Transmigrational Writings between the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa: Literature, Orality, Visual Arts by Hélène Colette Tissières, trans. Marjolijn de Jager

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reviewed by Holiday Powers

In recent years, there have been numerous attempts to broaden the field of African art to include North Africa, yet I can attest, as a scholar focusing on Moroccan art, that the willingness to conceive the disciplinary limits is not consistent across the field. I therefore find the premise of Hélène Colette Tissières’ book Transmigrational Writings between the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa: Literature, Orality, Visual Arts compelling and laudable. The study is focused on the “circulations” among Francophone African arts, particularly in the immediate post-Independence period, focussing on literature and, it is important to note, only scant emphasis on visual arts.

Transmigrational Writings was originally published in French in 2007 as Écritures et transhumanse entre Maghreb et Afrique subsaharienne: Littérature, oralité, arts visuels and was translated into English by Marjolijn de Jager. This is a study that highlights Francophone writers and relies on a Francophone theoretical backbone. If there are many references to well-known writers like Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Edouard Glissant, Tissières also brings in theorists like Abdelkébir Khattab and Toni Marains who are less widely translated, not to mention the numerous fiction writers she discusses and quotes. The field grows stronger with these translations and summaries since Anglophone scholars gain access to this wealth of knowledge.

The book opens with a clear position about what Tissières perceives to be the problems of the extant disciplinary division between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. As she writes, the forms of interfacing between the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa … have been formed over the centuries from a variety of events—a vast network—the result of relationships and ruptures, influences, insertions, and rejections. The latter, less visible, less tangible, have been reorganized and evoked by writers, artists, and musicians for all the world to hear, from its distant trembling, its subtle components, fracturing exclusive perspectives, illusions, and failures (p. 27).

The book begins with a chapter giving a more theoretical perspective, then moves into a more thematic analysis, ending in the second half with in-depth case studies of four writers: Abdelwahab Meddeb, Werewere Liking, Tchicaya U Tam’Si, and Assia Djebar.

Across the study, an interesting argument develops about silences, breaks in narration, parts that do not fit or are missing. Tissières approaches these “structural voids,” the “unspoken” language that “disrupts,” “fractures,” and “obscures” (pp. 55–56) from perspectives that range from rituals and divination to orality to the insertion of visual artworks in a literary text. Most scholars shy away from what does not quite fit, scooting around any awkwardness, but Tissières instead makes that disruptive language central to the study itself. With each new example and each new writer, there is an accumulation of insight into the power of these interstitial spaces created through language. The reader sees step-by-step why and how these fractures appear. One of the book’s biggest strengths is undoubtedly the meticulous analysis of quoted texts. Tissières goes close for each one, picking it apart word by word, allowing for a depth of analysis that is fascinating and profound. This is most true of writers to whom she devotes more than a page or two, as in the four highlighted in the book’s second half. She has a keen sense of observation and offers clear and creative interpretations of these textual details.

Most authors attempt to broaden the field of African art by taking only one of two tactics: overt argument or implicit positioning by, say, including both Maghrebi and sub-Saharan African artists within the same category. Tissières relies on both of these techniques, beginning with a clear argument along both theoretical and historical lines, then moving into a terminology of “the African artist” (e.g., p. 99) that uses examples from both areas. It is perhaps in her desire to make these regions overlap so entirely that “the African artist” becomes abstracted, and the themes and writers studied here become frequently decontextualized. In an example of what is a consistent structure in the first half of the book, her section about “Madness and Subversion” (pp. 39–47) as thematics linked to postcolonial trauma begins with reference to ideas proposed by Frantz Fanon and Albert Memmi. She then gives examples of writers without referencing their country of origin or the context of the work’s creation or its reception: Nabile Farès, Pius Ngandu NKashama, Ferdinand Oyono, and William Sassine. There are thus examples from the Maghreb (Algeria) and from sub-Saharan Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Guinea).

Colonialism was, of course, experienced differently by these countries, and independence came about in different ways. So, in this example, why is it that writers rely on similar techniques, and are they used to the same ends? In other words, to speak more broadly about the structure of argumentation in the book, is it enough to point out that Francophone African writers during the period of independence used madness as a literary device without explaining why this is consistent across the literature? More directly: is it enough to focus on formal analysis without rooting these works and writers in their multiple historical and political contexts?

At its best, this way of argumentation—setting out an idea, providing brief theoretical grounding, and then giving examples from across the continent or, in the second half of the book, offering in-depth analyses of four writers with consistent themes of disruptive writing without explaining their interrelation—makes the point of shared themes, of intertwining, with an elegant economy of words through the act of suggestion, by expecting the reader to make these connections. The danger Tissières does not entirely escape, however, is that it renders the continent featureless or collapses the vastness of these multiple contexts. It is, of course, impossible when referring to such a large number of writers to delve into the entire context in which each works, yet the flip side repeats the problematic suggestion of one shared, continental history and culture void of diversity.

