



BOOK REVIEW

Repainting the Walls of Lunda: Information Colonialism and Angolan Art, by Delinda Collier, by Torin Spangler

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EDIÇÃO E PROPRIEDADE

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COLLIER, Delinda

Repainting the Walls of Lunda:

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Delinda Collier's *Repainting the Walls of Lunda* is an ambitious volume in which the author – Assistant Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago – explores a case study in contemporary Angolan art that spans over half a century, bridging the late colonial, Cold War, and post-war periods of the country's history. What is immediately apparent upon reading the book's indispensable introduction is that Collier's work is as much a detailed examination of a complex local, socio-political reality as it is a dialogue with a vast gamut of big ideas from such thinkers as Vilém Flusser, Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, and Achille Mbembe, to name but a few. As such, *Repainting the Walls of Lunda* defies easy classification within any particular discipline. One could say it is eminently a book about media theory, but one which uses a thoroughly engaging historical approach that both builds on and challenges twentieth- and twenty-first-century discourses on postcolonial literary and cultural theories.

The two terms most central to Collier's approach are those of "re-mediation" and "remediation". The "re-mediation" facet is one that revisits Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's 1999 work on new media, among whose central concepts is the notion that new forms of media "absorb" and "repurpose" previous forms (Bolter and Grusin, 1999): an idea that Collier reworks by tracing the story of how certain images of Chokwe "art" came to be incorporated into a series of different mediums in the period from 1953 to 2006. Here, the questioning of the images' status as "art" relates to the fact that many of them were elements taken from the *sona* visual/performative storytelling medium, which involved Chokwe initiates' use of complex geometric designs, often traced in the sand (and only later painted on walls) as a means of both communicating messages and demonstrating social status.

The first transformation of the Chokwe images was that undertaken by Portuguese amateur anthropologist José Redinha, who had conducted fieldwork among the Chokwe in the 1930s and '40s, and was hired by the parastatal mining company Diamang to run its museum at the Dundo complex in northeastern Angola. In 1953, Redinha published a book, *Paredes Pintadas de Lunda*, featuring his own renderings of artistic elements of a medium he understood little about, but which he sought to preserve under the then commonly held supposition that "static" indigenous art forms were under threat from modernization (Chapter 1). Redinha's work represents what

Collier considers to be the transformation of a dynamic, recursive medium into a static, visual representation whose transmission is bound by both the material apparatus of the book (*Paredes Pintadas de Lunda*) and the cultural apparatus of Diamang. Collier's use of the term "apparatus" in this sense builds on Vilém Flusser's concept of the photographic camera as an apparatus which conditions the autonomy of the photographer to "produce" images, due to the technical parameters inherent to the machine (Flusser, 2000). Thus, not only does Redinha transform the nature of *sona* elements by painting them into static images, those images are then framed by the medium of *Paredes Pintadas de Lunda* and can only be interpreted in that context. This (partially intentional) separation of a cultural product from its native environment of usage has the result of obfuscating the discursive elements of *sona* within a completely new ontological and sensory context.

Perhaps the freshest and most crucial angle explored by Collier in this vein is that the very recursive nature of *sona* makes it a medium akin (though not analogous) to written communication, thus framing the "re-mediation" of *sona* into Redinha's book as precisely that: the "digesting", as she puts it, of one medium by another (Chapter 2). In crude terms, one might think along the lines of photography re-mediating the function of painting, rather than simply thinking of a photograph of a painting. This challenges mid-twentieth-century suppositions (sustained by McLuhan and Ong, among many others) regarding the primary orality of precolonial, Sub-Saharan Africa, by reinterpreting *sona* as a technological rival to the apparatuses that sought to subsume it. It does not erase the violence inherent to colonial and neocolonial efforts to control and filter "indigenous" knowledge, but it does call into question overly simplistic divisions between the "digital" and the "analog" (here read as "modern/mechanical" and "primitive/natural"). One small point of criticism to be made here is that Collier's peculiar reading of the digital-analog divide is not explicitly hashed out in *Repainting the Walls of Lunda*. For further information on the topic, it is helpful to read the author's previously published article, "Obsolescing Analog Africa" (Collier, 2015).

