

**CRITICAL  
TERMS**  
*for*  
**THE STUDY  
OF AFRICA**

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# Introduction

Adeline Masquelier and Gaurav Desai

Africa has long been represented as a featureless void—a mysterious place about which little is known but much is speculated. From the “Dark Continent” of nineteenth-century European explorers to the informational “black hole” of late-twentieth-century social theorists, outsiders have envisioned the continent as an empty landscape without people and history—a “blank” space that could be populated with all kinds of creatures dreamed up in European imaginations. Indeed, from time to time these perceptions have found quite literal expression. The eighteenth-century French mapmaker Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville, for example, inserted blank spaces on his maps to represent regions about which nothing was known. Other cartographers filled unknown regions with animals, mountains, or flamboyant lettering.

To be sure, mapmakers everywhere have depicted the world not as it is but rather as they have seen it. Maps are social constructions, and, as such, they can shed light on their makers’ conscious (or unconscious) manipulation of the world while also revealing something of the political context in which they were created.

The cartographic history of the Kong Mountains—a fictitious mountain chain featured on most maps of Africa in the nineteenth century—is a case in point. The mountains first appeared on two maps drawn for Scottish explorer Mungo Park’s account of his celebrated voyage to the Niger River in 1795–97. Subsequent generations of writers, including the famed British explorer Richard Burton, perpetuated the fiction of the Kong Mountains in their travelogues. Needless to say, the reports they produced were based on hearsay. While traveling in the region in 1886, the Lt. Governor of Senegal and Dependencies thus claimed to have gathered “reliable” information

indicating that crossing the Kong Mountains might not be as arduous as was previously assumed. He went so far as to suggest that ostriches be used as pack animals during part of the crossing. All this might seem strange in an age of detailed satellite imagery, but it points to the long-standing persuasiveness of maps and their power to authorize particular imaginings of space—even when those imaginings are purely fanciful.

In the nineteenth century the massive expansion in cartographic production allowed a broader European public to gaze at Africa “from above.” By then maps had earned a scientific respectability that made them largely impervious to criticism. The “reality” they summoned in two-dimensional form shaped the conceptual geographies of their readers. Although experts differed sometimes as to the geomorphology of the Kong Mountains, they did not question their very existence. Indeed, the mythical mountain range soon loomed large in the popular imagination as the El Dorado of West Africa. Lending credibility to these outlandish tales of hidden wealth was the unique authority of the map as a scientific device assumed to be inherently factual, accurate, and reliable. The use of precise descriptors (“blue,” “snow covered,” “gold rich,” and so on) to describe the mountain range further consolidated the public’s mental images of the Kong Mountains. So powerful was cartography’s perceived hold on truth that, despite the emergence of new evidence that cast serious doubt on the existence of the Kong Mountains, for decades maps went on to depict West Africa as significantly mountainous. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that maps of West Africa stopped featuring the mountain range. By then the colonial conquest of Africa had fully begun, facilitated by various technologies, including improved cartography. Indeed, as geographers Thomas Bassett and Philip Porter note, the disappearance of the Kong Mountains from maps boosted the progression of empire building by eliminating what Europeans had previously seen as a significant geographical impediment to trade between the Guinea coast and its hinterland.

Today, we may be tempted to chuckle at such episodes. But we should remember that we too bring our own assumptions to bear on the map of Africa. Save for a narrow strip of land in the northeast that connects the continent to Asia, Africa is surrounded by bodies of water. Yet it is routinely (and problematically) divided into North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. According to this geographical convention, the former is seen as an extension of the Middle East on the basis of shared environmental, linguistic, and cultural characteristics, while the latter is identified as the “true” Africa. Thus, while Egypt is in the Mediterranean zone, Ethiopia

belongs to sub-Saharan Africa. Such a division has important implications for the way that knowledge of the continent is mapped into distinct, area specific fields of study. Whereas scholars of Ethiopia are considered Africanists, Egypt specialists are folded into Middle Eastern studies.

