editorial

Special issue: cultural infrastructures in Africa

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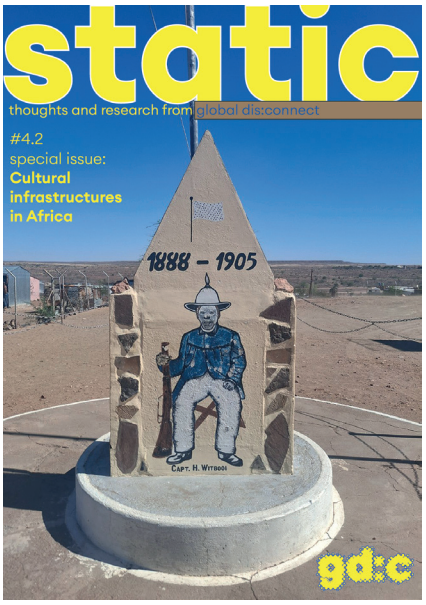
When Donald Trump recently described people of African heritage – Somalis specifically – as 'garbage' and the 'worst set of immigrants' in America, the sentiment was not a random negative thought.[1] It echoed earlier unflattering remarks in which he declared Africa a 'shithole' and broadly reflects not only a deep-seated worldview among his conservative base but also widely held negative perceptions of the African continent across the Global North.[2]

These perceptions are not new. They have been at the centre of Western narratives about the continent since its encounter with European imperial powers in the 16th century, serving as the launch pad for the institutionalisation of racism, trans-Atlantic slavery, colonialism and the hegemonic structures of today's post-imperial order.[3] In its *longue durée*, the negative portrayal of Africa and its inhabitants, recently summarised in the term 'Afro-pessimism', has undergone various transformations over



1 See Bianca Flowers et al., 'Trump 'garbage' rhetoric about Somalis draws cheers from administration, silence from Republicans and alarm from critics', Reuters, 2025, accessed 31 January 2026, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-garbage-rhetoric-about-somalis-draws-cheers-administration-silence-2025-12-04.

2 Unlike Trump, these perceptions are rarely expressed freely and publicly by other Western leaders except in the rare moments when it seeps through the veil of diplomatic niceties via policies and viral hot-mic moments as evidenced in the case of Emmanuel Macron, see for instance, Basillioh Rukanga, 'Macron accused of 'contempt' over Africa remarks', BBC, 2025, accessed 31 January 2026, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn4xej8n7wxo.

3 Toyin Falola, *The Power of African Cultures* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2003).

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the centuries.[4] From the expansive metaphor of a dark, barbaric and uncivilised continent to one plagued by poverty, disease, wars and underdevelopment, the 'single story' of the continent has been couched in the narrative of otherness, where Africa is expected to be one thing and to play only one prescribed role in the global order – a net exporter of resources, labour and talent.[5] A common denominator across this transgenerational prism is Africa's place in the hierarchy of nations, cultures and civilisations. Despite its many natural and cultural assets, Africa has remained largely undeveloped, exploited and an epicentre of global crises (such as poverty, disease and perennial conflict) – a complex, contradictory and dis:connected place.

The concept of dis:connections has emerged as a critical theoretical framework in globalisation discourse, offering a perspective on processes of globalisation that goes beyond binaries, such as connection and isolation, across different terrains.[6] As shown in Wenzlhuemer et al., processes of globalisation foster connectivity and integration just as they produce fractures, asymmetries and erasures. In such processes,

> … actors and places of globalisation are themselves always simultaneously embedded in connective and disconnective circumstances, where connections and non-connections converge in particular places and in the lived experiences of historical actors, revealing their significance in their interrelations; often in a state of tension that derives from the simultaneity and mutual constitution of connective and disconnective elements.[7]

The term *dis:connectivity* captures precisely this 'mutually constitutive tension between global integration, disintegration, and the absence of connections, the relevance of which is revealed not only in the context they form together, but also in their turbulent interplay'.[8] Viewing Africa as a site of disconnection reveals the contexts and contours that have shaped the histories, identities, narratives, perceptions and (postcolonial) realities of the continent politically, economically, technologically and, most importantly, culturally. The dynamics of dis:connectivity at play in

4 For an in-depth exploration of the concept of Afropessimism, see Frank B. Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017).

