

Contemporary Art in the Post-Yugoslav Space

Case Studies in Hauntology

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The Museum of African Art (MAU) was established in 1977 by Zdravko Pečar and Veda Zagorac at a point of Yugoslav vitality (Figure 10.1). It affirmed Yugoslavia's anticolonial stance and provided a different way of viewing, studying, and understanding Africa and African art. At the time the Yugoslav economy was thriving, its citizens had rights that those of neighboring countries did not have, particularly in regard to mobility and travel, and the country's importance to the nonaligned movement (NAM) was secure. Through this movement, the Yugoslav leader, Josip Broz Tito, fostered and ensured strong ties between his country and various Global South nations, many of which had recently secured independence. If the 1960s were marked by the establishment of Yugoslav relations with African countries and the NAM, the 1970s were marked not by Tito's "peripatetic diplomacy" in Asia and Africa but by continued Yugoslav engagement and collaboration with the Third World.¹ Their connections were realized and fortified by members of the Yugoslav professional classes, who helped establish and maintain infrastructure projects throughout Africa and coordinated international student exchanges and other related collaborations. The favorable stance toward Africa and Blackness was central to the cultural imaginary of Yugoslavia, and it is possible to observe ways in which these past experiences are "conditioning expectations and motivating cultural production" in the post-Yugoslav period.²

The origins of the MAU and the drive since its inception to create a space to focus, dislocate, and even refract the Euro-American gaze of Blackness, the continent, and stereotypes about Africa and its diaspora are the focus of this chapter. Of particular interest is how outward expressions of solidarity with African populations, and Blackness more broadly, connect past and present, implicating hauntings of an imagined ideal Yugoslav past that seep into the post-Yugoslav present but remain unrealized. With the goal of addressing these issues, I analyze how the MAU actively aimed to challenge European socioracial hierarchies as a foundational facet of the cultural ideology of Socialist Yugoslavia and address how the presentation of the museum's holdings, exhibitions, and presentations continues to prioritize that mission. To explore these ideas, I engage primarily with three MAU exhibit catalogs, *A in B: Africans in Belgrade* by Ana Sladojević and Nebojša Babić, *Hairdresser and Barber Shop Signs in Africa* by Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, and *When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You* by Ivana Vojt, Jelena Matić, Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, Djibril Sy, and Katarina Radović.³ All these catalogs center physical features of Blackness (skin color and hair) that have traditionally marked members of the African diaspora not just as different, but as antithetical to an ideal European norm.⁴ The images and people celebrated in these catalogs offer an important



Figure 10.1 The Museum of African Art in Belgrade, Serbia. Photograph by the author.

counter-narrative that can only be understood beyond a colonial lens if the historical context of Yugoslav anticolonialism and solidarity with Black and Brown communities is considered.⁵ Without this “context sensitivity,” or considering the relevant historical, cultural, and social realities of Yugoslavia, the goals and objectives of the museum, especially the permanent collection, are not immediately evident.⁶ Accordingly, this chapter intentionally engages with the historical realities that gave rise to the emergence of the NAM as well as the historical association with Blackness in the region that had to be denied for such a critical stance toward Blackness, Africa, and African diasporic people to emerge and proliferate in the socialist period and beyond.

When the MAU opened, the museum’s benefactors, Pečar and Zagorac, were completing their diplomatic post in Ghana and preparing to return to Belgrade.⁷ Pečar worked in Algeria and Tunisia as a journalist and eventually as a diplomat representing Yugoslavia in “Mali, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Liberia, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Togo and Dahomey (now Benin).”⁸ Having lived in African countries for nearly twenty years, Zagorac and Pečar had acquired a significant collection of African art, which became the foundational collection for the MAU. The importance of the museum was symbolically denoted by its presence in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, and specifically in the area of Dedinje, a wooded sanctuary distant from the busyness of central Belgrade. Contemporarily, the area is home to a number of NAM member nation embassies, the Archives of Yugoslavia, and the Museum of Yugoslavia, Tito’s former residence.

Some of Belgrade's wealthiest residents now live there, and the broader region, Topčider, includes a number of important cultural and touristic institutions and memorials.⁹ The location of the museum is still an important site, and the MAU connects past and present in Serbia through its history as head of a kingdom, a federative socialist republic, and founding member of the NAM.

While African art exists throughout Southeast Europe, the art in the MAU differs because it is not among ethnographic collections and therefore meant to be exhibited without a normalizing judgment and the uncomfortable question of how the art was acquired. As independent curator and scholar Ana Sladojević notes, MAU was conceived as *anticolonial*, but no museum is ever truly devoid of a particular point of view or implied hierarchy. The very idea of collecting and showcasing art from other places "is tightly interwoven with imperial and colonial discourses and contexts."¹⁰ Dejan Sretenović supports a similar idea when he writes that

the culture of imperialism and its legacy are fundamental for understanding all of the forms of representation, textualisation, interpretation, contextualisation and politicisation of African culture and art in the 20th century, including those belonging to a different historical space, such as the Serbian/Yugoslav one.¹¹

Further complicating the case of the MAU is that as a space of "remembrance" it harkens back to a time no longer active for many contemporary citizens or visitors to the space, creating the possibility of misunderstanding the original intended meaning of the museum's collections.

