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(Anti-)colonial assemblages

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Njinga Mbande, or Ana de Sousa, the Christian Portuguese name she took on following her strategic christening, ruled the Ndongo and Matamba Kingdoms (geographically spanning what is today northern Angola) from 1624 to her death in 1663. During this time, in a complex way, she balanced diplomatic collaboration with, and military opposition to, the Portuguese crown in addition to military tensions with neighboring kingdoms and other encroaching European forces. By sifting through the colonial documents from the Portuguese authorities and other European travelers and missionaries, as well as her own letters written to the Crown and the Vatican, we get a sense of how Njinga was articulated via colonial discourse and how she challenged the forces and epistemologies of Western imperialism. Njinga’s life coincides with a particular moment of racial capitalism in which taxonomies of racial, gender, and sexual difference were negotiated and trafficked by the forces of Empire as undergirding and informing its expansionist and extractive desires and processes. During and after her life, her body and political stature served, as I shall consider ahead through the framework of assemblages, as racialized texts and fantasies of gendered abjection, sexual deviance, and psychological pathos. While these have continued to inform the continuity of Empire after her political and military resistance to it, her defiance toward imperial forces is also recovered and integrated into radical cultural production and meaning-making across the African diaspora and within anti-colonial epistemologies.

Life and political rise of Njinga

Prior to her reign, all known rulers of the Ndongo and Matamba Kingdoms had been men. As Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe point out, the Kimbundu term for ruler, ngola, was not gendered as in European languages and political models. Therefore, the title of “queen” is both a translation into European gendering systems and an erasure of the complexities of Njinga’s rise to power and struggle against colonizing forces. As I shall expound upon further ahead, Murray and Roscoe perform the important decolonial work of placing Njinga into an African queer history, an archive of life beyond the European gendered order of bodies. Historian Linda Heywood, author of *Njinga of Angola: Africa’s Warrior Queen* (2017), would disagree with Murray and Roscoe’s assertion that Ndongo society was matrilineal. Though gender expectations at the level of the body and its everyday performativity were blurred to some extent within a
particular binary, Ndongo division of power followed patrilineal orders, as indicated by Njinga’s suspicion of male claims to the throne.

Njinga’s lineage could be traced back to the founders of the Ndongo Kingdom, over a century prior to her birth. The reign of her grandfather (1575–92), Ngola Kilombo kia Kasenda, saw substantial incursions of the Portuguese and military conflict, with resounding defeats on both sides. Her father, Mbande a Ngola, was elected in 1592 and ruled until 1617. His reign was plagued by internal discord between himself and local officials of the kingdom, known as sobas, which would carry serious military consequences as Portuguese armies seized significant portions of Ndongo territory.

This Portuguese encroachment also coincided with the expansion of the slave trade across Ndongo and Kongo spheres of influence (located to the north of Ndongo). As a result of these dire consequences and compounded dissatisfaction among regional leaders known as sobas, Mbande a Ngola was ultimately murdered by his own military. The years immediately following his death left the decimated kingdom without a successor. In the meantime, court officials and sobas were responsible for electing the next ruler from several different eligible lineages and from candidates holding important local positions of power. Ngola Mbande, son of Mbande a Ngola and his favorite concubine, Kengela ka Nkombe, and full brother of Njinga and her two sisters, Kambu and Funji, ultimately seized power by preemptively proclaiming himself king with the help of his supporters moments before many Ndongo electors arrived at the voting location. He did so by arguing that Mbande a Ngola’s legitimate heir – the latter’s son with his principal wife – was, in fact, ineligible because his mother had been convicted of adultery. He went on to enact violent retribution against much of his opposition, including family members. He ordered the sterilization of his sisters and killed Njinga’s son (the offspring of one of her male concubines) in order to secure his line of succession.

