Nana Oforiatta Ayim (Fig. 6).

Far from being a comprehensive analysis of every conversation at Condition Report 3, this dialogue includes the reflections of a few participants on some of the issues that emerged. Importantly, not all of these authors or all of the participants at the symposium share the same views. By the time participants reached the final plenary session and engaged in lively discussion with the audience, it was very clear that these conversations had only just begun. Evidently there is great need for scholars, curators, and artists working in Africa—whether at universities, museums, galleries, or independently—to continue to debate how we create and shape our knowledge and how we do so in collaboration with other people locally as well as globally.

The Raw Material Company positioned the city of Dakar as a “protagonist” of this event, with the symposium “enquiring deeply into the histories of its locality and bringing these to the fore through site visits and a commitment to holding discussions in spaces that are the stages of new art histories.”² As one might expect, participants went to the Musée de l’Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire (IFAN Museum) where they met with curator El Hadj Malick Ndiaye. Of particular interest, though, was the fact that the symposium was hosted in the Musée des Civilisations Noires a couple of months before the new building officially opened.

According to Raw’s Dulcie Abrahams Altass, the choice of this, at the time, yet-to-be-launched venue was a deliberate intervention.³ The 150,000 square feet, four-story, circular museum, which was built with Chinese money (costing over US\$30 million) and designed by the state-owned Beijing Institute of Architectural Design (Brown 2018), is situated opposite Dakar’s Grand National Theatre, which opened in 2011 and was also funded by the Chinese. The Art History in Africa delegates convened in a cavernous room with signage that was only in Mandarin and English.



1 The Condition Report 3 symposium on Art History in Africa took place at the Musée des Civilisations Noires (Museum of Black Civilizations) in Dakar, Senegal, a couple of months before its much-anticipated official opening. The building of this museum, which was a dream of Senegal's first president, was finally realized with the assistance of Chinese funds, highlighting contemporary geopolitical complexities and at times tensions.

Photo: Ruth Simbao

Speakers were staged in front of a large wall clad in copper (Fig. 7), which, as Dominique Malaquais stressed, raises important questions about labor, resource extraction, and the violence that often inhabits our spaces.

Beyond the typical question about whether China's presence in Africa is neocolonial (a question that is too often asked and answered in over-simplified ways; see Yan and Sautman 2013), what are the implications of meeting in a museum that was a dream of Léopold Senghor in 1964 and was finally realized with the assistance of the Chinese government fifty-two years later? Citing "David Hume's canonically illiterate discourse on Africa," Donald Trump's "shit hole" comment, and the "bankruptcy of European contemporary discourses and practices on Africa," the museum's press statement explained that the choice to turn away from the west and accept Chinese aid was deliberate (Brown 2018). At the opening of the museum in December 2018, the Chinese ambassador to Senegal, Xia Huang, stressed solidarity when he recalled the "common fate" and "friendship" that "unites" Africa and China (Brown 2018). How, though, can we reconsider solidarities of the twenty-first century that function beyond the "Big Man speak" of government and capitalist investment, and how might meaningful solidarities be manifested in spaces such as the Musée des Civilisations Noires?

As the presence of this new museum reveals, the current geopolitical landscape is very different to what it was when the history of "African art history"—at least the dominant history in the academy that largely positions the west as the progenitor of a particular type of academic study—began. This new geopolitical landscape demands an intricate analysis of the deep complexities of global interaction and global south⁵ possibilities if the dominant history of "African art history" is to be meaningfully unsettled.

On the first day of the symposium an audience member from South America asked why western-styled art history always turns to 1989 (and western exhibitions at that time) as the key geopolitical turning point, when this continues to uphold a western slant and timeline.⁶ The fact that this question was not sufficiently addressed is, in my view, a missed opportunity to earnestly reconsider the import of contemporary geopolitical shifts and to take

seriously the art history research of various Asian, Latin American, and other global south contexts. In my view, the engagement with theoretical and experiential resonances across global souths needs to be part of the ongoing process of delinking from worn-out western art histories.