The physical space of the MAU decenters Euro-American perspectives and provides some indication of the goals of the space and its contents. On the right of the museum is what appears to be a traditional African dwelling, and to the left of the building is an anchor with an adjacent plaque and board addressing its significance and origins from the slave ship *Sidro* that transported Africans to the Americas solely for the purpose of enslaving them. There is also a signboard parallel to the anchor that explains that the anchor was presented to Zagorac and Pečar in Ghana and stands "to underline the strong anticolonial politics of both the former Yugoslavia and the Museum in Belgrade" (Figure 10.2). The board itself was only added to the exterior of the museum in 2021, which marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the NAM and, interestingly, a general increase in scholarly and cultural interest in the movement.

This resurgence seems contingent on two important trends: the actual reality of a renewed form of blocism with small nations caught between China and/or the United States, and another of an academic nature that is working through a turn to race, racialization, and racial hierarchies through local historicization. Throughout the Euro-American world, 2021 proved important as countries were challenging themselves to address the promises made during the summer of 2020 when stories of Black Lives Matter protests dominated newsrooms and people of color globally were challenging the powerful to exercise equality and fairness in interactions with African diasporic populations. In East European countries with small Black populations, the movement looked different. While there were protests and challenges to power, they were seen primarily as solidarity marches, akin to similar movements that took place in the 1960s and 1970s throughout the region.¹² Also at this time, countries worked to demonstrate a lack



Figure 10.2 Anchor from the boat *Sidro* in front of the Museum of African Art. Photograph by the author.

of regional ties to colonialism and therefore racism against people of African (diasporic) heritage. A focus on the NAM was a way to highlight the historical legacy of antiracist and anticolonial solidarity and illustrate that ties to colonialism and its afterlives, manifest in racism and hierarchies of power, never had a place in Yugoslavia, insinuating that there was no place for such sentiment in contemporary Serbia.

Also important to note is that there was not just a “moment of reckoning” among the cultures and geographies of focus in Slavic and East European studies (SEES); it happened in our fields as well.¹³ How we as a field can acknowledge and work through the existence of racialized hierarchies in our scholarly work became important, and the question of *race* immediately became of historical and contemporary urgency in North American SEES scholarly circles. Therefore, the history of internationalism and global solidarity became a clear way to link the region to questions of race and racialization and this was done in a number of publications, talks, and discussions about historical entanglements with race. In studies of Yugoslavia specifically, a reengagement with discussions of the forgotten history and legacy of NAM as a global force provided a useful historical backdrop as an example of when there was little ambiguity about the region’s relationship with race. In fact, it was proof that the region was invested in advancing a different way of understanding, viewing, and knowing the Global South and Africanity.

The Image of Africa and Africanity in the Yugoslav Region

Prior to the socialist period, the imaginary of Black Africans and the “dark continent” in Yugoslavia was not very different from that in the West, and the prevailing representation of Blackness and Africa was in line with colonizing states. Prior to the shift in alliances and active solidarity of the socialist period, it is possible to read through early twentieth-century travelogs, artistic movement manifestos, and photographs in which Black bodies and Africa, especially “Black Africa,” were subject to the same scrutiny and judgment in both East and West Europe. These attitudes of anti-Black racism, hostility, and casting of Black bodies as strange, foreign, hypersexualized, and animalistic persisted well into the early to mid-twentieth century.

In the 2004 exhibit catalog *Black Body, White Mask*, Dejan Sretenović uses photographs and travel narratives as evidence from Serbs traveling around the African continent in the early 1920s and 1930s to illustrate the similarities of Yugoslav views on Blackness, Africa, and Africans to those of colonial Europe. Related is Jovana Babović’s work on Josephine Baker, the first African American female performer to travel to Yugoslavia in the 1920s, which addresses the harsh treatment Baker received initially in Zagreb and later in Belgrade, partially because of her racial difference and what was viewed as her overt sexuality.¹⁴ These examples highlight the prevalence of the belief that Africa was a struggling continent and that Black inferiority was a deeply entrenched idea, so the anticolonial stance and embrace of Blackness and “Black Africa” were an intentional shift in the historical views and positions of many in the region. Even following the move toward solidarity with “Black Africa,” remnants of racial prejudice and intolerance remained. Consider here Peter Wright’s work on surveys distributed to Yugoslavs in the 1970s to gauge whether Yugoslavs were racists.¹⁵

Ana Sladojević notes in the 2017 MAU catalog *Човек не може опастати сам/One Man No Chop* that even if the MAU building and collection do not immediately project an image of anticoloniality, the anticolonial goals of the institution can be recognized in the intent of the museum’s founders. She suggests then that to understand what makes the museum relevant contemporarily can only be found in its past. Namely, the “ideas of the time” are “interiorised, inscribed ... through processes of memory and remembrance.”¹⁶ The goals of the MAU must then be considered within the context of its founding and the ethos of the period of the 1960s and 1970s, a time that was deeply invested in creating a space to reflect the growing spirit of anticolonialism and collective uplift of the Third World. The image of the Black body in the United States suffering under Jim Crow and decolonizing Africa was instrumentalized to cement a new image of Africa, elevate African art, and refract Blackness, illustrating its depth and diversity. When the museum was founded there was a clear motivation for recasting the image of Blackness, but what role do the museum and its exhibits have in a contemporary setting, particularly in a Euro-American context that is rife with exclusionary nationalism and transatlantic xenophobia? Can the specter of Yugoslav anticolonialism and antiracism seep through to the contemporary period to inoculate its citizens against these features of the dark side of modernity?