As Linda Heywood and other historians have argued, her brother saw Njinga as a threat to his political aspirations before he even took power. Njinga spent the early years of her brother’s reign living in the neighboring and incorporated Matamba Kingdom. In 1621, as a result of growing Portuguese military expansion into Ndongo territory and a subsequent need for re-establishing diplomatic relations with the Portuguese Crown, Ngola Mbande invited Njinga to be Ndongo’s official envoy to the Portuguese. She and a vast Ndongo delegation met with the Portuguese in Luanda – the first African delegation to receive such an invitation and grandiose reception by the Portuguese governor and local colonial elites, thus highlighting Portuguese recognition of the Ndongo Kingdom as a major power in the region.

The establishment of Portuguese and Dutch colonial presence in the region hinged on tensions and conflict between local kingdoms, and when Njinga took power in 1624, the Portuguese had seized control of coastal and inland territories between the Lifune and Kwanza rivers. Njinga, like her predecessors and counterparts, leveraged power and political relationships with European envoys and militaries to consolidate and in some cases, expand her influence and the Ndongo sphere of control. As Heywood notes in the case of Njinga, these relationships entailed land concessions, continued acceptance of Christianity and the presence of Catholic missionaries, military alliances with both the Portuguese and the Dutch as well as against one another, and the exchange of enslaved bodies to the Portuguese and Dutch. These local power dynamics and practices at the dawn of European colonization in southern Africa were common in the region before Njinga’s reign.

Njinga accepted baptism as a diplomatic tool during her meeting in Luanda with Portuguese governor Correia de Sousa. Njinga and Correia de Sousa came to a peace agreement of sorts whereby Portugal and Ndongo would accept the current borders and support one another in the fight against common enemies. She refused several Portuguese demands in the process,
however, most notably that of paying an annual tribute to the Portuguese in enslaved Ndongo citizens. Njinga was steadfast on her position, reminding Correia de Sousa that Ndongo remained a sovereign kingdom and thus had no need to pay any tribute to the Portuguese. In response to Portuguese insistence on this matter, she agreed to be baptized, and a public christening ceremony in Luanda ensued. Njinga also saw her baptism as strategic from a military standpoint, considering that Ndongo nemeses would now be Portuguese nemeses under the Ndongo–Portugal alliance, but the Portuguese used the opportunity to claim the land for themselves. Ngola Mbenda subsequently fell into depression with the reality of the ever-dwindling Ndongo Kingdom and died after ingesting a supposedly poisoned beverage. According to different chroniclers, most notably the Portuguese António de Cadornega, Njinga was behind the poisoning.6

Njinga immediately assumed power and was driven, like her predecessors, to revive the Ndongo Kingdom to its former glory prior to Portuguese colonial expansion. She shared a deep distrust and hate toward the Portuguese, not only for the loss of Ndongo territories but also for the underhanded diplomatic tactics and brutal military strategy they employed, leading to the death of several of her family members and ancestors. For the duration of her nearly 40-year reign (1624–63), she achieved her goal of resisting Portuguese expansion in the region and regrowing the Ndongo Kingdom.

She quickly worked to mobilize military support from sobas, and so for the first time since the arrival of the Portuguese in the region, their growing power was threatened by a possible uprising. However, the Portuguese preempted any uprising by defeating Njinga’s armies and forced her court to flee from Ndongo lands, subsequently installing Ngola Hari, a distant descendent of Ndongo founder Ngola Kiluanje kia Samba, as puppet ruler of the Kingdom. In addition to military intervention, the Portuguese attempted to convince regional officials of the Ndongo that Njinga was unfit to rule because she was a woman.

The racial, gendered, and sexual discourses that impacted her identity and informed the inscription of her body in various ways came from both European and Ndongo modes of knowledge and gender norms. As she told her biographer, Antonio Gaeta, regarding her childhood, she caused significant concern and consternation among elders and wider society by learning political, judicial, and military practices that were reserved for the sons of rulers. At the same time, she was known for outshining her brother and other young men with whom she circulated in the acquisition of knowledge.