During his keynote address, "In and Out of Africa: African Art History as a Paradox!" Salah Hassan recalled the solidarity of the African independence eras and stressed the need to reclaim or reignite an axis of solidarities. In the discussion that followed, Elizabeth Giorgis (professor in art history, criticism, and theory at Addis Ababa University) argued that, working on the African continent, she doesn't experience the solidarity from outside that Hassan talked about. In response, Hassan stressed that a revival of solidarity should be a goal—something that we need to strive for in our present context.⁷

What might solidarities mean in the current geopolitical landscape that has shifted significantly since the early anticolonial and independence era? Certainly, there is much value in Hassan's suggestion that we need to revisit and reread the contributions of black intellectuals such as Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Stuart Hall. How might we do so within a broader contemporary climate of returning to and reassessing solidarities, as can be seen in the revived interest in the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia, where leaders from twenty-nine Asian and African states met to discuss anticolonial struggles and the rebuilding of their own spaces "*in their own image*" (Prashad 2007: 48; emphasis added). In his book *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, Christopher Lee (2010: 3–4) asks how we create a new "geopolitical communitas" and how can we recuperate solidarities of the past in ways that are relevant today? As we consider art history in Africa, what facile solidarities do we need to shake? And what new solidarities should we embrace that enable us to strengthen art histories of the African continent?

In my presentation, "Geopolitics and the Arts of Africa: A Walk with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o," I argued that it is critical—as Ngũgĩ suggested when fighting for the decolonization of the study of English literature at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s—to begin on

the ground where one places one's feet (Ngũgĩ 2012:39). For an analysis of art history in Africa this means that the starting point should be particular art histories in various African contexts, then cross-continental comparisons, and then a consideration of various global south situations before assessment is made in relation to the Euro-American history of "African art history." In line with Ngũgĩ's notion of decolonizing curricula, this would radically change what is viewed as the legitimizing measuring rod (Ngũgĩ 2012: 42–43).

The Condition Report 3 program asserts that, "methodologies and epistemological frameworks for scholarship have yet to shed their historical west-centric frames of reference,"⁸ and the symposium aimed to find ways of delinking from old frameworks and grappling with new, locally driven epistemologies. As such, I was surprised to hear the assertion made by a participant in the final discussion that no one on the African continent is teaching "African art history." What could such an assertion mean and what does it reveal about processes of legitimization?

I imagine that underlying such a proclamation is the assumption that no one in Africa is teaching "African art history" as it exists and is taught in Euro-American contexts. If this were the implication (indeed the charge), then the simple answer to the question, "Does 'African art history' exist on the African continent?" would be probably be "No." This, however, would be a reductionist and skewed approach.

Having completed a PhD in the United States and having lectured in art history on the African continent for thirteen years, I have experienced the stark differences in these scholarly spaces. US art history programs are often completely separate from visual studies or fine art programs. Professors in art history mostly hold PhDs in their area of specialization, and in one art history department there can be as many as twenty-four art history professors. Areas of specialization such as "Islamic art," "African art" or "Latin American art" tend to follow or grow out of an area studies model initially linked to Cold War-era thinking that positioned western knowledge as universal and other knowledges as "foreign case studies" for the North American academy. In contrast, art history on the African continent is largely taught within fine art or visual studies departments, which means that many students (and often lecturers) major in studio practice. Relatively few people teach art history and art theory (and even fewer teach only art history); many lecturers do not (yet) hold PhDs, and most are forced to teach a broad range of courses beyond their chosen specialization.

While the differences are significant (and there is more variation across the continent than this summary captures), it is too easy to allow the issue of resources or lack thereof to drive conversations about value and legitimization. Certainly there are strengths in the privileged art history programs of the north, just as there are weaknesses in the teaching of art history in Africa,⁹ but it is important to recognize the blind spots of privilege in terms of a geopolitics of knowledge (Simbao 2015), particularly with the problematic legacy of area studies and anthropology that shapes the "African art history" of the north. It is also important to recognize the ways in which African universities and independent platforms are at the forefront of transforming the discipline.