In the museum catalog produced for the traveling exhibit *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* the authors, Adrienne L. Childs and Susan H. Libby, note that “Black people appear in the European imaginary in very specific ways that reveal European conceptions (often misguided) about a group that was at once geographically distant and closely studied for ‘causes’ of otherness.”¹⁷ Through thirty-two pages of

images and text, the curators present images that center Black bodies in various Western European art in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. The catalog opens with the image of a slave ship, which they define as “the most familiar image of Africans in European visual culture in the long nineteenth century,” highlighting that the image of Africa and Africans was created, defined, and redefined against a backdrop of servitude that was undeniably horrific but justified by those who enslaved based on ideas of Black inferiority and African backwardness.¹⁸ In European art Black people

have a symbolic role ... of the Africa of European myth, which had infinite wealth and natural resources, and great Christian kingdoms ... [but] ... was also the habitat of heathens and savages who needed the Christian revelation that could only be bestowed on them by Europeans.

These representations of Africa and Africans are self-reaffirming and based on constructions that reinforce the European gaze and power. So, while some images from the catalog illustrate the “sheer beauty of the people represented,” they change and are contingent on particular images and projections of African difference bound by space and time constraints. For example, images of Black people “composed in profile ... emphasize the model’s deep forehead angle and large nose, features that implied lower status in the hierarchies of humanity.” The authors note that portraits such as these had titles like “Negro,” “Negress,” and “Study of a Black,” which cast the subject outside European norms.¹⁹

Interestingly, three such images still hang in the National Gallery of Slovenia, *Zamorka* [The Black woman] (Anton Ažbe, 1889), *Profil črnca* [Black man in profile] (Rihard Jakopič, 1898–1900), and *Glava črnca* [Head of a Black man] (Rihard Jakopič, 1890), providing useful insights into the circulation of images, perceptions, and imaginary of Blackness in Southeast Europe. The collections at the Ethnographic Museums in Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Zagreb (Croatia) are related in this regard. The ethnographic museum in Slovenia houses the materials collected by Ignacij Knoblehar/Ignatius Knoblecher (1819–1858) during his time as leader of the short-lived, but nevertheless impactful, Sudan Mission of 1848–1858, and the museum in Zagreb houses items collected by Dragutin Lerman during his service to King Leopold in the Congo.²⁰ Knoblehar is recognized as the first white man to study, explore, and document the cultures and peoples of the White Nile and has secured a place of prominence among the ranks of historically important Slovenes. Among the holdings at the Ethnographic Museum of Slovenia are hundreds of items (spears, pipes, whistles, jewelry, cups, baskets, implements, beads, crosses, stools, and statues, among other things) that Knoblehar and others collected during their missions in the service of the Austrian Empire. Also among the collection are sketches aiming to classify and depict the people, their dwellings, practices, and physiognomy. Relevant too are news articles from the period, particularly from the periodical *Zgodnja Danica*, that explain and justify the Sudan Mission.

The 2009 exhibit catalog for *The Sudan Mission 1848–1858* from the Slovenian Ethnographic Museum centers on these items that Knoblehar acquired and his sketches. The text opens with a self-reflective anecdote about a mirror hanging on the wall of the actual Sudan Mission that perplexed a local Black man because of the way in which a “phantom” appeared and disappeared when walking past it. The confusing situation caused the man to promptly remove the object, only to find that there was nothing behind it. The white man explained to the Black man what a mirror was, but the man could not

be convinced that he had seen himself in it.²¹ The catalog's author, Marko Frelih, goes on to explain how the exhibit catalog is also like a "mirror," and closes the introduction by posing the question: "[W]ho do we see in the mirror: Africans, Europeans, Slovenes, ourselves? No one?"²² This provocative closing offers a challenge to the observer and reader to interrogate the expectations, imaginaries, perceptions, and projection of difference that undergirded the Sudan Mission and, perhaps, to recognize the ongoing implications for the meanings attached to the objects and their presence in the museum quite distant from their origins. It is important to note that in one museum they are objects of ethnographic study whereas in another context, such as in the MAU, they would be considered art. The connotations of this difference help to highlight the role of museums to reinforce a particular imaginary about groups, be that one of equal or subordinate status.

Interestingly, the objects included as part of the Sudan Mission exhibit are described as "gifts" that Knoblehar acquired from interacting and presumably *befriending*, as much as that is possible with such an imbalance of power, those with whom he interacted. The artwork that forms the bulk of the collection at the MAU similarly comes primarily from the personal collections of individuals and therefore was acquired in a fair manner. At first glance, then, it would be difficult to understand how the collections in these museums differ. The time period of their production and the articulated intention of the curator(s) may offer some insights. However, the similar origins of the collections trouble the foundational idea that the MAU is anticolonial, reinforcing what Sladojević notes is the imbalance inherent in the musealization of objects.²³

To understand the MAU as offering a contrasting European image of Blackness requires social and historical understanding of the context haunting the present and giving it meaning. It is also necessary to consider the backdrop of its initial founding and the intention of its benefactors. There are challenges inherent to such an exercise, despite the goals. The museum, after all, marks Blackness primarily through the history and image of the slave ship, a defining feature of members of the African diaspora that reduced the cultures of Africa to the empty signification of Blackness, inherently linked to slavery.²⁴

