



*Routledge African Studies*

# THE DE-AFRICANIZATION OF AFRICAN ART

TOWARDS POST-AFRICAN AESTHETICS

Edited by Denis Ekpo and Pfunzo Sidogi



# The De-Africanization of African Art

This book argues for a radical new approach to thinking about art and creativity in Africa, challenging outdated normative discourses about Africa's creative heritage.

Africanism, which is driven by a traumatic response to colonialism in Africa, has an almost unshakable stranglehold on the content, stylistics, and meaning of art in Africa. Post-African aesthetics insists on the need to move beyond this counter-colonial self-consciousness and to considerably change, rework, and enlarge the ground, principles, and mission of artistic imagination and creativity in Africa. This book critiques and dismantles the tropes of Africanism and Afrocentrism, providing the criteria and methodology for a Post-African art theory or Post-African aesthetics. Grounded initially in essays by Denis Ekpo, the father of Post-Africanism, the book then explores a range of applications and interpretations of Post-African theory to the art forms and creative practices in Africa.

With particular reference to South Africa, this book will be of interest to researchers across the disciplines of Art, Literature, Media Studies, Cultural Anthropology, and African Studies.

**Denis Ekpo** is Professor of Comparative Literature and Director of multidisciplinary Comparative Literature Programme, at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. He is originator of the concept of Post-Africanism and author of *Neither Anti-Imperialist Anger nor the Tears of the Good White man* (2004) and *Philosophie et Litterature africaine* (2004). He has published extensively in journals such as *Textual Practice*, *Neohelicon*, *The Literary Griot*, *Social Semiotics*, and *Third Text*. He is a Fellow of the Stellenbosch Institute of Advanced Study, South Africa. His current book project is titled "Forget Fanon: Post-Africanism and the Closing of the Colonial Story in Africa."

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Towards Post-African Aesthetics

Denis Ekpo and Pfunzo Sidogi

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**Edited by Denis Ekpo  
and Pfunzo Sidogi**

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**For Ingrid ‘Muffin’ Stevens (1952–2019) and Edima Ekpo**



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# Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
1 Africa Mis-traveling to Modernity: From Modern African Art to African Modernism	1
DENIS EKPO	
2 Manifesto for a Post-African Art	21
DENIS EKPO	
3 The New African Movement and the Artists It Inspired: The Early Post-Africanists	54
PFUNZO SIDOGI	
4 Africanity, Litigation Aesthetics, and Openness to Being	77
CHIELOZONA EZE	
5 Post-Africanism as Fluid, Feminist, and Agentic Alterity	96
RUNETTE KRUGER	
6 The Ruses of the Afrophiliac Condition	119
THABANG MOLATELO MONOA	
<i>Index</i>	137



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# Preface

*Pfunzo Sidogi*

In 2017, Denis Ekpo was invited by the Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria, South Africa, to present the keynote address at the annual South African Visual Arts Historians (SAVAH) conference themed “Alternative and Current Visual Discourses in Africa and Beyond.” This was Ekpo’s third invitation to the country in four years, and his fairly dense speech was a trans-valuation of the modernist artistic turn in Africa during the twentieth century and how this formative event in Africa’s modern cultural history has been memorialized and theorized. In his address, Ekpo claimed, *inter alia*, that Africa’s visual creative exploits of the twentieth century, celebrated as the vanguard of what Chika Okeke-Agulu (2015) denotes as “Post-colonial modernism,” were no more than a “copycat” and “sham” modernism. Additionally, and perhaps most provokingly, Ekpo argued that discourses on Africa’s creativity were beset with too much talk about decolonization and the need to Africanize. According to Ekpo, the cure for this Afro-mania is to de-Africanize the African mind. After his keynote address, which left me visibly disturbed, I floated the idea to Ekpo that his pronouncements need to be cataloged in a manuscript that reopens the debate about Africa’s artistic legacies, and how they have been rationalized and historicized. And so this book was conceived. Its title emanated from what was probably the most perceptive statement Ekpo uttered in his opening address, the imperative to de-Africanize African art. Chapters 1 and 2 of this edited volume are expanded versions of Ekpo’s provocative SAVAH conference presentation. Leading up to and post the 2017 SAVAH conference, several critical positions to Ekpo’s ideas by South African-based scholars have surfaced. Our hope is that these introductory essays looking into Ekpo’s call for the de-Africanization of African art through the adoption of what he terms Post-African aesthetics, will garner discursive dialogues and responses, be they complimentary, ambivalent, or divergent to the logic of Post-Africanism. This collection of solicited essays, anchored by Ekpo’s own manifesto for a Post-African art (Chapter 2), seek to unsettle the normative discourses about Africa’s historical, contemporary, and forthcoming creative heritage.