I am very heartened by the exciting and cutting-edge research that a number of current PhD students are conducting on the African continent. The next generation of art historians in Africa (who are training at this time of significant geopolitical and



2 Koyo Kouoh, coorganizer of the Condition Report 3 symposium *Art History in Africa*.

epistemological shift) will, I believe, change our discipline as we know it. A few examples of students' PhD projects I am currently working with are: Andrew Mulenga's PhD on speculative futures with a focus on contemporary Zambian art, Gladys Kalichini's PhD on representations of women freedom fighters in Zambia and Zimbabwe, Barnabas Muvhuti's revisionist art history research that focuses on Job Kekana and Zimbabwean modernism, Hu Binjun's PhD on Chinese art collectors in contemporary South Africa, and Claire Nalukenge's PhD on a feminist reading of Nakayima's power objects at Mubende Hill Cultural Site in Uganda (a project that relates in significant ways to Rose Kirumira's article in this issue). At Makerere University Angelo Kakande and Amanda Tumusiime are supervising the following PhD projects: Eddie Butindo's PhD on contemporary public art in Uganda, Dorah Kasozi's PhD on women and paper beading in Uganda (see her article in this issue), and Esther Ndagire's PhD on textiles and the stigma of sickle cell in Uganda.

These are just a few examples of current PhD research projects that are growing directly out of students' own interests and their own experiences on the African continent and that are responding to twenty-first century epistemological transformations.¹⁰ Notably, many of these PhD candidates are women, which I submit will impact the future of African universities in valuable ways.

Reassessing art history in Africa—as the Condition Report 3 symposium has importantly pushed us to do—I am encouraged by the significant role that these and other PhD candidates are playing in shaping what art history in Africa is and will be in the future. Considering this work in African universities alongside the cutting-edge work of independent platforms such as Chimurenga, the Pan African Space Station, and the ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge, knowledge creation on the continent can play a leading role in situating Africa as the legitimizing site of new art histories of Africa.

Below, the organizers of the symposium, Koyo Kouoh and Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi discuss their conceptual framing of

Condition Report 3. Suzana Sousa, who presented “Art and Culture in a Complex Geopolitical Context in Angola,” considers what it means to localize art histories, and Emi Koide, who presented “The Anxieties and Stalemates Surrounding the History(ies) of Modern and Contemporary Global and African Art—The Case of the DRC,” provides insight into her experiences of art histories of Africa in the context of Brazil and considers what this might mean for the establishment of new solidarities.

FRAMING THE SYMPOSIUM

Koyo Kouoh: On the African continent there are a number of art history departments, but they are still few and far between, small in terms of material and human resources—particularly relative to the demographic power of the continent’s fifty-four countries—and often subsumed as modules of study under larger fine art courses. Moreover, it is important to remember the acute economic pressure in Africa that is pushing large numbers of young students to move into academic fields that seem more lucrative in the short term. This disciplinary exodus gravely threatens the future of art history and is impacting negatively on the production and critical analysis of artistic production by African artists, affecting the wellbeing of art and society in general. While more and more examples of hybrid forms emerging from the mix of art history, curatorial studies, and arts administration are integrated into curricula that are just as hybrid, hosted in the wide spectrum of “humanities,” it is fundamental to consider whether this approach is sufficient. Is it enough to make room for examples of African art in the grand chronologies of academia, or should a complete reconstruction of existing art histories be encouraged instead?

Indeed, the majority of African art history being produced on the continent is taking place outside of the academic sphere, emerging within a creative ecosystem that is in turn informing the discipline and rooting it in local practice. With this in mind, in order to derive an understanding of what a contemporary African art history, or histories, may be, it is also important to take into account the ecosystem within which these histories grow, which

6 Salah Hassan was one of the keynote speakers at the Art History in Africa symposium, and presented the paper “In and Out of Africa: African Art History as a Paradox!”



spans art collectives, commercial galleries, fairs, biennales, independent exhibition making, and cultural journalism. Today more and more initiatives are cognizant of their roles as both creators of artistic movements and active witnesses to practice, archiving in an often unique and innovative manner. These organizations and individuals build a bridge between artistic production and its inscription in art history, serving as models for beginning to renegotiate and renew the entire discipline. The urgency of approaching contemporary African art history from a spectrum of different practices that go beyond the academy emerged as a lynchpin of this edition of the Condition Report on Art History in Africa.

Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi: When I began the conversation to coconvene the Condition Report 3 on Art History in Africa with Koyo Kouoh of the Raw Material Company about two years ago, it was clear to both of us how crucial it was to address the conditions of African art scholarship and the production of art history in Africa. For Koyo, it logically built on Condition Reports 1 and 2, which focused respectively on independent art initiatives and institutions in Africa and the state of art education on the continent. It is important—and rightly so—that such conversations should be happening in Africa and be driven by people who live there. I felt that Condition Report 3 could provide the opportunity for a critical assessment of some of the activities on the continent in the last few years and perhaps begin the process of articulating a framework within which to engage with emergent modalities of knowledge production on the continent that have yet to seep into the discipline of African art history. The symposium was also an opportunity to examine African art history scholarship, which has few African voices and fewer participatory voices of those living and working in Africa.