Returning to *Sidro*, the placement of the anchor outside the MAU is intentional, as is the content of the plaque beside it. The anchor of a slave ship is a powerful symbol because it metonymically illustrates the breadth of transatlantic slavery, but in this case it serves as a reminder of the anticolonial stance of Yugoslav and its people. Such a large anchor could have only held back a ship of grand proportions, a fact substantiated by the transatlantic slave trade, a deeply generationally entrenched institution that broke apart lives, identities, and cultures and served to *underdevelop* Africa for centuries. The transatlantic slave trade, and its adjacent realities of racialization, bondage, and violence among other things, has affected the possibilities and realities of generations of African diasporic people. The anchor therefore serves as a reminder of two things: that slavery was a product of empire, and that Yugoslavia played no part in its proliferation. That the anchor was gifted from Ghana is also significant because that was the first sub-Saharan African country to achieve independence, charting a pathway for other then-colonized states and people to follow. As the plaque notes, "Yugoslavia never participated in the colonizing of African peoples, because of this it was able to be one of the bearers of the non-alignment idea." While Yugoslavia never *participated*, Yugoslav lands *benefited* from the practices of slavery—both transatlantic and Ottoman—and were enmeshed with an entire sign system, established and maintained by way of imperialism, that ascribed many negative attributes to African peoples, including being unclean, primitive, hypersexualized, and in need of proselytizing.

While the Ottoman Arab slave trade has come to be understood as more tolerant and less brutal than its transatlantic counterpart, some of its practices for those enslaved from East Africa belie that historical narrative.²⁵ Regarding the Hapsburg Empire, the practice of proselytizing and general missionary work on the African continent, and scientific categorizing among East Africans along the White Nile, must be viewed as an “alternate colonial” practice that was part of a wider “civilising process” based on assumed European moral and racial superiority.²⁶ As Marko Frelj notes, these missions were the origins of Slovenian perceptions and stereotypes of African difference.²⁷ Furthermore, in the nineteenth century traveling “ethnic shows” were hosted in Hapsburg territorial lands. Polajnar reminds us that in the Slovene case, Africans were cast as opposite to Slovenes who constructed themselves as “diligent, cultivated, white, hardworking people.”²⁸

Given this historical backdrop of Black images in the region, I would like to analyze the MAU through the lens of refraction, or how the image of Blackness begins from a colonial construction but then departs from dominant European conceptions to explore nuance and create a diverse imaginary of Africa and Blackness. As already articulated, the historical image of Blackness and Black bodies in the Yugoslav region differed little from the Euro-American imaginary. However, with the intentional ties created through the NAM, the image of Black and Brown bodies, Africa, and the Global South necessarily changed to reflect the new connections that Yugoslavia shared with those who would become brothers through NAM and socialism. Through these changes, a new imaginary of the Black body was created, fostering possibilities for self-representation. The creation of the MAU reflected the zeitgeist of the time and should be considered alongside other changing representations of Africa and Blackness in 1960s and 1970s Yugoslavia, including photographs, news stories, and newsreels of Josip Broz Tito and Jovanka Broz traveling and interacting with Black and Brown people, literature written about the continent and its virtues, and travelogs of Africa written by Yugoslavs. These various representations helped to cement new pathways to refract Blackness in its fullness and diversity.

As Tina Camp notes, the need to distort the image of Blackness as presented primarily through a European lens creates a space for African and African diasporic people to articulate ideal images of themselves.²⁹ The MAU’s permanent collection was not built on photography, but photography is central to the exhibit catalogs I analyze in this section. These images elevate and construct an image of Blackness that creates new possibilities for seeing it beyond colonial frames, allowing African (diasporic) communities to fully showcase themselves and their art. The catalogs analyzed uplift aspects of Blackness that have long been projected as proof of otherness—Black skin and hair—illustrating that “there is no *single narrative* that can be applied to the work of Black artists” and that Blackness has manifold possibilities.³⁰ This expansion enlivens and expands the ways in which Blackness and Black bodies can be seen and understood in the seemingly unlikely setting of Belgrade, Serbia. While its origins align with the goals of the socialist period, how and why these images and insistence on a broad understanding of Blackness continue in the early to mid-2000s are worthy of analysis.

The 2009 exhibit catalog *A in B* by Ana Sladojević and Nebojša Babić features photographs and stories of people of African heritage who live in Belgrade and addresses “how ... people who have, through their origin, language or family, a connection with another environment, in this case African, see themselves in the surroundings they live in.”³¹ *A in B* features black-and-white photographic portraits centered on the subjects’ faces. Their varying Brown skin tones provide contrast to or harmonization with a black

background, allowing the spectator to view their Black and Brown skin as relational to their background and Serbian surroundings by extension. The catalog notes that the original exhibit included photographs by Nebojša Babić, personal narratives, and a video reminiscent of “home videos.”³² The catalog’s author explains that

the literary confrontation of people and the city is deliberately avoided, so that the toponyms such as “Beograd,” “Novi Beograd,” “Banovo Brdo,” all locations in Serbia, reveal themselves only through the stories of the participants themselves, unveiling the rapport of people toward their surroundings.³³

The nature of the photos “makes us wonder about the meaning of intimacy and individuality today, and the quality of empathy we are capable of feeling when confronted with someone who lets us, at least for a moment, into their world.”³⁴ I would also add that the possibility of empathy is further complicated when the person is marked as very different from yourself, a dissonance presumably experienced by the majority of individuals who will encounter and interact with this exhibit catalog. The “visual fact of Blackness” in these photos challenges the observer to question the place of diasporic Blackness in Serbia and other places that benefited from migrations connected to the NAM in various forms.³⁵ By extension, these images demonstrate that Serbia benefited from the NAM beyond the political and highlight the ways in which Yugoslav hauntologies persist in the present.