It has been more than two decades since the first Post-Africanism essay (Ekpo 1995). Since then, outside of Ekpo’s own expansion of the Post-Africanism theorem, there has been limited deep scholarly engagement and critique of

Post-Africanism, especially by African intellectuals both on the continent and across the diaspora. On the one hand, this dearth of academic rebuttal to Post-Africanism is alarming, given the seriousness of Ekpo's claims and how incredulous his ideas are to the prevailing academic clichés of Afrocentricism, postcolonialism, decolonial aesthetics, and the like. Yet, on the other hand, it is extremely taxing to wrestle with and intellectually discredit Post-Africanism because of the hard evidence that seems to support Ekpo's bold claims. The knee-jerk reaction of most African scholars who are not agreeable with Ekpo's ideas is to reject and dismiss Post-Africanism as a blasphemous ideology that has no place in an Africa battling against the centuries-old demons of exploitation, colonization, and their after effects. These disavowals are at the core of this book, for we seek to evoke further discourses on Post-Africanism, no matter how difficult the task may be. The work of intellectualizing Africa's historical and current cultural malaise is, both in practical and in scholarly terms, a demanding vocation. While there have been notable attempts to create a space where open, honest, and difficult dialogue can take place about Africa's destiny, especially on the cultural front, rarely do these conversations include self-reflexivity wherein Africans question the pitfalls and drawbacks of advancing Africanity.

In January 2019, I was a participant in a seminal workshop coordinated and sponsored by the Consortium of Humanities Centres and Institutes (CHCI) that sought to enable Africans to convene these hard talks. Hosted by the Addis Ababa University, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, this defining symposium brought together emerging and early-career researchers from across the continent to deliberate on the prospects and possibilities of the humanities in Africa, and beyond. Throughout the three weeks we were serenaded by intellectual luminaries like, *inter alia*, Simon Gikandi, James Ogude, and Rosi Braidotti, whose various talks grappled with what the theme of the gathering had captured so lucidly, "Africa as Concept and Method: Decolonization, Emancipation, Freedom." However, the session that remains vivid in my memory was the two-day seminar coordinated by Gikandi titled "After Fanon: Decolonization and African Knowledge." At the core of Gikandi's immersive and careful rereading of Frantz Fanon's writings was the imperative to, as Gikandi put it, "explore the possibilities and limits of the discourse of decolonization." Gikandi reminded us that part of the reason why the work of decolonization had not fully matured throughout Africa, and indeed the entire world, over the past six decades was because the initiators of decolonization politics and rhetoric during the mid-twentieth century such as Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire desired not to fully detach Africa from the clutches of their French colonialists, in the case of Senegal and Martinique, but rather sought a democratic and egalitarian inclusion of Africa into the metropole. This original sin, Gikandi argued, was the reason why Africa had been unable to fully achieve conceptual and material decolonization. Of specific interest here is the almost banal and slightly rhetorical question I asked Gikandi after his opening soliloquy wherein he made the indisputable case that colonization and empire are the constant in

almost every inch of the modern world where ethnic tensions and civil wars persist. Accepting that colonization and imperialism are the causes for much of the world's problems, I asked, 'Is decolonization possible?' With his mesmeric smile, Gikandi responded through the age-old sleight-of-hand deflection, stating that the very purpose of the workshop was to answer such interrogations. I am cognizant of the amazing and century-old repository of scholarship, generated for and by people who were Otherized, which has engaged with this and related questions around decolonization. For example, the tidings of South American sages like Walter Mignolo have provided 'how to' guides that nudge the world closer to the promise of decoloniality. Mignolo's (2009, 2) assertion that reusing monikers such as modernity and postmodernity to explain global creative phenomena unduly centers Western epistemologies as the basis of understanding world history is well taken. While I am sympathetic to the merits of the intellectual positions adopted by Mignolo and Gikandi, among many more celebrated pundits of decolonization, neither have crystallized the solution to the dilemma confronted by formerly and neocolonized peoples as clearly and perceptively as Ekpo and his idea of Post-Africanism.

