In order to achieve that goal, Gagliardi and Biro recommend severing the ethnonym—or what is most often regarded as the name of an ethnic group but which may just as well be the name of a region—from the societies concerned while only retaining it as a label qualifying a given style as identified by networks of African art enthusiasts in the course of the first half of the twentieth century. It would, for example, follow that “sculpture, Senufo” would no longer be understood as “sculpture, Senufo population,” or possibly in this case “sculpture, Senufo region,” but as “Senufo-style sculpture.” However, the signal given would remain unclear. It might perhaps make sense in this particular case, studied at length by Gagliardi, and in certain other examples, but would transforming this approach into a new, and unique, paradigm really allow us to move on and progress further in our understanding of African artistic productions? Or might it not, instead, close the door to the very possibility of addressing their histories?

While the two authors discuss theoretical issues and consider embarrassment created by the colonial legacy, they do not take into account the contemporary implications of the ethnic assignment of style. Are we sure that we are ready to understand “Senufo style” as we would understand “Art Deco style” or “Louis XIII style”? Regarding the latter two designations, nobody would nowadays feel their identities affected in any way by the terms. Yet, objects labeled with a style name that is still considered ethnic are often likely to be seen as identity markers and as stakes in the political or social uses of history, without their histories having necessarily been investigated.

Moreover, despite the wishes of the two authors, their approach suggests that everything is settled while the ethnic group remains there, in the background, still swathed in timelessness if what becomes recognized as a style is not accompanied by temporal coordinates. Yet a style marker only makes sense in a particular context. Yes, in the context of documentary paucity, the notion of style remains as a method and also as a gateway to explore processes of creation. Differentiating styles is not an end in itself but a first step of sorting things out in order to pursue more detailed analyses.

When I refer to a “style of Ląstà,” I mean a style of painting purposely designed by Ethiopian painters between the 1640s and 1740s through the orders of the local elite of Ląstà revolting against the king (Fig. 1). Importantly, the style radically differs from the style then in vogue in the capital of the Ethiopian kingdom. Questions about motivations and formal decisions remain unanswered, but they provide bases for examining modalities and meaning of figurative thinking at work—that is, what thoughts are expressed through the figurative language and how the thoughts literally take shape (on “figurative thinking,” see Francastel 1967). In any case, should we not rather give up on excessively standardized descriptions of objects? In a publication, the information provided in a caption for an illustration may be subject to interpretation, but the explanatory data are—or must be—provided in the body of the text. In a museum the telegraphic text of the tombstone is not intended to require clarification in long chats. How, then, do we account for scientific and social enquiries and knowledge? There is no unequivocal answer but, before questioning the form of presentation, whether publication or label, it is absolutely necessary for a museum to first probe what it really wants to address.

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Facing Toward the Future: How New Categories May Emerge
Mbongiseni Buthelezi, Executive Director, Public Affairs Research Institute, Johannesburg
Gagliardi and Biro accurately recognize language as an important site of change in the presentation and discussion of African arts with a historical bent. Toward the end of the essay, they make the point that, “Once we recognize that our determinations of style reflect our evaluations of form, then we must also revise our language to signal to our audiences that the style of a particular object may or may not reflect anything about who made it, for whom, or why” (2019: 4).

This is an important point to emphasize, i.e., that the work of signaling, or even addressing more strongly than merely signaling, to audiences that the naming conventions used by art markets and museum displays carry with them histories of epistemic violence. The work of questioning and undoing these categories and the violence out of which they emerge is far from over. The work of scholarly criticism has indeed got us to a point where “educated” audiences are aware that categories like Baule or Shona or Zulu reference constellations of meaning that are much broader than the simplistic colonial “tribal” descriptors. Each object so described was collected from a particular place, at a particular time, often under circumstances that involved domination and violence in colonial encounters. What’s more, the work had been made at a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular person or people. It had been used either in the flow of daily life, in ceremonial circumstances, or as art or ornament. This is how, as scholars and audiences schooled in critique, we approach these works, as the authors acknowledge. The work of conveying this to audiences—perhaps the majority of museum-goers—must continue even at the risk of appearing didactic to those who know better.

When we turn to language and contemporary artistic creations that reference past eras of African art, such as Theaster Gates’s installation that illustrates Gagliardi and Biro’s essay, the authors also correctly argue that the work of “recognizing complex histories” cannot be passed from museums or universities onto living artists (2019: 4). This is the responsibility of scholarship. In South Africa, for example, critique of colonial categories of neat “tribes” has been consciously undertaken by some artists, but the penetrating task of developing methods for giving detailed histories back to artistic works that were collected in colonial situations and are held in collections of museums in South Africa as well as in Europe and North America, is being done by scholars collaborating across disciplines (e.g., Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016). Attempts to get beyond static inherited categories requires opening up again and again the thickness of how works were talked about in the contexts in which they originated in Kenya or Mali or Zimbabwe in languages other than English or French. It was often when works were collected by outsiders that they moved from being described in quotidian terms that normalized them in the life-worlds of their creators and users to being bluntly labeled by “tribe.” It may not be possible fully to undermine the use of designations like Baule because of how well established they are in international circuits as Gagliardi and Biro recognize.
It may be then that our analyses need to be future-facing in such a way that we teach prospective collectors and traders to pass through university classrooms to depart from the colonial mentalities and discourses that remain alive today. Furthermore, where contemporary collectors still do not, they need to be challenged to describe the objects they collect differently to how their predecessors did: they must contextualize the works with details such as names of artists, places of creation and collection, and circumstances under which the works are collected. Such collection practices will then make possible the further attempts of scholarship to fill out our knowledge of the quotidian contexts of the works. In time, then, new categorizations will emerge that are not as epistemically violent and offensive as the “tribal” categorizations away from which we are attempting to move. Much work still remains to be done along the vectors Gagliardi and Biro signal.