In the 2016 exhibit catalog *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim/When You’ve Stopped Combing Me, I’ll Stop Hating You*, Katarina Radović showcases images of intricate hairstyles of Black women and addresses the politics of Black hair in Senegal. The exhibit space reproduced a beauty salon, featured photos “taken during her time that she spent in residence at the Centre for Arts and Design (WAAW) in Saint Louis, Senegal,” and included “all the necessary tools: combs, hairdryers, lock in many colours, towels, hair products, while in the closed boxes, kauri shells, razors and needles ... and hairstyle magazines from Senegal.”³⁶ These items were in a waiting room where a documentary by Mame Woury Thiobou was playing questioning what makes a woman beautiful.³⁷ To further enrich the verisimilitude of the setting, visitors encountered a beautician’s chair and tablets with music from Senegal.

Photos featured in the exhibit were taken at Madam Mariem Soda Diop’s hair salon where primarily women gather (Figure 10.3). It is described as “a zone of intimacy and gossip, where with the help of traditional tools and techniques an entire spectrum of women’s hairstyles emerges—from plain hairdos to exceptionally creative hairstyles.”³⁸ Radović

explores the phenomenon of *joie de vivre*, which contains the socially constructed and ... personal desire to be loved and to belong ... [H]er camera ... bring[s] to light the need of women to be subjected to the aesthetic criteria of the societies they live in ... which often indicates the level of belonging to the community.³⁹

However, beauty and the need “to look prettier than when they came in” frequently require the women to “patiently endure the hours of sitting, pulling, even sewing and torching the locks of their hair.”⁴⁰

The artist and exhibition catalog contributors are aware of the problematic imagery of Africans, particularly Black African women, and seek to acknowledge the fraught



Figure 10.3 Katarina Radović, Hair salon in St. Louis, Senegal, 2013. *When You Stop Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You*. Reprinted with the artist's permission.

history and dispel any possibility that the exhibit is likewise engaged in similar colonial representations. While the exhibition catalog recognizes the power imbalance involved in white Europeans photographing Black Africans and incorporates the historical photographic legacy from the region, even including a discussion about Rastko Petrović whose 1930 travelogue *Africa* is well known, discussed, and critiqued in literature from the area. The catalog argues that “it cannot be denied that his documentary photographs of the muscular members of African ethnic communities were made as part of his fascination with the body and diversity in the unknown world.”⁴¹ Irrespective of this acknowledgment, the text asserts that Petrović’s images were the result of a noncolonial agenda. This point of view is contested by a number of individuals, including Oskar Davičo, Zoran Milutinović, and Dejan Sretenović, whose work I referenced earlier. The assertion that the gaze of someone who does not seek to colonize is inherently different is in keeping with the original goals of the MAU’s founders as well as a number of exhibits. However, as Sladojević notes, it is difficult, if not impossible, to read that impartiality into photos without prior knowledge of the sociocultural and historical context. Moreover, Tanja Petrović reminds us that photography is particularly important in this regard as it is always a nod to a past that is unknowable in the present but informed by contemporary aesthetics and sign systems.⁴² Therefore, the intent behind a standalone image is rendered, in part, by the individual who receives it. However, in reading the descriptions

and narrative that accompany the exhibit, we learn that the images in *When You Stop Combing Me*

not only depict the hairdos and diversity of styles, but also the facial expressions of the featured protagonists, their conversations, gestures, make up and above all their tradition, ethnic and class origins, and the pain women must suffer while having their hair made up. At the same time, they tell the story of their small companionships and the status of the women in Senegal.⁴³

The essay “I Will Stop Hating You When You Stop Braiding My Hair” represents an African perspective in the catalog and recounts the “silent pain” experienced by salon patrons. The styling of Black women’s hair is the subject of many essays and scholarly articles, and it is likewise the experience of those individuals worldwide who have “Afro hair” or hair with kinky or coiled textures. The story is focused on the fictional character of Ndeye Ngone, a hair braider “who managed to make [a girl] hate her completely after she completed [her] hairstyle” after pulling her hair to form braids.⁴⁴ She later remembers the story of a friend who learned a French proverb in school, “One must suffer for beauty,” which is later repeated by the protagonist, who notes, “I can endure the pain, since it is the price that I should pay so that I could be pretty.”⁴⁵

The essay concludes with the following statement: “We, as African photographers, have the tendency to glorify the beauty of our women, with fake additions from Europe, so that we can prove that we belong to the universal civilization,” which helps to place this exhibit catalog and its contents into a broader global dialogue about beauty and the effect of the external gaze on self-representation.⁴⁶ While the exhibit is a discussion on beauty and the connections between beauty and pain, the exhibit is clearly aware of the potential problematic of a European artist, in this case a photographer, memorializing the culturally relevant and important space of the Black beauty salon, which is not simply a place where women go to get their hair styled. It is a place of beautification, community, storytelling, and identity maintenance against global European beauty standards that uplift a norm of light skin and straight hair, which stands in opposition to the forms of beauty highlighted in the salon. The essay expands the discussion of beauty and serves to remind the reader to “ponder ... cultural identity.”⁴⁷