Salah Hassan’s keynote captured the debates and positions that have long defined the arc of African art history. Perhaps the point he makes about a responsive art history that extends outside of academia and could hold some real-world consequence is more important than questions surrounding methodologies and pedagogy: it is the idea of revisiting, or rather returning to, the sort of intellectual solidarity that marked the early postcolonial periods in Africa. I found this insight quite compelling, although one must say that factors such as decolonization, cultural nationalism, or radical movements of that era, which once held intellectual urgency, no longer hold the collective imagination. His perspective on destabilizing the idea of the insider and outsider, clearly an old debate, still reflects the high stakes around the ownership of the discipline and its historical roots.

One critical subtext that shaped the conversations at the symposium was that of the object of African art history, historical and contemporary. In private conversations with colleagues elsewhere and at different times, I have pointed out that the narratives of the historical canon in African art do not fully consider or address the object in its history. Instead it is the object in the history of the market or collectors who have possessed it. In that regard, the object’s biography has less to do with the source-provenance than it has to do with its history of changing hands, from one Western collector to another, or from one Western institution to another. That is to say that its source origin is not always important other than to emphasize its historical function, which is the narrative it is expected to tell in reiterative contexts of scholarship. Also, it is not the narrative of African art’s “object-ness” that is the emphasis;

3–5 Participants (top–bottom) Emi Koide (Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia, Brazil), Eva Barois de Caelvel (Raw Material Company, Senegal), and Nana Offoriata Ayim (ANO Institute of Arts and Knowledge, Ghana).

instead it is a narrative of its function that lends to its reception. African art as a global commodity and as an academic discipline has yet to truly evolve from its colonial origin. In other words, and arguably, while there has been a considered push beyond the ethnography of the object to a wider consideration of its biography, such attempts place the historical narratives of African art at the mercy of Western collectors and institutions.

This pressing issue was reflected in a number of presentations at Condition Report 3, which explored the Western market origins of African art history and how that origin continues to dictate pedagogical and scholarly lenses. It is difficult to think of an art history that does not really attempt at heavy lifting, tracing and reconstructing the history of the object in ways that document the changes in the artistic production of ethnic groups, for instance, and the nation-state at large. Perhaps the larger task for many of us is to be able to look back, retrace our steps, and begin the real task of evolving, perhaps, a new model of art history that truly centers the continent; one that recognizes and fully takes into account the intellectual work being produced from within the continent.

With regard to the contemporary object, during the symposium, I was asked on separate occasions, “what is contemporary African art?” by two Senegalese artists in the audience. I thought the question conjectural but important in that it returned attention to what still is a major debate in many countries in Africa, where a modernist mode of artistic production and essentializing notions of cultural nationalism inscribe the norm. For example, Senegalese modernism was a state project inaugurated by the country’s post-independence president, the venerable poet, art patron, and cofounder of Négritude, Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senghor enjoined Senegalese artists to seek an essential African spirit in advancing their modernist vocabularies. This legacy of Senghorian modernism, which emerged in the wake of decolonization agendas in the early postcolonial periods and which the two artists hold on to, flies in the face of the marauding discourse of global contemporary art that insists on a certain coevalness of artistic practices. Yet the crisis of artistic identity and a certain resistance to the plethora of artistic forms and media beyond painting and sculpture are not peculiar to Senegal. It cuts across the continent, from north to central, east, west, and southern Africa. This crisis of artistic identity may also be understood as a crisis of art globalization and perhaps suggests two streams of artistic consciousness—one connected to an international flow of contemporary art and the other to local notions of contemporary art tied to post-independence modernist roots. What was thus clear at the symposium were disputations and disjunctions in the narratives of the modern and the contemporary in African art when approached using either a localized or a more globalized lens.

Although the three days of the symposium were filled with



robust, refreshing, and energizing conversations that underscored its timeliness, it became imperative to reflect on what kind of art history we should be engaged with and for whom:

- Is an African art history that stands distinctively connected to, or folds into the discursive landscape of global art history? and
- What does it mean to have a collectivizing vision of African art history—does it reflect or take into consideration the many micro art histories (national and otherwise) that abound on the continent without flattening them, or does it serve the purpose in academic departments outside of the continent?