Her challenging of prescribed gender norms caused further alarm as she got older. As Heywood notes,

she made clear through her actions that her gender did not preclude her from enjoying the same liberties as her male counterparts. In addition to having in her service a coterie of female attendants and slaves, she kept a large number of young male consorts (concubines), and she is reported to have had multiple lovers throughout her long life.7

Her sexual relationships and performance of power via sex drew disapproval from Ndongo elites and horror from Portuguese administrators and chroniclers.

Portuguese imperial signification of Njinga in positing her as an unfit ruler to her Ndongo rivals reveals much of the contradictory discourses inscribed on Black women’s bodies, already in the early centuries of Western expansion. On the one hand, her perceived gender inscribed her as unfit to rule due to a deficit in the signifiers of masculinity – itself always signified through the performance of domination over othered bodies. On the other hand, her alleged poisoning of her own brother, as recorded by Portuguese chroniclers, allowed the Portuguese to
signify her to Ndongo officials as an abject subject that carries out power by way of treacherous excess. In other words, Njinga was posited by the Portuguese as both deficit and excess of the white imperial standards of normative personhood and masculine ideals of leadership. A political imperial textuality and imagery surrounding Njinga was thus in formation. Under this growing imperial narrative of Njinga's alterity was the Portuguese Crown's fundamental fear of Njinga's political power and military shrewdness. Unlike her sibling predecessor, Njinga was revered and respected by many of the Ndongo elites, and the Portuguese would have a harder time taking political advantage of internal fractures in Ndongo power structures.

Njinga would remain peripheral to the Ndongo during Ngola Hari’s reign until 1657, when the Portuguese signed a new peace treaty with Njinga in 1657, thus recognizing her as ruler of the Ndongo once again. By this time, and in the over 30 years that had elapsed since her removal, Njinga and the Portuguese had had no shortage of conflicts. They had excommunicated her from the Catholic Church and kidnapped her sisters, eventually murdering one of them – Funji – and destroying her base in 1646. These violent and political initiatives were nonetheless insufficient to erase or limit Njinga’s power in the region. After her military losses to the Portuguese in 1626 and 1629, she began her conquest of the neighboring Matamba Kingdom, ultimately establishing herself as ruler of both Ndongo and Matamba in 1648.

In this same year, and as the Portuguese reconquered Luanda from the Dutch, Njinga began correspondence with the Vatican with the goal of gaining the Vatican’s formal political recognition as ruler of the Ndongo and Matamba Kingdoms. In exchange for recognition, the Vatican sent missionaries to Njinga’s court and established churches in her kingdoms, beginning in the 1650s. From then until her death in 1663, she corresponded extensively with the Vatican to ensure sovereignty while also working to reintegrate people formerly enslaved into Ndongo-Matamba societies. During this final period of her life, she reinitiated direct diplomatic relations with the Portuguese and eventually signed the aforementioned peace treaty of 1657. Peace with the Portuguese temporarily secured Ndongo-Matamba sovereignty until 1671, when the kingdom was invaded and integrated into Portuguese Angola. One can argue that Njinga’s unrelenting resistance to Portuguese imperialism played a significant part in postponing European encroachment and colonization of southwestern Africa beyond coastal regions until the late nineteenth century.

Njinga in Western imperial representation

As Njinga resisted colonization, her body and its actions were in many ways semantically ensnared by binary thinking and racialized modes of imperial signification. Her transgressive use of masculine behaviors (in other words, those sanctioned only to cisgender men) within her repertoire of performativity led to racialized European images and narratives of a volatile, unstable, and abject ruler who was to be distrusted and ultimately removed from power. These actions included access to sexual exploitation over subalternized bodies, use of male attire, and enactment of physical violence in battle. Equally important, and perhaps most substantially transgressive, Njinga accessed a sphere of knowledge and privilege afforded nearly exclusively to men. By entering these spaces and challenging their foundational racist and misogynistic discourses surrounding African women’s roles and bodies, she presented a greater threat to patriarchal and European systems of representation and concentrations of power.