I first learned of Post-Africanism in 2011, after my then colleague at the University of South Africa, Bernadette van Haute (2011), presented a paper titled "Post-Africanism and Contemporary Art in South African Townships" at the yearly SAVAH conference convened at the University of Witwatersrand. Like any other Black person who encounters Post-African thinking for the first time, I was shaken and disturbed by Ekpo's arguments. To hear a Black African say the things Ekpo had the strength and conviction to utter was both unsettling and transformational. The clarity and directness of Ekpo's arguments caught me off guard. But equally, Post-Africanism codified and theorized the private thoughts and suspicions I had harbored regarding the state of affairs in Africa, where the continent had failed, spectacularly, to engineer the kind of living standards that every modern human deserves. Post-Africanism seemed to provide the answers to my unease with the messiness of what it meant to be an African in the twenty-first century, an uneasiness that Fayiso Liyang Stevens (2011, 19) captured so eloquently in the opening chapter of his daringly titled book, *The African Philosophy of Self-Destruction*: "If a Black man does exist, why is he constantly in a state of pandemonium, molestation, disease and backwardness? Can a Black man, or any man for that matter, exist for so long and seem to be doing nothing about his problems?" Post-Africanism clarified this angst through the radical and yet simple solutions it proposes for dealing with the troubles that Africans face.

In the main, Post-Africanism posits that instead of looking inwardly for the answers to Africa's challenges, Africans must synthesize the best of what the rest has to offer in terms of ideas and winning formulae, and pragmatically assimilate those modalities without fear or favor of any philosophical or cultural maxim, both African and Other, to make modernity work for Africa. To this end, Ekpo is unapologetic in his criticism of African-orientated thought systems and cultural practices that continue to relegate Africans to the bottom billion.

In his acclaimed *Wealth, Poverty and Politics*, Thomas Sowell (2017, 5) implores Africans to guard against “politically convenient or emotionally satisfying” readings of history that blame others, namely Europe, for Africa’s poverty and continued suffering. For Sowell (2017, 2), it is expedient for poorer nations to study the causes of prosperity, rather than find culpability for poverty, because, as he puts it, “[t]here is nothing automatic about prosperity. Standards of living that we take for granted today have been achieved only within a very minute fraction of the history of the human race.” While the obvious and expected criticism of Sowell’s statement will be that Europe and its wealthy nations profited and advanced due to the exploitation and enslavement of others, such responses unfortunately fail to alleviate the poverty and distress experienced by millions of Africans every day. However, in Ekpo’s calculation, Africanist ideals and developmental programs founded on those ideals have been deficient in their attempt to create better standards of living for the African, especially in the areas of healthcare, education, infrastructure, and culture. For Ekpo, cultural practitioners can be the cure to the harmful overexposure of Afrocentric and pan-African idealism which are etched in the hearts and minds of African leaders and policymakers entrusted with realizing a renewed Africa.

This introductory volume is rooted in Ekpo’s deep concerns regarding the perpetual resurgence and recycling of images produced by contemporary African artists driven by anti-colonial, pan-Africanist, postcolonial, and Afrocentric impulses. This modern and contemporary African art has resulted in a creative bubble that unwittingly and regrettably fails to inspire the emergence of a rehabilitated Africa that has conquered disease, hunger, and underdevelopment. In his sweeping *Philosophy of Fine Art* first published in 1885, G.W.F. Hegel (1920, 356) posited that “[e]very work of art is in fact a *direct appeal to the intelligence* of everyone who confronts it” (my emphasis). Thus, it is inevitable that most, if not all, art will in some way tickle the intellectual convictions of its viewer. Accepting this logic, Post-Africanism contends that much of the art created by African artists who are inspired by theoretical prisms such as postcolonialism, Afrocentricism, and pan-Africanism have induced and continue to induce intellectual responses among their African audiences that unintendedly perpetuate the very precarious order they are representing. According to Ekpo, the Post-African artist must take advantage of the artwork’s communicative power to reimagine Africa and preside as the high priests of imagining and imaging alternate tomorrows where Africa is redeemed from poverty and deprivation.