These are questions that I hope can be addressed in succeeding fora, should they ever take place.

LOCALIZING ART HISTORIES

Susana Sousa: National contexts have had a particular impact on African art histories, whether through particular political systems or whether because they have promoted the characteristics of specific art worlds. In Angola this was the case for art apprenticeship in the years following independence, which were marked by the lack of an art education infrastructure. That was replaced at the time by a master-pupil system and training in neighboring countries, such as Congo, or even by the construction of a narrative that promoted nationalistic identity perspectives of both traditional and contemporary art practices.

Condition Report 3 on Art History in Africa opened up a question on the position from which we study art history. The panel “Localizing Art Histories,” which focused on Angola, Benin, and Ethiopia, mapped art histories through national history and memory as the foundation for the construction of art history in Africa, exploring three different territories as well as political periods. But other papers, such as the ones presented in the session on “The History of African Art History” also highlighted the need to think about location and the need to clarify one’s standpoint. In her paper, “Shattering Single Stories in the Teaching of Historical Arts of Africa,” Susan Gagliardi evoked Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s concept of the single story, referring particularly to the teaching of the historical arts of Africa. Only the specifics of a location, which is never—surprising as it may sound—contained in itself, can bring the bright colors of detail and difference. The focus on geography forces our eyes to notice relations in place and its impact and bring together politics and history, economics and everyday life, and allow for a fully rounded history of art and objects.

Location also determines what is relevant in a certain narrative. The paper by Nana Oforiatta Ayim, “Future Histories,” questions the place of objects in museums and the role of museums in African societies. From her project and research on a mobile museum, there seems to arise an understanding that live objects—objects that are still socially meaningful in contemporary societies—need new models of museums. It seems to me that they need new forms of engaging with audiences that the Western model of museum does not cater for.

On a different note, both Dominique Malaquais and Etone Edjabe provided us with important historical information about FESTAC 77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, the national delegations that took part in the



7 Raw Material Company Condition Report 3 speakers and some audience members in front of the large, copper-clad wall in the Musée des Civilisations Noires, September 22, 2018. Photo: Courtesy of the Raw Material Company

event, and its music and participants. In these examples we could find layers of entanglement and dependency, and the determinacy of place and time on the reading of the history being told. These webs are still in place today, and we should highlight them, as their importance—although of a different order from the art object—is tangible.

Despite being stated in the title of the symposium “Condition Report 3: Art History in Africa,” it was easier to talk about the discipline in general terms—and actually that point of view was part of the discussions, as if place were a minor aspect and not connected to the objects produced and the theoretical foundations adopted to read these same objects. For me, location as a standpoint is also a way to reflect and question views that tend to contaminate critical thought on the production of knowledge. Can we place more value depending on where thought is produced? Are we aware of this process? By adopting particular theoretical frameworks, are we dismissing the value of local, sometimes traditional, knowledge? We are still far from answering these questions, but the fruitful discussion at the symposium allowed us to at least question the place of museums; the role of cultural policy; the role, use, and relevance of objects; and how all these elements are connected through space and time.

CONTEMPORARY SOLIDARITIES

Emi Koide: The symposium brought together researchers, scholars, artists, and curators from Africa, the African diaspora, Europe, and the USA, gathering many interesting and relevant perspectives and topics. As I have been interested in Modernism and its relationship with the construction of national identities in Global Souths, I think the panel “Localisation des histoires des arts,” with contributions on Ethiopian and Angolan modern art connected to transformations in history and politics, was really enriching. This panel brought perspectives on the ambivalence of the production of modern and contemporary art and the historical discourse about it. I consider this interesting in a comparative

transcultural approach with other modernisms, as in Brazil—where the discourse on Brazilian modern art has been critically reviewed by considering topics of race, unequal power, multiple regions and modernities in a continental country. It seems that comparative approaches on “peripheral” modernisms can disclose similarities and differences, especially considering their complexities, ambivalences and negotiations with local traditions, historical conditions, Western and other influences.