Due to her powerful role in southwestern African politics and resistance to European imperialism, Njinga figured prominently in European imperialist cultural production and historiography. Through deeply racialized, sexualized, abjectified, and gendered imagery and discourses, her body and actions came to be a text within what T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting has called
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“a totalizing system of representation” at the heart of Western imperialism’s epistemology and mechanisms of signification. I use the term “assemblage” – as indicated in this chapter’s title – to designate and frame the myriad, conflicting, and overlapping discourses, images, and narratives that have signified Njinga’s life and body. These draw on her many notable accomplishments and the complexities of her legacy – anti-colonial resistance, shrewd political and military decisions, and strategic negotiations with European colonial powers, including the slave trade to the Americas and Europe. Njinga has been integrated into and rendered via an assortment of assemblages that span spectrums of political ideology, historiography, and public memory.

European travelers, historians, politicians, and artists have notably rendered Njinga through discourses that have informed the inscription of Black women in the longue durée of Western imperialism through white masculine gazes. As Jennifer Morgan underscores in her exploration of imperial male travel writing, “Europe had a long tradition of identifying Others through the monstrous physiognomy or sexual behavior of women.”

Njinga’s body, political actions, and sexual life were thus imperially translated into the racialized lexicon and textuality of imperial meaning and claims to knowledge while becoming part of an “iconography of danger and monstrosity.” Some of the earliest examples of European writing and painting on Njinga came from Antonio Giovanni Cavazzi de Montecuccolo, one of the Capuchin missionaries who resided in her court from 1654 until her death in 1663. Although he also came to be her chronicler, Cavazzi took biased liberties in reframing her endeavors and legacies through a white supremacist gaze that discredited, abjectified, and vilified Njinga to his European audiences. His paintings and poetry on Njinga provided Europeans with an assembled story of an African queen who ruled with treachery and moral corruption toward her own people as well as her enemies, thus rendering the implied European self vis-à-vis the Black other as both the apex of valid personhood and the more benevolent ruler of bodies to be colonized. His paintings include a visual rendering of Njinga’s diplomatic visit to the Portuguese governor in Luanda in 1662 in which, due to lack of seating, Njinga orders one of her servants to get on all fours and serve as her chair. In another painting, Njinga sits on a lavish rug surrounded by her servants and orders a woman to be punished – a ruling executed by two men who, in the painting, can be seen grabbing her breasts with objects while her hands appear to be tied behind her back.

His poetry on Njinga designates a racialized place, marked by excess, for her among earlier historical and mythological female figures who, in Cavazzi’s eyes, attained notoriety via treacherous means. These include Medea, Agrippina, and Helen of Troy, who challenged gender roles, political structures, or patriarchal orders of power to varying degrees, but whose actions have also been renarrativized within imperial patriarchal matrices of power. For Cavazzi, Njinga surpasses all of these earlier figures in supposed brutality toward her own people and unethical transgressions. He labels Njinga “a most cunning thief” who instead of rallying together a nation as Helen did with Troy, or Agrippina with Rome, “overturned, destroyed, and ruined Ethiopia” – Ethiopia being the early modern European term for nearly all regions of sub-Saharan Africa. In other words, according to Cavazzi, her resistance to European imperialism did not save Ndongo and Matamba but rather contributed to their downfall.

Another missionary of her court, Antonio Gaeta, went on to write a biography of Njinga’s life, political endeavors, and ties to the Catholic Church, titled The Marvelous Conversion to the Holy Faith of Christ of Queen Njinga and her Kingdom of Matamba in Central Africa, and published in 1669. Like Cavazzi, Gaeta also compares Njinga to female political figures of Antiquity but nonetheless articulates her difference in terms of a “warlike Amazon,” “pagan idolater,” and practitioner of “diabolic ceremonies.” Following Cavazzi and Gaeta, other European missionaries, colonists, chroniclers, and cultural producers wrote extensively on Njinga in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reproducing similar tropes while describing her as cannibalistic and
sexually deviant, ultimately becoming a prominent reference for French libertine writers. The latter would posit her into an assemblage of European imagery and narratives on Black women as a profoundly racialized and eroticized image of transgression against sexual norms—a corporeal site of sexual difference and fantasy for European consumption and negotiation of European sexual identities.