The plates following the essay feature a woman taking a break during a multihour braiding session, a young girl with a traditional hairstyle, and other women having their hair braided in “tresse americaine style,” indicating cultural “traffic” across the Black Atlantic that has the potential to minimize African beauty standards.⁴⁸ Radović notes that “there is something in the relationship between hairdressers and their customers which comes before the final product: the mixed feelings of tenderness, pain, obsession, seduction, trust, rivalry, love and hate.”⁴⁹

Radović ultimately notes that the desire for beauty “proved far stronger than the pain”—a universal truism.⁵⁰ In this iteration, however, Black hair is the medium, the hair stylist is the artist, the scalp is the canvas, and Africa itself provides the standard of beauty. While there is an implicit backdrop of European beauty standards and acknowledgment of the historical reality of stereotypes and differences informing images of Blackness, particularly of Black women, the photos and narratives of the exhibit catalog provide a space to evaluate Black hairstyles against Black beauty standards. The exhibit creates a world unto itself where a defining feature of Black womanhood—Black women’s hair—is elevated and admired. It is no longer a mark of difference but presents as an entire

universe, intentionally examined and admired with indifference to the expected external European gaze, where beauty tropes of Blackness long championed internally can be recognized and appreciated externally.

Similarly engaging with the politics of Black hair and its representation(s) is the 2010 exhibit catalog *Hairdresser and Barber Shop Signs in Africa/Frizerske i Berberske Table Afrike*, by Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, highlights emerged and

bec[a]me the popular expression of the African urban scene sometime between 1950 and 1960, at the time when African nations were gaining their independence and when the political, social and above all economic spheres of life altered ... when the market economy started to emerge.⁵¹

The signs that are the focus of the catalog were aspects of a larger movement in “urban environments” marked with “graphic signposts” to many things. These barber and salon signs emerge as two-dimensional look books advertising the existence of salons and barbershops as well as boasting the hairstyles and cuts available at the specific shop. Given their continued existence during different periods, the boards signal aesthetic and stylistic changes in appearance throughout the African continent.

The catalog includes boards that feature images of men’s and women’s hairstyles that capture the zeitgeist of Black hairstyles via the political and social realities of the time. Whereas the boards featuring men’s styles tend to showcase a small number of styles, the boards with women’s hairstyles feature as many as nineteen different possible hairstyles. These boards, such as those from Togo and Benin, illustrate a diversity of possible hairstyles and hint at the complex skill set required to turn two-dimensional possibilities into three-dimensional works of art, the importance of which is inarticulable given the importance of the head, which is explained as having “extraordinary symbolic meanings.”⁵² Hair can also indicate “the changes in the life cycle of an individual, the value of their property, identification of contestants in certain rituals and ceremonies” and “represent[s] the high point of expressional capabilities and creativity.”⁵³

The exhibit includes examples of signs from the West African countries of Cameroon, Togo, Benin, Ghana, Senegal, and Ivory Coast. Integral to this discussion are the transatlantic connections and convergence in Black hair aesthetics and political changes connected to Black liberation. While the catalog does not specifically address the dominance of American culture, the additions focused on the Black Atlantic cultural traffic in hairstyles are particularly compelling and urge for a conversation that includes the African diaspora. The influence of the United States and cultural dialogues was a common feature of some of the boards and appears, for example, in Ghana, where “red and white stripes and stars, as symbols of the American flag are common motif[s].”⁵⁴ The text notes that the posters “were linked with the change of fashion trends and cultural aspirations ... while representing symbols of the craft and its use.”⁵⁵ Additional signs of American influence surface in hairstyles named after prominent Americans, including, curiously, former president John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

The catalog indicates that African American hairstyles were never more influential than the period of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the rise of the “Afro or ’fro hairstyle, and promoted the natural way of hair grooming, which contributed to the first exposure of African hair” for many.⁵⁶ This reinforces how African hair “was stereotyped for so long, [and] subdued to the Euro-American influences.”⁵⁷ For many people the “Afro was ‘bad’ ... scary and socially and aesthetically disturbing for white America and ... [a] majority

of African Americans who feared repression” because it was perceived as “militant by its opponents.”⁵⁸ By focusing on Afros of the 1960s and 1970s, the author highlights the link between Afro hair and identity reclamation in Black liberation movements. To wear an Afro was a mark of pride and “liberati[on] from the centuries of hiding and hair ironing.”⁵⁹ Dreadlocks had a different point of origin in the Caribbean, but had a similar function of connecting those in the diaspora to their African roots.⁶⁰ Other styles such as corn- or canerows, rows of plaits braided closely to the scalp, forming “an exceptionally rich variety of geometrical shapes,” are also expressions of African and African diasporic identity globally connecting those with Afro hair.⁶¹ However, because of the dominance of American culture, some African leaders were unable to see beyond the origins of the Afro and therefore were unable to “estimate” its significance—one recognized and elevated by the catalog.