Although there was a panel on Senegalese art history in which the debate was about the canonical version of history—the *École de Dakar* and the cultural politics of Senghor’s *Négritude*, as well as the opposing experiences of *Laboratoire Agit’Art*—the participation of many artists from the *Village des Arts* as well as curators and scholar Abdou Sylla was announced, but unfortunately the artists and Sylla (who wrote extensively about modern and contemporary Senegalese art and Senghor’s cultural politics) were not able to be present. Nevertheless, it was an interesting panel.

During the debate, someone in the audience asked about crafts and how these would be considered as part of Senegalese art history; panelists answered promptly that they were presenting a “Western perspective” on Senegalese art history. As it was the last session, the debate did not continue, but it seems that this assertion gives us a lot to think about.

What would this “Western perspective” on art history about “Others” art productions be? Would that be the framework, the methodology of a discipline, the topics or objects that are chosen? How are Senegalese and other Global South researchers located in the chain of production and circulation of knowledge and the discourse on art history? In spite of some other moments during the seminar, in which the dynamics of production of knowledge and its circulation were briefly questioned—such as the difference between artists and scholars based in Western or Northern institutions and those based on the African continent or in other Global South institutions—it seems that this topic deserved to be further discussed and properly addressed.

Most of the “paradigmatic” exhibitions on African art, which integrate the art history discourse, take place in the West; the main journals on the topic are from Northern universities and institutions; and with English as universal academic language, a significant part of the main bibliography is produced by diasporic intellectuals or Western scholars. While these are certainly very important, obviously, we continue to know far less about African art exhibitions that were organized on the continent, as well as there being little access to bibliographies or research produced by scholars and intellectuals who are based in Africa. It is evident that there is uneven access to research tools in universities of Global Souths, of which African and Brazilian institutions probably have much more in common concerning lack of access to funding, archives, libraries, and collections that are mainly based in the North.

It was very important that some presentations tackled the issue of other methodologies, other narratives that are not the classical Western academic approach—the Benin Project by Peju Lawiyola and Nana Offoriata Ayim’s ANO project. Both explore other possibilities of collective construction and a critical approach to local histories, arts, and heritage, based on other local knowledges, producing art and discourse that are significant to the protagonists of cultural manifestations as well as to the world. This is very relevant, and in some ways similar to experiences of pluriversity in Latin

America, which aims to decolonize the production of knowledge. There, initiatives have been taken to construct horizontal, dialogical approaches between different traditions of practice and thought, considering also different modes of transmission, recognizing the “Other”—who is usually placed as an object or informant—as a subject of the construction of pluriversal knowledge. Perhaps one possibility to open and decolonize art history production and circulation would be through pluriversal collaborative construction.

For a long time, Brazil was widely considered as a place marked by its cultural mixing, for its “racial democracy,” which had long been celebrated, as well as for the importance of its African heritage. Nevertheless, this positive view of the country as a melting pot of cultures and races often hides racism and segregation in Brazilian society. As the country to which 40% of African slaves were brought, Brazil was the last to abolish slavery, in 1888. In 2017, according to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), around 55% of the population defined themselves as being “black” or “brown,” making Brazil the country with the largest number of black African descendants outside of the African continent. But Brazil still has to face its denial about racism, as Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie remarked in a Brazilian newspaper interview.¹¹

African art in Brazil has for many years remained an area often considered the domain of anthropology, and the histories and cultures of the African continent were completely absent from curriculums in schools or universities. In a profoundly unequal country, the percentage of black students and professors at universities remains low. Black movements have been struggling for access to education as well as for the inclusion and recognition of Afro-Brazilian history and culture. Since 2001, some universities have been implementing affirmative action for Afro-Brazilians. In 2003, Law 10639—which makes the teaching of Afro-Brazilian and African history and culture mandatory in the school curriculum—was promulgated by President Luiz Ignácio (Lula) da Silva. Since then, universities and schools have been trying to include and connect elements of African history and culture, but didactic materials and textbooks still lack consistency. Although there has been much important and relevant research and academic production in Afro-Brazilian and African studies, African art especially remains a minor area. Art history itself is also a fragile area of study. Consistent postgraduate programs were established around 1980, but apart from one or two programs in which African art and non-Western art history have been included, most of the programs and curriculums focus largely on Western official art history.