The conflation of sub-Saharan Africa with “Africa proper” can be traced to the rise of modern Europe and concomitant efforts by Europeans to map race onto geography. The images of Africans that circulated in twentieth-century Europe still drew on the language of primordialism. They offered a racialized view of Africa that justified excising Northern Africa and Egypt from the rest of the continent. Racial mapping of this sort became so common that even highly regarded scholars like Fernand Braudel could assert a strong distinction between “Black Africa” and “White Africa,” where Islam was the dominant tradition. The creation of “area studies” in the US in the 1950s further solidified the division between Northern and sub-Saharan Africa by overemphasizing cultural and historical differences between the two zones while downplaying their commonalities.

The exclusion of North Africa—also called the “Maghreb”—hinged on the assumption that the Sahara is a clear line that separates the region that lies north of it (North Africa) from the region that lies south of it (sub-Saharan Africa). This is another cartographic fiction. The Sahara is a vast territory that encompasses countries from both zones and, as such, it cannot be said to delimit precisely any space. Yet, it has often been conceptualized as a natural boundary between distinct territories. In the heydays of the Roman Empire, the Sahara desert was seen as forming a natural divide between Roman Africa and the mysterious hinterland beyond. To this day it continues to be popularly referred to as a “sea of sand.”

In recent years, scholars have adopted a more critical approach to borders as spaces of flow. Some reject the Sahara boundary altogether. Political scientist Ali Mazrui, for example, campaigned for the rejection of the concept of sub-Saharan Africa. He insisted that the Arabian peninsula should be included as part of Africa on the basis that the divide between the two regions was a product of Western engineering (through the creation of the Suez canal) and Western monopoly over world cartography. The creation of the Organization of African Unity (later known as the African Union) in 1963 was another attempt to disrupt dominant imaginings of Africa and conceptualize it as a cohesive cartographic unit.

The study of Africa as a geographically bounded but culturally diverse entity cannot be disassociated from Europe’s imperialist designs on Africa. Geography played a major role in the exploration of the continent by

European powers. Though ostensibly motivated by a quest for knowledge, those who sought to discover the Nile River's source or follow the Niger River to its outlet were acting on behalf of European commercial interests during the period when Europe was united by the desire to gain commercial access to Africa, not direct control of its territory. The subsequent carving out of the continent by rival European nations and the implementation of colonial rule impacted greatly the maps and surveys of the continent that were produced thereafter. For many the image that best sums up the late nineteenth-century scramble for Africa is that of European diplomats at the Berlin conference of 1884–85 clustered around a map of the continent as they drew the borders of the territories they claimed for their respective countries.

Africans did not wait for the arrival of Europeans on their shores to map their world. Muslims, for instance, had likely been mapping out trade routes for centuries. The geographic imagination of Africans also found expression in a multiplicity of visual patterns and processes, but since these did not fit the narrow definition of what a “map” was, they have largely been ignored by scholars (when they were not altogether displaced by European mapping technologies).

Seeking to redress this imbalance, a new crop of studies has drawn attention to the ways that Africans have graphically represented their world through mnemonic maps, body art, the layout of villages, the design of buildings, and sacred topographies. Additional efforts to trace the contested genealogy of cartographic imaginations have also produced novel understandings of how Africans have used spatial strategies to counter the power of the state, redefine community and belonging, and remap civic pluralism through appeals to locality rather than ancestry. Understanding how African people have used cartography as a form of power has necessitated a fundamental shift in the topographical imagination, a shift that could help scholars see beyond the dictates of cartographic scale and the “truth” of colonial surveys.

The logical outcome of this critique is that Africa does not exist in a vacuum. Africa has always been a part of a complex, globalized world, even if the density and spread of the networks it is enmeshed in have increased in the last several decades. To be sure, such claims are far from new. As early as 1946 W. E. B. Du Bois insisted that Africa should be seen not as a neatly bounded entity but as part of the world and the product of long-term interactions between unequal polities.