We are well aware of the reality that, as John Iliffe (1995, 4) professes, “[s]uffering has been a central part of African experience, whether it arose from the harsh struggle with nature or the cruelty of men.” African artists have been inextricably linked with this suffering and overwhelmingly use it as stimulant in their creative endeavors. It is fairly easy to locate the response patterns to this heritage of suffering in the works of contemporary African artists, because they are the dominant tropes. But as Sarah Longair (2013, 127) decoded in her analysis of the creativity emanating from South African cultural workers,

“[c]riticism of past horrors and inequalities is much simpler than confronting the challenges of the post-Apartheid era.” Sadly, a vast majority of African artists are trapped in the ‘simpler’ and perennial act of capturing the past and current trauma of Africanity. Although some artists have become adept at glamorizing Africanity by producing fantastical and futurist Afrotropes – to borrow from Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson (2017) – their depictions remain steeped in displaying the horror and trauma of being Otherized. This almost automatic and pre-set activist duty has become an inescapable noose that seems to funnel all the artistic energies of Africans toward a default end, that of exploring and expressing themes related to Africa’s pandemonium, molestation, and sometimes inhumane state of being. Although such acts of creative expression are to a large degree necessary and unavoidable, Windsor Leroke (2006, 106) is critical of this “reductionist” ethos which entices and sometimes blackmails African artists to concern themselves continually with the dire condition of the African. For Leroke (2006, 104), “[i]t is the political elite who demand that art in Africa must have a function and that its function must be to advance political transformation.” In other words, contemporary African art is often co-opted by Africa’s political establishment to advance their dictatorial and power-hoarding tendencies. To this end, African art is suspended between the poles of Africanism – the unceasing desire to rediscover a lost Africanity – and contemporary African politics, where artists are incentivized to reproduce images of slavery, colonization, Apartheid, segregation, and struggle, where historical and present-day Black pain is aestheticized into a cultural fetish that helps keep dictatorial and corrupt African governments intact.

In light of the current global awakening in race relations consciousness, how dare we, as African scholars, advance the de-Africanization of African art? Besides the incitement implicit in this title, it is in fact a counter-punch to the *en vogue* Afrocentricism, decolonization, and pan-Africanization calls that have regathered momentum in recent years. These ideologies have purposefully promoted the re-Africanization of creativity emanating from the continent. These demands, which were for the most part contingent on the #decolonize and #RhodesMustFall university student protest movements in South Africa, are so loud that anyone, especially those identified as African, who utters sentences that do not reinforce or advance the Africanist worldview are tagged as culturally rootless bandits serving the interests of a capitalist global order bent on the continued exploitation of Africa. To evoke a reference from political science, the Overton Window within Africa’s creative climate has shifted so far to the left, that is, to the ultra-Afrocentric and Africanist end, that any voices, like the Post-Africanists in this instance, located around the center of the ideological spectrum are branded as alt-right, pro-West, pro-Whiteness, anti-Blackness, self-hating Afropessimist sellouts.

The opposite is true. Post-Africanism is decidedly pro-Africa and pro-Black. If Post-Africanism is pro-Africa, then there is an ironic case to be made that Post-Africanism’s aporia toward the overexposure of Africanism

in African art, or rather Post-Africanism's desire to save African art from Afrocentrism renders Post-Africanism a discourse of Africanity. There is no denying that Ekpo's dream to generate alternate stories about Africa's pasts, presents, and tomorrows is predicated on a deep love and sense of responsibility toward the continent. If indeed it is agreeable to consider Post-Africanism as a discourse of Africanity, then we must accept that what Post-Africanism hopes to achieve is to wipe the slate clean and wash the African mind of existing conceptual and material networks that continue to manacle Africa and its creative economy. In other words, the version of Africanity propagated by Post-Africanism is de-traditionalized, unhinged, remodeled, and glistening with possibility.