The two catalogs *Hairdresser and Barber Shop Signs in Africa* and *When You’ve Stopped Combing Me, I’ll Stop Hating You* present concepts, images, and perspectives in dialogue with one another. Both catalogs demonstrate cultural trends, music, and aesthetic values—in this case hairstyles—that circulate among African Americans and the world primarily through Black Atlantic “cultural traffic,” whereby “actual movement of Black cultural material moves from place to place.”⁶² These two catalogs create a space for Black hair and aspects of Black culture to exist hermetically beyond the normalizing judgment of whiteness and Euro-American aesthetics, which reinforces the idea that “woolly, nappy, or curly hair was by definition bad hair.”⁶³ Unfortunately, this remains true in the United States, for example where employers and schools can discriminate against Black students and employees because of their hairstyle choice. Rather than judging Afro hair, these two catalogs celebrate it, offer intricate styling choices against the relevant cultural context, and focus on the skill, and sometimes pain, required to create such complicated hairstyles and the resulting beauty. In addition, the texts recognize that hair, and especially Black hair, is a system of conveying culture, defiance, and even an expression of liberation.

Conclusion

As Tanja Petrović reminds us, it is a challenging exercise to see beyond the colonial frame when viewing art and artwork featuring various Western concepts connected to colonialism, such as race.⁶⁴ However, if it is possible to engage with context sensitivity that includes an understanding of the history and goals of the MAU as well as Yugoslavia, then it is equally possible to remove the veil of imperialism that codes images in ways that can only be understood through the Euro-American lens, which has long presented aspects of Blackness as antithetical to Europeaness. In the catalogs from the MAU discussed here that are directly engaged in telling the story of physical difference and inclusion, such as *A in B*, *Hairdresser and Barber Shop Signs in Africa*, and *When You’ve Stopped Combing Me, I’ll Stop Hating You*, it is possible to see how an alternative imaginary is possible—one that is engaged first with the act of interpreting self-representation and is therefore interested in relatability and universalities rather than judgment and assimilation. The other MAU catalogs referenced are similarly engaged with complicating the story of Africa and African art and are therefore actively interested in “decolonizing” and even decentering dominant Euro-American perspectives by questioning and providing indigenous practices to analyze modes of analysis with which the spectator and museum visitor can engage. They indicate the possible role that an institution such as the MAU can continue to have in creating spaces to reflect on how the legacy of nonalignment

and Yugoslav hauntologies persist and continue to inform the spirit of brotherhood and inclusivity of Black populations and set the tone for their representation.

The MAU and the exhibit catalogs referenced in this chapter illustrate that aspects of Blackness can continue to be celebrated and appreciated well beyond their ability to signal solidarity. Moreover, activities at the MAU, such as Swahili lessons, the annual African festival, elementary school engagement, and admission-free days for seniors, contribute to a holistic agenda to encourage a continued positive and inclusive image of Africa and Blackness that may have emerged in the socialist period but persists into the current era. That is not to say that this image is not at times mired in global aesthetics, expectations, and well-established hierarchies, but it is to recognize and indicate how refracted images of Blackness in MAU catalogs and exhibits circulate in ways that engage with the past and imagine the future possibility of refracting the Blackness of the past to better understand the present.

Notes

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- 2 Mark Fisher, "What Is Hauntology?," *Film Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 16–24.
- 3 Nebojša Babić and Ana Sladojević, *A in B* (Museum of African Art, 2009); Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010); Katarina Radović, *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim* [When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You] (Museum of African Art, 2016).
- 4 Kehinde Andrews, *Back to Black: Retelling Black Radicalism for the 21st Century* (Zed Books, 2018); Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (Routledge, 2014); Olivette Otele, *African Europeans: An Untold History* (Hurst Publishers, 2020); Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Duke University Press, 2016).
- 5 Tanja Petrović, "Seeing the Futures Past, and Futures Yet to Come: On the (Im)possibility of Reading the Promises of Liberation from the Visual Archive of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Socialism," *Membrana* 6, no. 1 (2021): 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.47659/mj-v6n1id104>; Ana Sladojević, "Tito's Africa: Representation of Power during Tito's African Journeys," in *Tito in Africa: Picturing Solidarity*, ed. Radina Vučetić and Paul Betts (Museum of Yugoslavia, 2017), 45.
- 6 Erica Lehrer and Joanna Wawrzyniak, "Decolonial Museology in East-Central Europe: A Preliminary To-Do List," *Europe Now*, February 21, 2023. www.europenowjournal.org/2023/02/24/decolonial-museology-in-east-central-europe-a-preliminary-to-do-list.
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- 8 Anders Kreuger, "Five Images of an Image: The Museum of African Art in Belgrade," *Afterall* 37 (Autumn/Winter 2014): 60–71.
- 9 For more about the region, see <http://mau.rs/en/58-news/upcoming-events/1478-the-cultural-heritage-of-top%C4%8Dider.html>.
- 10 Ana Sladojević, "An Anticolonial Museum," *Europe Now*, February 21, 2023, 11.
- 11 Dejan Sretenović, *Crno telo, bele maske* (Muzej aфричке уметности, 2004), 132.
- 12 Madigan Fichter, "Yugoslav Protest: Student Rebellion in Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo in 1968," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 99–121.