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So, What Do We Do Now?

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On “More Truth,” the May 27, 2020 episode of the Scene on Radio podcast from Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies, independent journalist Lewis Raven Wallace asks, “Shedding light is only part of the struggle [to seek truth], right?” explaining, “it matters how we shine that light. … [A particular] telling can reinforce the status quo or challenge it, depending on the framing.” He concludes that we need to attend to how we present information if we care about the meanings and possibilities attached to the stories we tell. While Wallace’s statements specifically address an urgent need for a long overdue reckoning with racial prejudice against Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the United States, they resonate with us and the discussion we brought forward in our winter 2019 First Word essay, “Beyond Single Stories: Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and Agency in Arts of Africa.”

Scholars and journalists share professional commitments to search for information, assess its reliability, and present analyses to their audiences. Africanist scholars also often commit to examining or subverting Eurocentric understandings of the world. We endeavor to recover overlooked voices, democratize information, and decenter knowledge. Yet, our tellings about art and its histories may reinforce the status quo or challenge it, depending on the framing.

In our winter 2019 essay, we argued that scholars of African arts must overhaul our language for so-called historical or classical arts of Africa and reframe our presentations of material to disparate audiences. We emphasize a need to acknowledge and investigate bases for the categories we use to organize and think about arts as a starting point, and only as a starting point, for reform. We are concerned with how scholars of African arts write about and present historical or classical arts of Africa in any context, whether in university courses, scholarly monographs, or museum didactics. When scholars rely on terms like Bwa, Fang, Hemba, or Lobi to organize and evaluate objects or conditions surrounding their production and circulation without checking to see if the analyses that follow reinforce outdated concepts at the core of the terms, then we risk reproducing outdated concepts even if we qualify the terms we use.

In two series of responses published in the Dialogue section of African Arts, nine scholars, including emerging and established museum professionals and academics from Africa, Europe, North America, and South America have offered attentive reflections (see African Arts Vol. 53, no. 3 and this issue). We are grateful for their thorough engagement with our text. Joshua Cohen, Maxime de Formanoir, Salia Malé and Marguerite de Sabran, John Warne Monroe, and Leslie Wilson authored the first set of responses. Juliana Ribeiro da Silva Bevilacqua, Claire Bosc-Tiessé, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi contributed their words to this issue. Rich ideas we received from them and other colleagues—as well as renewed attention in recent months to injustice and disparities in the United States and across the world—have further informed our thinking on this topic and prompted a response.

Imaginings of Authenticity

Imaginings of authenticity have often depended on ideas of bounded cultures untouched by outside influences. Terms used to categorize arts have tacitly reinforced the notions. In their responses to our First Word essay, Wilson, Monroe, Formanoir, Cohen, and Buthelezi separately refer to the African art market and connoisseurship centered in Europe and North America. They point out that the European and North American market as well as connoisseurship linked to it have relied on certain terms to categorize and assess historical or classical arts of Africa.

To this day, when an art dealer, a collector, or another connoisseur evaluates an object and deems it authentic, the designation implies the object was created within a “one tribe, one style” context (see Kasfir 1984). Importantly, Monroe suggests that people invested in such market-oriented framings of authenticity may often resist calls to reveal historical constructions of ethnonym-based brand names and to expose their fictions (cf. Palmié 2013: 6). Buthelezi and Cohen rightly ask if scholars of African arts should remain beholden to market-driven concerns, especially when we know that such concerns tend to disregard nuanced dynamics of artistic production and circulation on the African continent. We assert that scholars of African arts must pursue critical evaluations of what we and other enthusiasts think we know rather than satisfy expectations of market actors or appeal to them.

Any move to expose the colonial construction of terms linked to present-day cultural or ethnic group names, as well as problematic concepts embedded in the terms through attention to complex entanglements of disparate African and European individuals over time, will unsettle. In the preface to the second edition of her generative book Le Singe de Kafka & autres propos sur la colonie, philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina (2020: 17) pointedly underlines a core challenge in dealing with knowledge structures inherited from colonial contexts. She explains,

“Today […] if the postimperial “decolonial scientists” have taken over from the “colonial scientists” of the past, they are not necessarily in a position to decolonize knowledge actively because postimperial—and sometimes postcolonial—insti tutions remain imbued with coloniality. … The epistemic impossibility holds in the fact that we cannot saw the branch on which we are sitting.”

The “one tribe, one style” paradigm is difficult to overturn because it is so entrenched. It is the branch on which we sit. And colonial ideas about purity and authenticity are integral to it. Yet, entrenchment of a flawed paradigm does not make the paradigm any more grounded in historical verities. We need to find ways to decouple terms we use from flawed concepts at their core.

There are practical reasons for us to think carefully about our terms, how we use them, and what they mean. As Mbongiseni Buthelezi acknowledges, we may never be able to abandon certain terms entirely even if they reflect flawed concepts because we have come to rely on the terms to organize and search for information. Monroe considers possibilities for harnessing data about historical arts of Africa and advocates for creation of a “globally searchable” database for “large-scale comparative research” across institutions. He also imagines some of the research an open, interinstitutional database could make possible. As people who have worked on designing or building a database know, the architecture and analytical possibilities of any database depend on the clarity of its structure and the reliability of information added to it. And in order to link databases from different institutions together,