5 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The danger of a single story*, TEDGlobal (TED, 2009).https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

6 Roland Wenzlhuemer et al., 'Forum: Global Dis:connections', *Journal of Modern European History* 21, no. 1 (2023) 10.1177/16118944221148939; Roland Wenzlhuemer, 'Dis:connectivity in Global History', in *Globalisation: Past, Present, Future*, ed. Manfred B. Steger et al. (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

7 Wenzlhuemer et al., 'Forum', 4.

8 Wenzlhuemer, 'Dis:connectivity in Global History', 18; Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci and Roland Wenzlhuemer, 'Introduction', in *Dis:connectivity and Globalisation: Concepts, Terms, Practices*, ed. Christopher Balme, Burcu Dogramaci, and Roland Wenzlhuemer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2025).

Africa conjure images of a space not entirely disconnected from global networks but one actively shaped by violent integrations, internal contradictions and strategic bypasses.

Given the above, this special issue, derived from a workshop on *Archiving dis:connected cultural heritage(s) in Africa: prospects, processes and challenges*, held on 24–25 April 2025 at global dis:connect, seeks to examine how these narratives of the continent are connected and how tension is embedded in their archival representations. These articles coalesce around three central themes: prospects, processes and challenges in the history of archiving cultural heritage(s) in (postcolonial) Africa.

The issue fittingly begins with Patrick Ebewo's exploration of the Slave History Museum in Calabar, Nigeria. Patrick acknowledges the creative use of multimedia, visual arts and technology to preserve and enhance the visitors' experience at the museum, describing it as an 'innovative medium for education and communication' of history. However, he argues that the museum's presentation exaggerates the 'role of Europeans while downplaying the contributions of some Africans', particularly African chiefs and their agents, to the perpetuation of slavery and the slave trade. He contends that this represents 'dis:connected archiving', offering a distorted and imbalanced portrait of the slavery experience.

Valence Silayo follows Patrick with an examination of 'colonial archival silences' and the complexities of acquiring and owning African ethnographic collections. Valence explores the contradictions and ironies that stem from the 'imperial ideologies and scientific rationales' that empowered colonial agents not only to 'commodify bodies and cultural objects as trophies and specimens as a way of reinforcing racial hierarchies' but also to legitimise conquest through evolutionary science and museum display. Although colonial archives should declare the provenance of looted cultural items, Valence argues that archives have remained silent to legitimise the removal and continued possession of these items, thus framing theft as lawful acquisition and obscuring reparational justice. Nevertheless, the existence of these archives and their content offers the possibility of tracing their cultural origins, tracking their locations, and provides hope for reparations based on community-led claims. For Valence, a key component of these claims is archival evidence; hence the call for greater accessibility of uncatalogued collections.

Leah Niederhausen critiques what she describes as 'museological-archival dis:connections' in the 2019 repatriation ceremony of Henry Witbooi's family bible in Namibia. According to Leah, the restitution process, which saw the bible transferred from the collection of Stuttgart's Linden Museum to the Namibian National Archives, inadvertently shifted it from a museum object to an archival record. This process straddled separate professional and scholarly domains, where restitutional procedures and

practical differences generated a categorical distinction between museological objects and archival records, which reproduce colonial epistemologies that obscure structures of colonial violence behind institutional procedures. As restitution entails restoring power, authority and voice, procedural differences and distinctions, along with historical knowledge and its narrative, make some histories visible while silencing others – a dis:connection of history and voice. Leah shows that the restitution ceremony framed the bible as 'national cultural heritage', positioning the repatriation as a political matter between nation-states and emphasising the narrative of 'genocide' reparations, and at the same time silencing and excluding the voices of the Nama people in the process. However, the desire to reconnect and locate ancestral belonging of the Nama people via an archive or museum transcends institutional distinctions. According to Leah, locking cultural objects in museums and archival records remains part of their looting, as do the origins of the institutions that classify them. It perpetuates disregard for the demands for participation and self-representation of their 'owners' – the people.