As argued throughout these chapters, Post-Africanism seeks to advance a creative and intellectual climate where art facilitates the humanist project in Africa. To critique Africanism and advocate for a de-Africanized African art is not a denial of the validity of the African experience. As Post-African apologists we are wary of the White voices – both liberal sympathizers and unrepentant supremacists – who jump with excitement when reading or listening to Post-African reason. We are alert to how the Post-African message seems to soothe the White conscience, by lessening their sense of historical culpability and guilt for the horrors committed by their forebears against the dark skinned peoples of the world. Unsurprisingly, within a South African context, the earliest favorable mentions of Post-Africanism were by white scholars who were interested in the dynamics of the post-Apartheid moment in South Africa – see de Kock (1995) and Bunday (1998). South Africa's affinity to the tenor of Post-Africanism is expected. As home to the largest White population in Africa, South Africa's socioeconomic character makes it the ideal breeding ground for Post-Africanist thought because of Ekpo's heavy-handed critique of Africanity. In other words, people of European descent who reside in Africa are agreeable to claims such as those projected by Ekpo – that too much Afrocentricity has failed to achieve the lofty ideals for which it was birthed.

While Post-Africanism is a discourse for Africans of all races, to all those White supremacists who enjoy the grammar it adopts, we say, woe to you. At its core, Post-Africanism is, to use the title of Ekpo's (2004) first book, "neither anti-imperialism nor the White man's tears." Post-African is neither for nor against the West. It is what Ekpo terms supra-Westernization, because it transcends the fallacy of European and Western exceptionalism. As Ekpo (1995, 134) wrote in his very first epistle on Post-Africanism:

The Post-Africanist mind can retrieve all its power and creative potentials by repossessing himself of the Western Logos and using it as a power tool rather than being possessed and bewitched by it and forced into either a romantic search for an impossible Afrocentricity or the depressive rhetoric of perpetual accusation of the West.

Elsewhere Ekpo (2004, 7) further notes regarding Africa's relationship with Europe:

Europe's casual imperial transit into a continent like Africa, no matter how perverse some of its delayed consequences may seem, should not serve as the permanent excuse for getting so shamelessly petrified in a complicated oedipal love-hate fixation on the West. Nor should it serve as the ground for our continuing to think that the West still owes us the responsibility to co-carry the burden of our development.

Post-Africanism is unconcerned with appeasing Whiteness. In fact, it seeks to compromise its unjustified dominance in Africa and the world at large, by unshackling the African mind in ways that will eventually disrupt White privilege and perceived White excellence, especially in settler colonial societies like South Africa. Post-Africanism does not advocate for the adoption of Western standards, but rather humanitarian and planetary ideals, which transcend the West. As Frantz Fanon famously concluded in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963, 313), "(l)et us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth."

According to Post-Africanism, the primary concern of the African cultural critic and scholar should be to locate and appraise works done by African artists who go against the current stasis of Afrocentricity by creating bold, dynamic, and progress-prone representations of the African experience, both figuratively and abstractly. The quintessential Post-African artists are those artists who, through their art, have been able to articulate and turn the dream of modernization for the African into a creative reality. Following the logic of classical pragmatism, a branch of philosophy which "pivots on the functional efficacy of means to given ends" (Rescher 2012, 239), the inherent presupposition of Post-Africanism is that art in Africa can only be qualified as being 'great' on the basis that it performs its functional pre-determination to launch a new Africa. A de-Africanized art in Africa must provide alternative visual narratives that empower Africans to take on the baton of modernization from Asia, who showed us the way during the latter half of the twentieth century, so that the twenty-first century can truly live up to its billing of being the century for Africa. I must stress that despite the South African heavy references in most of the chapters, the arguments the authors postulate are multi-African in their framing and implications. An unplanned but important constant that runs through the list of contributors is the fact that each of them has a very intimate and longstanding connection to Ekpo and his ideas. Therefore, and by several measures, these authors are well placed to act as the first respondents to this bold declaration for a de-Africanized Post-African aesthetics.

If Africa was indeed an ontological invention by external forces, as Valentin Mudimbe (1988) declared, then what could a Post-African Africa look like? As