Between 2000 and 2010, many new universities outside state capitals were created, with the idea of creating more accessible and popular universities. I have been teaching in one of these, the Federal University of Recôncavo da Bahia (UFRB) in the state of Bahia, in Cachoeira, a small town rich in Afro-Brazilian culture. At UFRB, a very diverse university, most of the students are Afro-Brazilians, in contrast to the older public universities where most of the students are white and middle class. Students frequently draw attention to the importance of the need for curriculum review, especially concerning topics such as the culture of African, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-diasporic, and autochthonous Brazilian people. They are also critical of courses that mainly focus on Euro-American art history.

African art and history are subjects of great interest for our

students—around 80% of whom are Afro-Brazilians. A recent project developed by Bruno Moreschi,¹² which analyzed most of the art history books used in visual arts undergraduate courses in Brazil, concluded that of all artists presented, only 0.9% were black, 26.3% were non-European, and 8.8% were women. It is evident that art history teaching and research in Brazil have a lot to tackle and question.

The African art history course that I have been teaching is an optional course in the current curriculum. The challenges and difficulties are to deconstruct stereotypical considerations of the African continent as being a homogeneous place, as well as the negative “primitivist” approach or romanticized view of the continent as a lost original paradise. It is also important to make students consider contemporary Africa with its complexities, in which artistic production does not limit itself to masks and statues or “classical art” and to present to them modern and contemporary art in its diversity. Currently I coordinate a research group with undergraduate students, in which, following their own initiative after reading some seminal texts, they are developing role-playing games and quizzes and are making a map of African and Afro-diasporic artists. It has been a very enriching experience and some of the games were tested with young students preparing themselves to go to

university. In the last few years, collaborations and possibilities for exchange with African universities have been taking place, as well as new research in African art history and connections with Brazil.

Nowadays, we are facing a very hard and regressive situation in Brazil, with the country’s newly elected president, Jair Bolsonaro. Teachers and professors have been under attack for “ideological indoctrination”, and federal universities are at risk of losing their autonomy. Bolsonaro, a far-right politician, is known for his racist and misogynistic comments and for his constant attacks against Afro-Brazilian, indigenous, and LGBTQ communities. He dissolved the Ministry of Culture, constantly blames artists as left-wing indoctrinators, and also disestablished the secretariat in the Ministry of Education responsible for promoting diversity, human rights, and inclusion. In these terrible times, universities are also place of resistance. It has never been easy to develop research, to continue to exist as public universities in this country. We have a lot to learn from the indigenous and *quilombola*¹³ black communities who have been resisting since colonial times in Brazil. Ways of establishing new forms of solidarity, networks of resistance with other universities across the world, must also be important for all of us now.

Notes

- 1 See Simbao 2017 for a discussion of the difference between “African art” and art of Africa.
- 2 Raw Material Company, http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_2238?lang=en#_2328.
- 3 Personal conversation, Dakar, September 20, 2018. According to Altass, a closed exhibition of Chinese art took place in the museum before it was opened.
- 4 Shortly after the World Festival of Black Arts in 1966, Senghor announced his dream to create a museum that would “present the past and present experiences of black people everywhere” (Thomas-Johnson 2018).
- 5 I choose to write south, north, east, and west without capital letters, as I do not correlate these terms with the fixed coordinates of physical geography. Rather I view the global south (or global souths, plural) as a term that reflects a situational understanding of geography.
- 6 See a discussion of the same question in Simbao 2015: 266.
- 7 This is taken from my symposium notes and is not a direct quote.
- 8 Raw Material Company, http://www.rawmaterialcompany.org/_2238?lang=en#_2328. Accessed 12 October 2018.
- 9 Elizabeth Giorgis, for example, laments that some curricula in Ethiopia continue to glorify “the formalism of European modernism” and there is a serious “absence of critical debate that situates artistic production and subjectivity within current social, economic and

political contexts.” (Personal correspondence, November 6, 2018).

10 At the University of Lagos, Abiodun Akande and Babaseninde Ademuleya are supervising James Opadocu’s PhD, and Akande and Ayodele Otonye are supervising Peter Ighodalo. I am sure there are a number of other examples at various institutions across the continent.

11 See <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/ilustrada/2015/02/1591504-fui-a-bons-restaurantes-no-brasil-e-nao-vi-uma-unica-pessoa-negra.shtml>.

12 See <https://historiada-rte.org/sobre>

13 *Quilombola* communities are the descendants of African and Afro-Brazilians slaves who escaped, occupying free lands which nowadays are rural black communities.

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