French writer Jean-Louis Castilhon's *Zingha, Queen of Angola*, published in 1769, the first fictional work in which Njinga figures as a subject, renders Njinga through the author's racialized fantasies of her, themselves drawn from the aforementioned works of missionaries. In Castilhon's novel, Njinga escapes cannibalistic desire through her thirst for power. Marquis de Sade and other libertine French authors would retake the racist trope of a cannibal Njinga, most notably in his *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795). In defense of his argument for a society that privileges sexual pleasure above all sorts of social order and of his definition of sexual pleasure as the sole aim of human existence, he renders and deploys an image of Njinga and her kingdom as the political example *par excellence* of a debased ruler and a society free of all sexual norms that were foundational to European claims to civilization. In Sade's view of an ideal society, all actions in search of sexual pleasure, as violent as they may be, are fully justified and should not be punished.

His portrayal of Njinga went far beyond his arguments in favor of the primacy of sexual pleasure, articulating her as a hypersexual ruler who effectively ruled, and was ruled by, her sexual desires, with no allusion to her political life and complex diplomatic maneuvers. As a sexual tyrant, Sade's Njinga exploited and killed her sex partners, men and women; killed pregnant women; and legally established prostitution. In promoting libertinism in Europe, Sade utilized and further exoticized a version of Njinga he had encountered in Cavazzi, Gaeta, and Castilhon as an example of a "far-away" society that had taken his tenets to excess. In other words, despite looking to challenge European norms, Sade nonetheless did so within a framework of European civilization built on imperial projects and held on to claims of white supremacy. This libertine European society he envisaged would still represent the core of normative personhood and knowledge despite challenging the sexual discourses that traditionally othered colonized bodies.

Also at the turn of the nineteenth century, German philosopher GWF Hegel used this colonial image of Njinga in teaching his philosophy of history. More specifically, in his lectures on the "geographical basis of history," he alludes to her without naming her specifically when discussing an African "state composed of women" from "a former time" and "whose head was a woman." He goes on:

She is said to have pounded her own son in a mortar, to have besmeared herself with the blood, and to have the blood of pounded children at hand. She is said to have driven away or put to death all the males, and commanded the death of all male children.\(^{15}\)

He utilized this imagery of Njinga as part of his European supremacist and colonialisit argument, which posited Europeanlessness as the core of history and that Africa and other colonized spaces were to be objects of European history. This argument hinged on discrediting and erasing non-European forms of knowledge as they pertained to economic development of the land and political structure. For Hegel, Njinga's rule confirmed his view that normative European gender norms and patriarchal orders of power were abjectly corrupted in Africa, further condemning the continent to historylessness, from which European colonization had to save it. Hence his narrativization of Njinga's rule: "These furies destroyed everything in the neighbourhood, and were driven to constant plunderings, because they did not cultivate the land. Captives in war were taken as husbands."\(^{16}\)
European paintings and drawings of Njinga also emerged in the centuries after her death and building on the tropes found in Cavazzi’s paintings. The most widely circulated of these is Achille Devéria’s from 1830 – a drawn portrait in which Njinga wears a crown on her head, while her torso is covered by only a cloak held up over her shoulder by a pin resembling a jeweled rose. Around her neck is what appears to be a pearl necklace. Despite the seemingly unassuming regal attire, characteristic of European royalty, her exposed breast serves to render her as a sexual other – an integral component to the consistent racialization of women of African descent in European imperial imaginaries, past and present. In this sense, the painting enacts the colonial discursive confluence of hypersexuality or sexual accessibility with epistemic deviance that has marked colonized bodies in general and Black women in particular.