- 13 Sunnie Rucker-Chang and Chelsi West Ohuery, "A Moment of Reckoning: Transcending Bias, Engaging Race and Racial Formations in Slavic and East European Studies," *Slavic Review*, vol. 80, no. 2 (2021): 216–223.
- 14 Jovana Babovic, *Metropolitan Belgrade: Culture and Class in Interwar Yugoslavia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018), 110.
- 15 Peter Wright, "Are there Racists in Yugoslavia? Debating Racism and Anti-blackness in Socialist Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 81, no. 2 (Summer 2022): 418–441.
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- 17 Adrienne L. Childs and Susan H. Libby, *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* (Giles, 2017), 17.
- 18 Adrienne L. Childs and Susan H. Libby, *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* (Giles, 2017), 11.
- 19 Adrienne L. Childs and Susan H. Libby, *The Black Figure in the European Imaginary* (Giles, 2017), 22–23.
- 20 Damjan Roce, "Reprezentacija hrvatskog istraživača Dragutina Lermana u javnom i znanstvenom diskursu" (Masters diss., University of Zagreb, 2022), 54.
- 21 Marko Frelih, *Sudanska Misija 1848–1858: Ignaciji Koblehar – misijonar, raziskovalec Beleg Nila iz zbiralec afriških predmetov* (Slovene Ethnographic Museum, 2009), 51.
- 22 Marko Frelih, *Sudanska Misija 1848–1858: Ignaciji Koblehar – misijonar, raziskovalec Beleg Nila iz zbiralec afriških predmetov* (Slovene Ethnographic Museum, 2009), 51.
- 23 Ana Sladojević, "An Anticolonial Museum," *Europe Now*, February 21, 2023, 17. www.europenowjournal.org/2023/02/21/an-anticolonial-museum/
- 24 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 81.
- 25 George H. Juune, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Sultan* (I.B. Taurus, 2016), 24.
- 26 Helge Wendt, "Central European Missionaries in Sudan. Geopolitics and Alternative Colonialism in Mid-Nineteenth Century Africa," *European Review* 26 (2018): 1–11. www.academia.edu/36835239/Central_European_Missionaries_in_Sudan_Geopolitics_and_Alternative_Colonialism_in_Mid_Nineteenth_Century_Africa_in_European_Review_doi_10_1017_S1062798718000182
- 27 Marko Frelih, *Sudanska Misija 1848–1858: Ignaciji Koblehar – misijonar, raziskovalec Beleg Nila iz zbiralec afriških predmetov* (Slovene Ethnographic Museum, 2009), 16.
- 28 Anja Poljanar, "The Portrayal of Africa in the Newspaper *Zgodnja Danica* from 1849 to 1858," *Prispevki za novejšo zgodovino* 61, no. 2 (2021), 25.
- 29 Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke University Press, 2012), 5.
- 30 Connie H. Choi, *Black Refractions: Highlights from The Studio Museum in Harlem* (American Federation of Arts, 2019), 24.
- 31 Nebojša Babić and Ana Sladojević, *A in B* (Museum of African Art, 2009), 12.
- 32 Nebojša Babić and Ana Sladojević, *A in B* (Museum of African Art, 2009), 11–12.
- 33 Nebojša Babić and Ana Sladojević, *A in B* (Museum of African Art, 2009), 11.
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- 35 Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke University Press, 2012), 67.
- 36 Katarina Radović, *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim* [When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You] (Museum of African Art, 2016), 13–15.
- 37 Katarina Radović, *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim* [When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You] (Museum of African Art, 2016), 16.

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- 39 Katarina Radović, *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim* [When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You] (Museum of African Art, 2016), 15.
- 40 Katarina Radović, *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim* [When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You] (Museum of African Art, 2016), 15.
- 41 Katarina Radović, *Kad Prestaneš da me Češljaš, Prestaću da te Mrzim* [When You've Stopped Combing Me, I'll Stop Hating You] (Museum of African Art, 2016), 27.
- 42 Ana Sladojević, "Tito's Africa: Representation of Power during Tito's African Journeys," in *Tito in Africa: Picturing Solidarity*, ed. Radina Vučetić and Paul Betts (Museum of Yugoslavia, 2017), 43–45; Tanja Petrović, "Seeing the Futures Past, and Futures Yet to Come: On the (Im)possibility of Reading the Promises of Liberation from the Visual Archive of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Socialism," *Membrana* 6, no. 1 (2021): 54–55.
- 43 Tanja Petrović, "Seeing the Futures Past, and Futures Yet to Come: On the (Im)possibility of Reading the Promises of Liberation from the Visual Archive of the Non-Aligned Movement in the Aftermath of the Yugoslav Socialism," *Membrana* 6, no. 1 (2021): 28.
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- 48 Kennell Jackson, "Introduction: Traveling While Black," in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam and Kennell Jackson (University of Michigan Press, 2010), xii.
- 49 Kennell Jackson, "Introduction: Traveling While Black," in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam and Kennell Jackson (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 67.
- 50 Kennell Jackson, "Introduction: Traveling While Black," in *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture*, ed. Harry Justin Elam and Kennell Jackson (University of Michigan Press, 2010), 70.
- 51 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 17.
- 52 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 61.
- 53 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 65.
- 54 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 65.
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- 57 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 68.

- 58 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 69.
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- 61 Nataša Njegovanović Ristić, *Hairdresser and Barbershop Signs in Africa* (Museum of African Art, 2010), 75.
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