The qualification of *sona* as a dynamic medium also raises questions regarding the methods by which independence-era Angolan artists use "pre-colonial" art to recover authentically national voices. This is where the "remediation" (think "remedy") element of the "re-mediation/remediation" dyad makes its entrance, with the non-hyphenated partner entailing an element of "correction" of violence engendered by past re-mediations. Here, Collier does not engage in the debate over the postcolonial anxieties of the "imagined community", although she certainly opens up new space for such a discussion. Rather, by parsing out the shifts and continuities present in successive attempts to retrieve Chokwe art from the grips of colonial apparatuses, the author demonstrates how each reinterpretation of images borrowed from *sona* (however well-intentioned) ultimately translates into a new re-mediation of previous borrowings from a medium whose symbols were never static to begin with. From Cold War-era artists such as

Viteix (an artist aligned with the then Marxist-Leninist MPLA party) to more recent multimedia artists such as Fernando Alvim (director of the 2006 *Trienal de Luanda*), all of whom have been informed in some capacity by Redinha's book, the ghosts of the past continue to inhabit re-visitations of the Chokwe images, but the spirit in which those images were produced can never be fully resurrected.

The most problematic instance of contemporary remediation in Collier's account proves to be the *Lunda Tchokwe* exhibition at the 2006 *Trienal de Luanda*, where exhibitors who were largely funded by Angola's mining sector literally digitized José Redinha's drawings from *Paredes Pintadas de Lunda*, removing his signature in an act supposed to "rescue" indigenous Angolan art from the pages of Redinha's book (Chapter 4). Such attempts to speak directly to the ancestors represented in Chokwe art prove to be problematic in this case, at the very least because they tend to reinforce stereotypes of the "native" as "authentic" and to perpetuate the notion that an entire, dynamic communication system can be reduced to fragmentary snapshots of a culture. Even more troubling is the fact that the very apparatus through which these images are transmitted may be enmeshed in networks of neocolonial financing, where elite cultural interventions evoking "traditional" art produce sinister echoes of Diamang's colonial-era propaganda machine.

Repainting the Walls of Lunda is not an attack on re-mediation as remediation, but it certainly calls into question the ways in which artistic interventions can – consciously or not – reinforce artificial boundaries between: the "native" and the "colonial"; the "colonial" and the "postcolonial"; the "traditional image" and the "technical image"; the "analog" and the "digital". While leaving no doubt that substantial (and often violent) shifts do occur in the translation of images from one medium to another, Collier warns us against fraught quests to recover any sort of memory presumed to be inextricably bound to the image itself. The author provides no easy solutions, but points to the promise of new theories on "media ecologies" as more holistic, and less linear, frameworks for the exploration of how a multiplicity of mediums and messages interact with and inform each other in contemporary societies (217). In the end, one must always be aware, not simply of the medium and its content, but of the entire social and historical context involved in the production and retransmission of oral, visual, and written information from one moment to the next.

In addition to telling a fascinating story, Collier's book will no doubt furnish scholars from a variety of areas with substantial food for thought, if not concrete models for approaching their own research. While its appeal is broad, the reader uninitiated in canonical and current works on media theory may find that the terminology relevant to the book's theoretical framework is somewhat lacking in transparency (despite Collier's generous endnotes) making it necessary to do a bit of background reading, in which the author's own previous articles can be of particular use. In any case, this should not prove an obstacle to the reader's enjoyment of this much appreciated work.

On a personal note, as a Lusophone and African Studies researcher, I would especially like to recognize the potential of Collier's work in increasing the visibility of research on underrepresented facets of Angolan culture and history for an English-reading public in multiple academic spheres, both North and South, for whom such case studies may not always be so accessible.

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