**Anti-colonial and diasporic assemblages**

Njinga did not exist solely in European imperial systems of representation, however. Anti-colonial movements and sentiment during the last century of Portuguese colonialism kept alive, or in some cases recovered, a version of Njinga’s life and actions more similar to her documented biography. After the fall of Ndongo, Matamba, and other Kimbundu-speaking kingdoms in the northwestern region of current-day Angola, stories of Njinga’s resistance to the Portuguese endured among residents living under Portuguese rule. As organized anti-colonial movements emerged in the mid-twentieth century, so too did consolidated anti-colonial systems of representation and national discourse that also looked to undergird a unified struggle against the Portuguese that traversed regions, ethnic groups, and language.

Angolan political sovereignty, won and declared in 1975, saw the integration of anti-colonial recoveries of Njinga into official national discourse and disseminated in public education and state-run media. A host of prominent cultural producers with ties to the postcolonial ruling party, the People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), also released different products revolving around Njinga’s resistance against the Portuguese. As cultural scholar Inocência Mata argues, this postcolonial articulation of Njinga in the MPLA-ruled public sphere was about more than fomenting a decolonial system of historical signifiers; it was also “a strategy of constructing a ‘grandiose narrative,’ characteristic of nationalist ideologies.” She points out notable cases, including a 1960 poem by Angola’s first president and MPLA leader, Agostinho Neto, shortly after his arrest by Portuguese authorities on suspicion of political dissidence. In the poem “The Raising of the Flag,” the poetic “I” dreams of liberation from prison and returning to an Angola fighting for independence. The poem effectively utilizes Njinga and Ngola Kiluanje kia Samba, founder of Ndongo, as early ancestors of a precolonial sovereignty and an anti-colonial lineage of resistance of which MPLA fighters are the heirs. Though the poem does not make explicit reference to the MPLA over other movements, the combination of “soldiers” and “poets” in the stanza mentioned conveys the makeup of the MPLA movement, formed by urban colonized elites (including colonial literati) and white colonists in favor of Angolan independence.

Ties between Njinga and the MPLA were made more explicit in Manuel Pedro Pecavira’s novel *Nzinga Mbandi*, published in 1975. Mata considers that “based on the novel’s title, one can surmise that its intention was to initiate an inversion of the Portuguese colonial image of an African queen bordering the sub-human based on her supposed cannibalism and cruelty.” For her, this apparent intervention against imperial historicity and knowledge is complicated by the novel’s paratext – its epigraph. In this regard, Mata highlights Pecavira’s dedication of the novel to the MPLA army, known as FAPLA (People’s Armed Forces of Liberation of Angola), which
establishes a historical connection between MPLA anti-colonial resistance and that of Njinga three centuries earlier. This connection notably leaves out the numerous other anti-colonial movements in Angola that resisted the Portuguese, thus positing and legitimizing the MPLA, the postcolonial ruling party, as the principal agent of liberation and revolutionary heirs to Njinga. Therefore, Njinga became part of a postcolonial revolutionary mythology allied to the party’s promises and initial policies of nationalization, wealth redistribution, and worker rights.

In the decades following independence, Njinga would continue to be a prevalent symbol of precolonial national glory and resistance against the forces of Empire (whether colonialism or late capitalism). MPLA rhetoric and initiatives have foregrounded Njinga’s legacy (while placing the party as part of this legacy) at exceptional moments of Angolan post-independence history, in triumph and to combat insurgency against a party that has since abandoned Marxist policies in practice, giving rise to a small urban millionaire/billionaire class with close and often familial ties to MPLA leadership. In 2002, a large statue of Njinga was erected in downtown Luanda, funded by the MPLA, to mark the 27th anniversary of independence. The year is also relevant because it marked the end of an almost 30-year civil war (beginning before independence) following the death of Jonas Savimbi, leader of UNITA (Union for the Total Independence of Angola), formerly supported by the United States and apartheid South Africa, and long posited by the MPLA as an enemy of Angolan independence and ally of Western capitalism.

