When did the intimate dialogue between Africa, Europe, and the America’s begin? Looking back, it seems as if these three continents have always been intertwined. There is ample proof to argue that, from the very beginning, they have been decisive in each other’s development in many different ways.\(^1\) Europe created its own modern identity by using Africa as a mirror, but Africans were travelers before Europe’s age of discovery: there is evidence suggesting that they had even sailed to the America’s, and they are said to have visited Europe long before Christ. Other studies, such as Bernal’s *Black Athena*, explain how African cultures lay at the root of European culture: they shaped Egyptian culture (which can be said to be African in a strictly geographical sense, as well as in the sense of its own cultural heritage), and this informed the classical Mediterranean cultures on which, to a great extent, European cultures based themselves.\(^2\) Nowadays this intertwining has become an inescapable reality of the world’s cultures. Africa emerges as a highly visible presence in the Americas, and African-American styles capture Europe’s youth, many of which are of (North-) African descent.

The point we want to make is not so much that the studies on the African presence on the world stage offer powerful arguments for a critique of traditional Eurocentric views of the continents as essentially different from each other. They do offer valuable arguments; but they have already become participants in complex debates about the exact role of Africa in the global past, and about the relevance of that history for present-day debates. We will not enter that important field of inquiry here. Rather, our point is that these studies and debates testify to a deep desire to see the continents as essentially, radically intertwined. This desire motivates some scholars’ enthusiasm about studies that propose to define Europe as partly African (see above), or Africa as Western (as parts of Africa were regarded as part of the Roman Empire), or Africa as embracing Arabia (Mazrui).

This desire is worth a closer look. It has partly come about in specific, African responses to Europe’s anxious insistence on its own autonomy, and partly in response...
to Eurocentric, racial definitions of Africa. Recently, however, the emphasis on the inti-
mate relations between Africa and its others has been taken up into a more general
discourse about the world’s interrelatedness. Many European and American scholars
are eagerly participating in scholarly discussions on globalization and postcoloniality,
finding in key-concepts such as hybridity a welcome liberation from the dualist models
which put them on the side of colonizing powers. The desire for a discourse of inter-
relatedness is part of a welcome change of perspective within the academy. It can be
productive, but we also long to question it. Are the discourses on globalization and those
on hybridity really the ideal context for a shared exploration of the nature of African-
European-American relations? Does this context stimulate a truly intercontinental
intellectual debate?

A response to these major questions should begin with a re-examination of the
cultural and intellectual interaction between Africa and its significant others. While it
is true that the continents have been implicated in each other’s histories, it is also true
that, from the ages of exploration and slavery onwards, these intercontinental contacts
have often been violent. In the 21st century, this entanglement is still both productive
and destructive. The three continental economies, for example, are intertwined in ways
that are disastrous for Africa. This situation is not only inevitably the background for
the intercontinental academic exchange, it also informs its very contents. Africa’s
academic infrastructure is often inadequate, and therefore incapable of supplying African
scholars with enough academic means to consistently develop African insights into
theories that respond to African agendas. Instead, African discourses are taken up
by academics outside of Africa, in the US and Europe, where they are translated to fit
in with their cultural and academic agendas (Schipper 166-68). The result is that the
debates between Africa, Europe and the Americas are unevenly matched, and the dom-
ingeering Western discourses of postcolonialism and globalization offer little room for
critical African contributions. African intellectuals often criticize the culturalist tenden-
cies within these debates, which make it hard to conceive of Africa as a real eco-
nomical, political and cultural space, with its own specific interests. Fortunately, not
only generalists participate in these global debates. African, American and European
students of Africa, Africanists in the most positive sense of the term, offer their own,
well-informed insights and critiques.

This book situates itself right in the middle of the tensions between the different
positions within the debates on postcoloniality and globalization. In the process, it seeks
to emphasize the productive role played by Africanists from all continents in the all
too generalist, dominant discourses on globalization today. One of these is Dutch
Africanist and literary scholar Mineke Schipper, a pioneering figure in this field, who
has always insisted on the need for acknowledging and respecting the specific cultural
and theoretical perspectives of Africans, while, at the same time, warning against the
exoticist perception of Africans as Europe’s counterpart. Throughout her career,