Festivals have always served as significant cultural and archival institutions in Africa that transmit traditions and artistic skills from one generation to the next.[9] From the 1960s, postcolonial pan-African festivals emerged as alternative archives to colonial discourses on pan-African heritage, offering counter-narratives that showcased African creativity through cultural productions such as dance, drama, music, literature, art and fashion. A crucial aim of these festivities was to chart a course of modernisation for postcolonial pan-African development, thus demonstrating their connection to the concept of the African renaissance. FESTAC '77 in Lagos was the largest of these, with a focus that marked a new direction from previous events. Gideon examines this festival, focusing on the differences and discontinuities in their organisational processes as well as the disconnections that shaped their presentation and legacies.

As noted by Harney, one of the legacies of postcolonial pan-African festivals, especially those held between 1966 and 1977, was the proliferation of cultural festivals.[10] These major cultural events, largely centred in West and Central Africa, inspired new waves of postcolonial cultural festivals such as Panafest (Ghana) and the MaCuFe festivals (Lesotho) from the 1990s. This is the nucleus of Rethabile's contribution, which examines contemporary cultural festivals from southern Africa, specifically the Morija Arts and Cultural Festival (MACuFe) and the Maletsunyane Braai Festival (MBF), as platforms for cultural reclamation, creative economies and the reconstruction of national identity in postcolonial Lesotho.

9 John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann Publishers, 1975).

10 Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal 1960-1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Drawing insights from Lesotho, Rethabile identifies funding, infrastructure, archiving and logistics as fundamental limitations to the cultural development and tourism potential of festivals in southern Africa.

Cultural infrastructure in a global context is a vital issue beyond this special section. In fact, gd:c co-director Christopher Balme reports on a forum that took place at gd:c in September 2025. The forum's 13 distinguished participants discussed the place of cultural infrastructure in countries and regions undergoing major transitions, especially Syria. Though cultural infrastructure perches precariously on the margins of public budgets around the world, Syria presents a particular challenge due to years of turbulence in which it was often unclear who was governing a given city in a given year for over a decade. Therefore, it was all the more pressing that experts from that region and ours discussed how to survey and map the facilities and functions of cultural infrastructure in tumultuous times.

In her report, Claire Louise Blaser ventures beyond gd:c's usual geography by describing what transpired at the workshop titled *Empire and (im-)mobility in South and Southeast Asia, 19th and 20th centuries*. Convened by Harald Fischer-Tiné and regular gd:c fixture Siddharth Pandey, this workshop took place in Dehli, 6000 km from gd:c's Munich headquarters. As the participants discussed, empires employ both mobility and immobility for particular purposes. We, however, proved our mobility with this event.

Global dis:connect also ventured beyond the conceptual territory relating to globalisation, where we are most at home, and considered normative dis:connectivity as well. Specifically, a recent workshop considered the fact that the two biological sexes are inextricably connected when it comes to conception, but practically disconnected when it comes to contraception. That is, most modes of contraception relate to women's bodies and are considered women's responsibility, as is the childcare should the contraceptive measures fail, and this is a global regularity, however normatively problematic it remains. The workshop tackled precisely this tension, and we share two reports that engage with these thoughts from two different directions.

Working on this issue, it has become apparent that cultural infrastructure is like dis:connectivity itself in that the more we think about it, the more it starts popping up everywhere. This realisation comes with three further implications. First, we're on to something at gd:c with our research programme. These issues matter. Second, there's still so much to do. The mining hardly stops when one finds gold. On the contrary, that's when the real work begins. And finally, we're very fortunate to be able to research these important questions and help improve everyone's understanding of what they mean and what is to be done.

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