As the twenty-first century has seen the growth of economic inequality in Angola and state-backed monopolies, protest and unrest against the MPLA has also intensified. With this have come severe cases of state repression and incarceration of dissidents, which have overlapped with continued national narratives of anti-colonial lore. It is in this context that Njinga has once again been highlighted in the public sphere, in the shape of the 2013 film Njinga: Rainha de Angola [Njinga: Queen of Angola]. The film’s production has notable ties to the MPLA and directly to then president José Eduardo dos Santos, who served from 1979 to 2017 and whose family members have accumulated substantial wealth and international political power. His son, José Paulino dos Santos, better known by his artist name, Coreón Dú, produced Njinga: Queen of Angola, and through his own production company, Semba Comunicações. Therefore, the MPLA’s articulation of national history temporarily dovetails with, and arguably occurs in relation to, the growing public unrest from an economically disenfranchised majority.

In addition to being produced and released via political ties to the ruling party, Njinga: Queen of Angola deploys colonial stereotypes of precolonial African societies and cultural practices while simplifying otherwise complex structures of Ndongo government. The film nonetheless offers an important and highly disseminated revision of colonial representations of Njinga. An early battle scene against a Portuguese brigade shows Njinga leading her military to victory from the front lines, attacking soldiers with an axe and shield. The film begins with the death of her father, Mbande a Ngola, at the hands of traitors whom she suspects of having conspired with the Portuguese and her brother’s rise to power. As her brother and eventual king, Ngola Mbande, lays claim to the throne, arguing that Ndongo needs a man with a warrior spirit to fight the Portuguese, one of the leaders retorts: “What about Njinga? She is a greater warrior than Mbande.”20 In this regard, whereas European accounts of Njinga posited her gender insubordination21 as a sign of racialized monstrosity, the film’s writers incorporate such transgressiveness into the formation of a national hero. Similarly, the cruelty that had been such an integral component of European representations is transformed in the film, as she is configured as a noble savior of the kingdom with “purity and honesty of heart.”22 Even her brother and the Portuguese laud her noble character traits. Furthermore, she is alibied from any involvement in her brother’s death, though not without suspicions after she assumes power.
Also of note is the film’s treatment of her sexuality, particularly with regard to historical accounts of her possession of male concubines. Instead, the film develops a romantic relationship between Njinga and Ngola Mbande’s fictionalized assistant, Jaga Kasa Kongola. The relationship develops in the film through performances of heterosexual masculine chivalry by which Kasa Kongola courts Njinga, offering gifts as the film’s score introduces light piano keys for romantic effect. On the one hand, one can argue that this screenwriting choice undoes colonial inscriptions of Njinga as a hypersexual and abject threat to masculinity. On the other hand, this decision places Njinga into a matrix of compulsory cisgenderism, monogamy, and heterosexuality that is at the core of imperial notions of valid personhood. This revision of her sexual life thus appears to be a prerequisite for the construction of a Black female hero in an articulation of modern postcolonial nationhood that does not disturb patriarchal orders of power and bodies. In this regard, the film’s radical potential is limited to the inscription of a figure of anti-colonial resistance while nonetheless mitigating Black women’s agency into the confines of imperial patriarchal notions of valid personhood. Although their romance does not last long after Kasa Kongola accuses her of killing Ngola Mbande and the latter’s son in order not to threaten her right to the throne, the romance is once again reestablished during the film’s final scene, when they lock eyes from afar during the celebration marking Njinga’s defeat of Ngola Hari and reassertion of control over Ndongo.

