

Africa 2020

Artistic, Digital, and Political Creation in English-Speaking African Countries

French President Emmanuel Macron announced on 3rd July 2018 in Lagos that a Special Season would be organized in France, from June to December 2020, to mark a renewed partnership with Africa, a “varied, strong and diverse continent that will play a part in our shared future”¹. Even if this cultural focus cannot be abstracted from a broader geopolitical agenda marred by controversial presidential declarations (Joe; Iati), it nevertheless has the potential to offer a somewhat different coverage of the continent. One can only hope that it avoids the temptation to officially “curate into being” “exceptional” artists (Dovey 60), tapping into the all-too-familiar image of Africa as “the supreme receptacle of the West’s obsession with, and circular discourse about, the facts of ‘absence,’ ‘lack,’ and ‘non-being,’ of identity and difference” (Mbembe 4).

Marseilles is undoubtedly set to play a major role in Africa 2020. The city’s special relationship with the continent dates back to its function as the first colonial port in France and persists in its multiple diasporic ties and recent position as one of Europe’s main transit points for African immigrants whose status is more and more precarious. One of the city’s major cultural festivals, the multidisciplinary Festival de Marseille, has embraced these historical, cultural, and social ties for the past three years, under Jan Goosens’ directorship.

Building on the recent partnership signed between Aix-Marseille Université (AMU) and the Festival, the peer-reviewed journal of AMU research centre on Anglophone Studies (LERMA), *E-rea*, has decided to seize the opportunity of Africa 2020 to dedicate a special issue to contemporary creation in English-speaking African countries. The first part of this double issue will consist in a series of interviews with English-speaking African artists programmed at or connected with the Festival de Marseille, while the second part, which is the subject of this call for papers, will focus on English-speaking African countries as places of contemporary artistic, digital, and political creation. Heeding Kenyan political analyst Nanjala Nyabola’s advice to eschew the too reductive ‘Africa rising’ and ‘Africa failing’ narratives in favour of ‘Africa *being*’ stories, this special issue wishes to focus on “stories reflecting the ambivalence, complexity, challenges and opportunities of African societ[ies] in an increasingly connected world” (Nyabola xxiv).

Asked in 2013 about the African contribution to a future world, South Africa-based philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe looked at the cultural history of the continent and identified “three attributes that can be conceptually deemed creative”: multiplicity, circulation and composition (Blaser). This special issue aims at recovering the multiplicity of creative African contexts, while bearing in mind the openness of these contexts, especially in the age of the internet, even if the propension of African people and ideas to circulate within the continent and abroad predated the invention of cyberspace. The third principle, composition, is described by Mbembe as a definition of identity *in relation*: “the subject is understood as being made and remade through the ethical interaction with what or who is not him” (Blaser). Composition can also be understood in a temporal sense: just like the Ghanaian *Twi* motive of the Sankofa bird, which builds its new nest with the straws of its former one (El Anatsui), contemporary creation is inscribed in a globalized world while being rooted in colonial and pre-colonial African contexts. Although this special issue aims at focusing on the present, this heritage and its influence on today’s societies cannot be ignored.

¹ <https://www.pro.institutfrancais.com/en/programmes/africa-2020>

We therefore invite proposals pertaining to the fields of literature, the arts, linguistics, history, sociology, sociology of arts, economics, politics, etc. to explore the following questions, the list of which is by no means restrictive:

1. Artistic Creation

• African Arts Programmes: Where and How can African artists develop their skills on the African continent?

We wish to examine the artistic schools, career programmes, companies and networks which are shaping today's African artists. One thinks of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus Creative Writing Workshop in Lagos or Gregory Maqoma's Vuyani Dance Theatre in Johannesburg, for example.

• Exhibiting African Arts: How is contemporary artistic creation curated and showcased on the African continent?

Ephemeral forms of curation (festivals, biennales, book fairs, etc.) and more permanent ones (publishers, museums, and digital spaces such as blogs, social network accounts, online literary journals and e-book platforms) can be examined and possibly contrasted, described individually and/or located within African/global networks.

• Exporting African Arts: How do English-speaking African artists export their work internationally, within diasporic circuits and beyond?

African artists navigate the global market, trying to reach global recognition while hopefully avoiding essentialization and cultural appropriation. Africa-based 'Afrofuturist' artists are a case in point: they use the label to identify their work on the global market, allowing for the identification but also the reductive essentialization of their work.

2. Digital Creation

• Leapfrogging and the future: What is the reality of digital creation on the continent in 2020?

From Nairobi's iHub to Impact Hub Accra, we wish to examine spaces of digital creation in Africa, their economic and social impact, as well as their link to local and international power structures. Instances of 'leapfrogging' can also be studied, in their achievements and limitations, from an economic point of view as well as from a rhetorical one, looking at international and national official documents appraising their success. The growing use of ICT and its promotion by African governments are further potential points of interest.

• African cyber activism: What participatory roles are played by artists and digital creation in contemporary politics in English-speaking African countries?

One thinks of the already much studied #RhodesMustFall or #FeesMustFall movements or of struggles which attracted less academic attention, such as #MyDressMyChoice or #FreeBobiWine. Online political spaces unite the diasporas, who push for political change from without; even if this issue focuses on creation taking place *in* Africa, diasporic groups need to be taken into account here.

- **African societies in the age of hashtags: How are cultural resistance and identity politics mobilized in cyberspace?**

Digital creation can be studied in relation to post-colonial cultural resistance, as in the reappraisal of indigenous languages through smartphone applications. Self-identifying neologisms ('Afropolitan', 'Afropunk', 'Afrofuturist', etc.) also aim at redefining African identity positively, while going viral in the shape of hashtags. More generally, cyberspace is where feminist, queer and ethnic identities thrive, connect, and argue.

3. Political Creation

- **(Re)constituting African heritage: How do African governments, historians and civil societies create the legal and physical conditions for its preservation and postcolonial restoration?**

Legal and political struggles as well as international partnerships to repatriate African objects from Europe can be studied (Laely *et al.*), such as the current negotiations with UK institutions regarding the Benin bronzes and Ghanaian Asante gold. We also want to focus on new attempts at writing African history from the continent and the possible curation of that history in physical venues such as the planned Benin Royal Museum in Nigeria.

- **Rethinking Africa from within: What and who are the contemporary African political and philosophical theories and theorists?**

The present state of postcolonial and decolonial thinking will be examined, through African intellectual networks, schools of thought and individual thinkers, as well as new horizontal models of knowledge production on the continent. The reception of non English-speaking African thinkers in English-speaking countries can also be considered.

- **Africas in relation: How do African countries deal with each other and with non-African countries in a creative way?**

Among other subjects, we wish to investigate the politics of continental and international trade, (Pan)African political networks, forms of political cooperation on the continent, as well as creative reconciliation and peace processes (such as the Prime Minister of Ethiopia's work with Eritrea, recently rewarded with the Nobel Peace Prize).

Please send an **abstract**, less than 300 words (**with a title**) and a **bio**, not more than 100 words to marie-odile.hedon@univ-amu.fr, fanny.robles@univ-amu.fr and gilles.teulie@univ-amu.fr by **31 January 2020**. Feedback will be given by early February 2020 and final articles expected by 1st May 2020 for online publication in December 2020.

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