With the end of the Cold War, many wondered about the fate of African

studies given that area studies was often seen to be no more than a product of the postwar US-Soviet rivalry. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the new mantra in the academy was to call for the end of area studies in a world which had declared, with popular historian Francis Fukuyama, the “End of History” and the ascendance of democratic governance, market economics, and neoliberalism. Certainly, Africanist and non-Africanist scholars had much to gain by forging new cross-area and trans-regional conversations. In the context of African studies in particular, the study of the Black Atlantic reopened long-standing conversations with diasporic communities and scholars. On the other side of the continent, the growing interest in the Indian Ocean and connections between Africa and the East likewise fostered tremendously rich research and ways of thinking about African peoples and spaces as part of a long history of exchange. And yet, for all these developments, the relevance and importance of area-specific knowledge never went away. As we hope will be clear to readers of this volume, the ways in which we now conceive of area studies in general, and of African studies in particular, have certainly shifted—in our estimation, in fruitful and productive ways—but giving up on the project of coming to terms with local African knowledges, interests, and priorities in the name of something called the “global” has never seemed to be a satisfactory alternative.

Furthermore, research today may be no less implicated in statist and capitalist desires than in earlier periods even though geopolitical priorities have shifted. Today the so-called war on terror, African migration “crises” in Europe, or the competition with China and India over African markets are more likely to spur extra-academic attention to Africa. But the attention, it seems, is here to stay. Regardless of where individual scholars place themselves in relation to such interests, it is imperative, we think, for Africanists—and particularly younger scholars coming into the field—to be critically engaged with both the historical trajectories of African studies as they have been practiced and the demands and pulls made on them as scholars, citizens, and activists committed to the study of a historically much abused and maligned continent.

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In 1979 Australian Stuart McArthur published what he titled the Universal Corrective Map of the World—an “upside down” view of the world that challenged many people’s perspective of the globe. By upending



cartographic “commonsense,” he made plain the profound arbitrariness of current conventions. Why, the McArthur model asked, should the Northern Hemisphere always be placed in the top half of world maps? There is nothing natural about the Northern Hemisphere always dominating the South. That convention began with Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator’s 1569 model of the world and was reproduced throughout the centuries despite the fact that it significantly inflates North America and Europe and diminishes Africa. The fact that cartographic conventions locate Africa at the bottom tells us something about how mapmakers use the persuasive power of what J. B. Harley has called “subliminal geometry” to shape people’s knowledge of the world.

Conceptually, this collection of essays is animated by the same spirit that inspired McArthur’s map. Scholars have started to reflect on what it might mean to write from the Global South and to turn conventional models upside down. The contributors to our volume cover thematic territory previously charted by other scholars but with an eye to finding ways to shift the center of gravity of previous analyses. Our collective interest has been to make a case for the ways in which an engagement with Africa has allowed us to sharpen, rethink, modulate, and sometimes jettison the conceptual frames with which we have studied Africa’s pasts, presents, and futures.

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The terms we have collected in this volume are meant to both reflect the current state of African studies and to push the field in new directions. Our choice of terms in this volume is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, we find that the terms we have chosen, some expected—such as “colonialism,” “labor,” and “narrative”—and others less so—such as “bondage,” “evidence,” and “design”—are good for Africanists “to think with.” Any such lists are ultimately subject to ongoing debate, and what we have chosen not to include will potentially raise as many eyebrows as what we have included. So, for instance, some might be surprised not to find the term “history” on the list; we have chosen instead to go with the term “evidence” since we think it has both a broader as well as more focused reach in terms of coming to terms with “what happened.” As Luise White shows, a focus on “evidence” allows for a wonderfully fruitful meditation on how material and social facts become evidence and how archaeological, oral, and archival sources can be brought together to narrate meaningful histo-

ries. Likewise, we have preferred to include the term “bondage” as opposed to “slavery” since as Gwyn Campbell’s chapter argues, it allows for a more capacious grasp of various kinds of unfree labor—serfdom, indenture, slavery—than a conventional accounting of slavery might. By bringing in the historical circumstances of Indian Ocean Africa, and by also insisting on more contemporary forms of bondage and human trafficking, the chapter allows us to both check in place a long-standing Atlanticist emphasis on African studies as well as a tendency to think of bondage solely as a thing of the past. After much debate and deliberation, we have chosen to include the term “witchcraft.” We are mindful of the debates that surround this term, but we hope that our inclusion of this term will allow for the debate to be staged in the classroom.