The film aims at a decolonial epistemology that nonetheless forecloses particular revisions of race, gender, and sexuality as they intersect with one another. In this sense, one can argue that the film, in reshaping Njinga’s sexuality and gender performativity, prevents her from operating as a site of a more radical Black feminist epistemology whereby repertoires of racialized and gendered behaviors can be revised, acting as a fomenter of “knowledge that fosters empowerment and social justice.” Such hegemonically sanctioned repertoires continue to inform the pathologization and systemic oppression of particular identities.

Conclusion

Njinga has also been recovered and maintained within diasporic Black feminist archives over the last century, in which her life and legacy have been circuited toward a deeper dismantling of Empire and the articulation of decolonial knowledge production. This is best exemplified by the poem “Song of Love and Respect for Queen Ana de Souza,” by Afro-Cuban poet Georgina Herrera, published in 1978. Herrera opens more radical possibilities for future inscriptions of Njinga by focusing on her relentless struggle against Empire. In centralizing Njinga in her articulation of the African diaspora, Herrera conveys diaspora as a space of counter-hegemonic renegotiation and reinvention, utilizing Njinga in her own development of a Black feminist epistemology that is global and trans-temporal. Herrera’s poem also intervenes in a particular historical moment in which the Cuban nation-state resists the forces of Empire at home and through military, social, and infrastructural collaboration with recently independent Angola, supporting the MPLA independence movement and nation-building process against the US-backed and South Africa–backed UNITA during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Herrera renders Njinga’s legacy through a lexicon of unfixity tied to resistance against overlapping forces of Empire and patriarchy, with “strong wind,” “furious flame,” and “never prisoner” marking resistance to both the physical and economic apparatuses of Empire as well as against its epistemological mechanisms that endeavor to confine the body and being of Herrera’s evoked Black female subject. While the archives of European imperialism have contorted her life and body into its racialized and gendered tenets of white supremacy, anti-colonial and diasporic archives...
of her life and legacy have emerged in the last century. The latter continue to grow and are constituted by different images varying in degrees of radical potential. These can be found not only in the realms of cultural production but also in scholarly interventions reclaiming African queer histories and epistemologies.

For instance, the aforementioned work of Murray and Roscoe places Njinga as a key figure in the articulation of a queer African history and a radical queering of how gender and sexuality have been understood in different times and spaces across Africa, especially through the Western imperial lens of heteronormativity and cisgenderism. Though their assertion of the Ndongo Kingdom as a matrilineal society is a topic of debate among historians, and the European travel narratives cited can be further problematized, Murray and Roscoe’s analysis of Njinga’s life sheds important light on how Njinga’s insubordination toward European gender norms “was not some personal idiosyncrasy but was based on beliefs that recognized gender as situational and symbolic as much as a personal, innate characteristic of the individual.” The reconfiguration of Njinga’s life through queer critiques and epistemologies delinks gender performance from European imperialist knowledges and reclaims gender as a fluid everyday social practice rather than a fixed and essentialized trait as trafficked by Empire. In becoming part of different colonial and anti-colonial assemblages, Njinga has been repeatedly translated from reality and into narratives and images that serve both the reproduction of Empire as well as different models of resistance and emergent epistemologies of radical engagement.

Notes

1 Throughout this chapter, I will use this spelling of her name, as it corresponds to the orthographic rules of Kimbundu placed in effect in Angola in 1980.
3 For the most thorough historical interrogation of Queen Njinga’s life and legacies, see Linda M. Heywood. Njinga of Angola: Africa’s Warrior Queen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).
4 Heywood, Njinga of Angola, 45.
5 Ibid., 12.
7 Heywood, Njinga of Angola, 59.
8 Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex” (New York: Routledge, 1993).
11 Ibid.
13 Gaeta, Meravigliosa, 228.
15 Hegel, Lectures, 101.
16 Ibid.
(Anti-)colonial assemblages

21 Butler, Bodies that Matter.
22 Njinga: Rainha de Angola, min. 8.
25 Murray and Roscoe, Boy-Wives, 2.