The question of why these writers are often treated as pertaining to no particular context is all the more important in a study that sets out to make an argument about place, about
the circulation of ideas in distinct spaces. Tissières brings great depth of analysis and observation to literary texts, and I hope that in future work she will bring this same eye to the flows themselves across the continent. I wanted more than the opening chapter to elucidate how ideas move beyond the presence of tropes and styles. In the way that she guides us through questions surrounding the power of silences, I hope to see in her work analysis devoted to why and how these movements circulate.

Finally, this is a book devoted to literature, and its contribution to the field of African visual art is circumstantial, through suggestions of similar flows in artworks. While writers in this study are full-fledged individuals responding to political postcolonial realities as well as to formal challenges, artists insofar as they are (minimally) discussed are often cast as mystical beings. Painting becomes synonymous with "vision" and, in multiple examples, some kind of sacred gesture. It is incomplete to write about painters like Farid Belkahia and Ahmed Cherkhaoui without discussing modernism, and thus Tissières does not approach the richness of their work. I urge her to accord visual artists that same grounding in contemporaneity that she so masterfully gives in her analysis of writers.

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book review

Trash: African Cinema from Below
by Kenneth Harrow
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reviewed by Delinda Collier

The concept "trash" creates a messy short circuit between allegory and real life—this is at the same time its theoretical strength. Kenneth Harrow has entered that theoretical terrain in his Trash: African Cinema From Below. Trash is a collection of essays, short and long, organized into a semi-coherent argument about African film "from below": a theory concerned with politics, low aesthetics, globalization, and, ultimately, agency. Harrow’s main theoretical touchstones are classic texts by twentieth century French theorist Georges Bataille and contemporary French political theorist Jacques Rancière. A secondary engagement with "theories from the south," predominantly those of Achille Mbembe, helps Harrow to adapt Bataille and Rancière to the particular situation of Africa.

The introduction sets out some of the many ways that trash is used: as expository device, as descriptor of aesthetics and equipment, as metaphor, and as theoretical term that pivots from film form to postcolonial theory (primarily that of hybrid spaces) and contemporary political theory. "Trash" undertakes a lot of jobs in this book. I am sympathetic to Harrow’s desire to read in African film something other than the state, be it colonial or postcolonial. He writes, after Rancière, that "we must reverse our usual practice of reading a film as a statement of an ideology, and seek to see […] a path toward a politics with its own peculiar heterologies—toward a new distribution of the sensible" (p. 137). However, at times his analyses of films are heavy with Rancière, Bataille, Sigmund Freud, Aimé Césaire, Mbembe, and many others, and light on analysis of the particular theories that the films perform. The text is thick, dense, and roving, and at times it felt as if I were wandering through a forest of philosophers and theorists, where film became a flashlight to admire the trees. Harrow’s prose contains quite beautiful sections of film analysis embedded in the theoretical descriptions, including a chapter on Tia Lessin and Carl Deal’s Trouble the Water (2008) and Joseph Gai Ramaka’s Karfen Gei (2001), fresh readings of Nollywood and Ousmane Sembène’s output, and discussions of lesser-known film scenes such as in Angola, where Zéké Gamboa’s O Heroi (2004) was produced.

If the cart-before-the-horse of theory is a familiar critique of reading on art and film criticism, then let us move on to the issue at hand: whether the trope of trash via Bataille, Rancière, Mbembe, and Robert Stam is a useful combination to examine the large number of films presented in Trash. Among the new critical approaches used in the last decade in African art, cinema, and literary criticism is "trash" or "recycla" as both descriptor of the work and theory of its interpretation; Bataille is now firmly planted in Africa. This might unsettle some scholars who look to native sources of theory for their engagement with African film, which has been championed by Manthia Diawara’s theory of the filmmaker-as-griot. One still is left with the conundrum, no less present in Harrow’s book: is trash a method of reading that disrupts the "global north" construction of film or is it a category imposed by "real" conditions on the ground in Africa? Harrow argues both, but he avoids a causal chain (bad conditions produce trashy films, metaphors of trashy Africa produce films that critique the global order, etc.). He carefully moves around the problem of African film as allegory of geopolitical exploitation, as the "condition" of trash must be both physical environment and also state of being.

The first part of Harrow’s dyad concerns the supplements and oversignification of "trash" in film, theory drawn from Bataille (and Stam). The second is a political argument drawn from Rancière. "Trash" narratives in African art rarely engage the particulars of theorists so well as does Harrow, and he might argue that they are crucial to demonstrate the stakes that term evokes. Trash theory should not be taken lightly, as Trash shows, nor should it