The choice of a term like “design” has the virtue of allowing for a discussion of multiple material forms (textiles, sculpture, architecture, tyre marks, fractals) which may not have been easily brought together under an alternate term. Likewise, rather than a chapter on a specific genre of performance such as music or theater, we have chosen to include a chapter on “performance” as a practice and as a process. This allows, as Tsitsi Jaji shows us, a discussion not only of an event such as the 1966 First World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar, but also of the performance of gender and the performance of the state. Some might find it objectionable that we have no dedicated chapter here on film and the study of media. Yet media analysis plays an important role in many of the chapters, most notably in Stephanie Newell’s reading of the narrative of cyberspace and internet scammers but also in Francis B. Nyamnjoh’s critical reading of an ad campaign by the South African restaurant chain Nandos. We should admit that part of what has made the process of selecting the terms not only intellectually exciting but also pleasurable has been the debate that we have had with each other and in many ways with the contributors who have written for the volume. As readers will note, some contributors fully embrace the term they write on, others are more circumspect in their relation with the term—offering other corollary or competing terms as possibilities in their stead, and a couple stage a covert insurrection against the term! As editors, we have not only allowed for this range of authorial positioning, but actively encouraged it. Our project is ultimately not wedded to the terms themselves but rather to the energies and debates they inspire and generate.

Rather than provide an outline of each chapter here, we want instead to notice some general patterns and tendencies. Almost all the chapters

in the volume consider the long legacies of non-African discursive and representational practices that have engaged with the African continent. If “representation” itself is not a critical term we engage (as do several other volumes in this series) it is because issues of the representation of Africa, as Jemima Pierre’s opening chapter on the racialization of “Africa/African” shows, are all pervasive in discussions of the continent. The role of outsiders in both describing and prescribing African practices whether of cosmology and religion, “customary” laws, state governance, citizenship, gender and sexual identities, or vernacular orthographies has been a major factor in the continent’s history and it continues to make its mark on both academic and extra-academic accounts of the subject. Another point of connection between many of the chapters is their emphasis on the contradictions of the respective term as it was thought of and applied in African contexts. So, for instance, John L. and Jean Comaroff point to the contradictions of the colonial project which was intended to help Africans modernize but did so by reifying traditions and customs that were often quite dynamic; or, for instance, Simon Gikandi points out how the project of modernity in Africa relied not on the Enlightenment idea of a secular, post-religious rationality but rather on Christian missionary practice. The chapter on governance by Brenda Chalfin and Omolade Adunbi shows how the pursuit of good governance and the structural adjustment programs associated with it actually resulted in rather bad forms of governance and economic depravity. Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf likewise points to the contradictions of humanitarian projects which in the urge to “save” Africans often pit them against one another and rely on the same civilizational tropes associated with the project of colonialism. And finally, by the end of his chapter on spirit, Matthew Engelke invites us to consider whether the term ought to be jettisoned altogether.

An emphasis on the quotidian aspects of African lives as opposed to the larger structural institutions in which they participate is shared by many of the contributors here. Thus, for instance, in his chapter on gender and sexuality, Marc Epprecht foregrounds the flexible manner in which Africans have negotiated gender norms and the strictures on heteronormativity. Deborah Durham discusses how “youth” gets defined in contingent and relative ways by members of a community even as the state might define “youth” in more stringent ways. Peter Geschiere shares Francis B. Nyamnjoh’s advocacy of flexible citizenship and asks how and why discussions of belonging seem to have shifted in the 1980s from earlier, more open forms of identification to narrower considerations of autochthony.

