

Ricardo Hernandez

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What is popular culture? According to Oxford Libraries, popular culture is the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system. These set of practices come from the media, music, art, dance, etc. Popular culture can be a great way to learn various topics, such as being informed about the news or to learn what fashion trends are popular. For Africa, popular culture has created an image of a “dark continent” full of savagery and little to no education. Anyone that has been raised in a western point of view has been subjected to popular culture that has reduced Africa to hollow stereotypes. Curtis Keim and Carolyn Sommerville work on informing their readers on the various ways that popular culture has subconsciously created stereotypes about the continent and the people of Africa. Whether it is through parajournalism, newspapers, magazines, and other forms of media. Scholars and filmmakers have also seen the negative effects of popular culture and have tried to push a different narrative to re imagine Africa through their work. These scholars and filmmakers challenge the legacies of the “colonial library” through their work by offering different perspectives of history.

Keim and Sommerville take on the task of discussing issues around popular culture creating harmful African stereotypes. The biggest argument that Keim made I believe was the fact that countries like the United States need to prove that they are a superpower by making sure

that the popular culture of showcase how grateful US citizens should be by comparing themselves to other countries. In this case African countries are always looked at as “Violent, hopeless, and in need of Western help.”¹ The way that Keim phrased it was that “we cannot be rich without the poor, developed without the underdeveloped, saved without the sinner, normal without the abnormal, civilized without the uncivilized and so forth.”² Keim and Sommerville summarize popular culture as a way to showcase a complete opposite way of life for their readers. To exoticize the differences between “Africa” and the rest of the world. This is done by parajournalism to fit the agenda of the western or newspapers that choose to only cover the violent aspects of Africa because it is “too expensive” to cover other African news. This is also done by magazines such as National Geographic which exoticizes the safari culture in Africa. Keim and Sommerville also mention that the use of movies, the internet, and even amusement parks play a role in how we look at Africa. Keim went as far to say that even museums add to the stereotypes of Africa. Keim mentions the fact that animals and native people belong in the same museum of “Natural History”, disregarding the Africa people’s advancement in civilization.³ Often times these forms of media are bad representations of Africa so that a superpower like the United States can feel superior and to justify their missions or conservation efforts to these areas where they “need” help from the white man. That is why there are many scholars and filmmakers working hard to challenge the colonial libraries and attempt to re imagine Africa through their work.

¹ Keim, “Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind”, 14

² Keim, “Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind”, 10

³ Keim, “Mistaking Africa: Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind”, 31

One prime example of a filmmaker attempting to re imagine Africa through film is Zola Maseko, the film director of *Manuscripts of Timbuktu*⁴. I strongly believe that everyone should watch this movie as it debunks a lot of misconceptions that we have about Africa. The biggest misconception that it debunks is the fact that Africa has no history and especially intellectual history. The film showcases that people of Timbuktu had set up universities and schools that transformed Timbuktu into an intellectual hub, besides being a trading hub. The film also showed that Timbuktu has a huge library of written documents, manuscripts, and writings showing that the people of Timbuktu were at the same level intellectually of the Europeans at the time. They explored math, literature, astronomy, and other subjects. Zola Maseko wants to change the image that Africans are inferior by showing that these people were just as educated as the Europeans because often people who have no education are looked down upon.

Another example of a scholar trying to re imagine Africa is Trevor Getz with his book Getz, Trevor R. *Abina And the Important Men: a Graphic History*.⁵ Trevor Getz hopes to re imagine Africa by giving voices to other people besides the “important men.” These important men are the white men and elite people of the Gold Coast. Getz does this by amplifying the voice of Abina and illustrating her story in the form of a comic. Getz then proceeds to also include the official court document to show the differences between the two forms of telling a story. The official court document did not give any context to who Abina was and her background, while the comic created an emotional attachment through illustrations. Getz uses Abina’s story to remind people that Africa’s history includes more than just the white explorers and missionaries. Africa’s history also includes ordinary people like Abina that wanted to fight not only the

⁴ *The Manuscripts of Timbuktu*, Kanopy Streaming, 2015

⁵ Getz, Trevor R. *Abina And the Important Men : a Graphic History*, 2012

injustice of not being free, but also not being free as a woman. Getz wants us to imagine that the people of Africa have a story just like the rest of us and that should not be overlooked by the “important men” sent by the Europeans.

Another scholar that tries to re imagine Africa is Dr. Etim E. Okon who challenges the “good work” that the missionaries did in Africa.⁶ Dr. Okon wants us to know that colonialism and missionary work in Africa were not separate. As Dr. Okon says, “It cannot be denied that colonialism aided missionary work in Africa.”⁷ Dr. Okon mentions that the missionaries had “good intentions”, but unfortunately went to Africa at the same time when the colonial administrators wanted to introduce commerce and civilization as well. Dr. Okon wants the readers to know that missionary work aided in the colonization of many African countries and that it was not just brute force.

I personally believe that these scholars and film makers were successful in challenging the legacies of the Colonial Library because so many misconceptions that I had about Africa were completely flipped. *Manuscripts of Timbuktu* disproves the misconception that the African people were not educated. That film just proved that the African people were educated and that they were on the same intellectual level as the Europeans. Trevor Getz challenges the Colonial Library by offering a different perspective to the important men. It amplifies the voices of the people who lived there and were forgotten in history. Dr. Etim E. Okon challenges the Colonial Library by challenging religion. Dr. Okon challenges religion by letting the readers know that although missionary work has good intentions, the work was often in cooperation with colonial

⁶ Okon, Etim E. 2014

⁷ Okon, Etim E. 2014, page 7

administrators. Dr. Okon does not undermine the great work missionaries did in Africa, but he is just stating that it was a factor that helped colonize a group of people.

It is going to take a lot of work to change popular culture and to remove stereotypes and misconceptions that people have of Africa. Scholars and filmmakers like Dr. Okon, Getz, and Maseko all play an important role in changing the way we look at Africa. Challenging the colonial library is the first step to erasing such stereotypes. We all play an important role as well by making sure that we are informed of the real history of Africa and to always question the history written with a Euro centric perspective. We should always challenge the colonial library by seeking the unheard voices because he who controls the language, controls history.

Word Count: 1341

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