And in her chapter on health, Susan Reynolds Whyte foregrounds how, by negotiating their understanding of accountability, connections, and care, Africans engage in efforts to overcome disease and strive for general well-being even when the government's health care system fails them.

In her chapter on liberation, Elisabeth McMahon insists that even while it was taken up by various actors in Africa and its diaspora, in so far as it was rooted in the Western idea of individual liberty, the concept, for all the work that it has done, nevertheless retains a Eurocentric legacy. As such, she includes in her chapter a discussion not only of liberation movements such as the abolition of slavery and the independence movements on the continent but also a discussion of epistemological liberation as advocated by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Even before embarking on this project of putting together a volume of critical terms for African studies, we have been humbled by the limitations of our project. For all the talk of the need for Africa-centered scholarship, perspectives, and epistemologies, it is sobering that the critical debates that continue to take place, at least in the circles of the academy if not in the streets of Nairobi or Dakar, are in the ex-colonial—though now, in many cases, Africanized—European languages. As a thought experiment we have often wondered—what might a volume such as this look like, what different directions and turns would it take, if the critical terms assembled were drawn from African languages? While we pose this as a challenge and a call to others more competent than ourselves in assembling such a project, we are encouraged that more than one of our contributors engages in a discussion of relevant terms in African languages and what they might have to offer in terms of a critique, juxtaposition, or enhancement of the English terms we employ here. So, for instance, Jane I. Guyer brings in Shona terms via the work of Clapperton Mavhunga, Suzanne Preston Blier refers to Yoruba and Zulu terms related to design, Simon Gikandi refers to Julius Nyerere's preference of the Kiswahili term *Maendeleo* for development, and Derek R. Peterson discusses the term for "culture" in Kikuyu and Yoruba.

Besides such noticeable connections among the chapters, we have found in our classroom discussions of the chapters with our students that students are quick to make connections between groups or pairs of chapters collected here. Many of our students found it useful to discuss Patrick Manning's chapter on mobility, which debunks still circulated notions of a static Africa by historicizing African mobility across time, along with the chapters on belonging and citizenship. Others found Kamari M. Clarke's discussion of structural violence, the violence of the "normal,"

and more recent legal norms to establish individual accountability to war criminals and dictatorial leaders to be a provocative companion piece to Adam Ashforth's chapter on discussions of violence and accusations of witchcraft. Yet others found it useful to read and think through Joseph Slaughter and Jennifer Wenzel's discussion of the Hegelian negation of Africa and their own critical questioning of what *counts* as theory in the first place with Jemima Pierre's history of the boundary disputes within African studies. Students found that the chapter on value coauthored by Leonard Wantchekon and Paul-Aarons Ngomo and the chapter on environment by Maano Ramutsindela both addressed important elements of social justice in the economic and environmental spheres. But perhaps the most memorable and interventionist response was when our students, on the one hand rightly disturbed by the colonialist representational politics of humanitarianism as outlined by Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, but on the other hand unwilling to let go of the impulse to help others who might well need the help, insisted that we go back to the drawing board and recast the chapter on humanitarianism as a chapter on reparations. Their logic was that if it is true that many of the crises that now call for humanitarian interventions in Africa were rooted in the structures and practices of colonialism, then contemporary efforts to solve them must be seen not as acts of charity toward helpless victims but rather as reparations to societies that had been destroyed by the colonizers in the first place.

Whatever one finally makes of our students' proposition, it should be clear that the chapters in this volume have proven to engage them and hopefully make them more critically aware of the ways in which Africa and Africans have been, and continue to be, represented both in scholarly studies and the world at large. And so, while we anticipate debates on the inclusions and exclusions in this volume, we hope that, collectively, the twenty-five terms that we have gathered here will give readers a sufficiently diverse picture of the current state of African studies, the key concepts that drive it, and the potential for more engagement with their interstices.

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