



The Afropolitan Idea: New Perspectives on Cosmopolitanism in African Studies

Sarah Balakrishnan*

Harvard University

Abstract

This essay locates the concept of Afropolitanism, introduced in the mid-2000s by Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi, inside a longer historiography on cosmopolitanism in Africa. Used to describe the multifarious ways that Africa is enmeshed in the world, today 'Afropolitanism' connects Africa's global metropolises, transnational cultures and mobile populations under a single analytic term, signifying the radical diversity that Africa possesses now and has throughout history. This essay argues that the idea of Afropolitanism has impacted theory on Africa in two ways. First, instead of regarding pluralism as a threat to state stability, Africa's cosmopolitan cities and zones are now thought to be harbingers of a new post-racial political future; rather than supposing that states will progressively coalesce into defined nations, as per the organic analogy, ethnically heterogeneous states are increasingly upheld as 'modern'. Second, Afropolitanism marks a radical shift from a longer history of black emancipatory thought. Contra 20th century Pan-African and Afrocentrist endeavours to create a civilization based on the 'African Personality', proponents of Afropolitanism instead propose a world in which there can be no centre for Africa, no cultural integrity, only networks and flows.

Following the 1980s turn to cultural history, scholars of African cities and societies have paid increasing attention to the complex ways that Africans manufacture their identities and lives, worlds and socialities. In the 1990s, a rising interest in global connections (also known as 'the global turn') occurred at the same time as Africa's topography was radically transformed by the end of the Cold War, the fall of numerous state dictatorships, and the increased mobility of people and business in and out of Africa. The concept of cosmopolitanism, used by scholars to describe these changes, coalesced a number of interrelated ideas: urbanism, pluralism, globalization and a universalism similar to Immanuel Kant's use of the term.¹ The 'cosmopolitan turn', coinciding with the new wave of optimism generated by media on Africa in the early 2000s, signalled a shift in longstanding attitudes towards the diversity of people and cultures within Africa's states.² Whereas during the era of decolonization from the 1950s–70s, scholars often looked at the numerous tribes in Africa as a risk to the nation-state's stability, today's scholarship on cosmopolitanism advances Africa's pluralistic societies as vanguards of potentially post-racial futures.

The term Afropolitanism, which now encompasses a large subset of cosmopolitan studies, was effectively invented twice in the mid-2000s. Although scholars have typically attributed the neologism to the Ghanaian novelist Taiye Selasi's 2005 essay 'Bye-Bye Babar',³ scholarship inside South African circles saw the term circulating earlier.⁴ In a conversation between scholar Sarah Nuttall and anthropologist Mark Gevisser in 2004, for example, Gevisser remarked that Johannesburg could be called 'an Afropolitan city ... a place where you can eat *fufu* or Swahili curry or *pap en vleis*'.⁵ This use of the term, meaning a pluralism of African cultures in one geographical space, was later expanded by theorist Achille Mbembe in a 2007 essay 'Afropolitanism' wherein he described Afropolitanism as 'the presence of the elsewhere in the here', the 'interweaving of

worlds' caused by the movement of Black and non-Black people in, out and throughout Africa.⁶ There could be no such thing, he argued, as African authenticity in a continent so connected physically and historically to other parts of the world. In this sense, Johannesburg was 'the centre of Afropolitanism par excellence ... a metropolis built on ... multiple racial legacies'.⁷

Taiye Selasi's use of the term, by contrast, was to name a generation of the diaspora whose parents had left Africa in the 1960s–70s and who had consequently grown up between several global metropolises, speaking multiple languages, engaging with both African and non-African cultures.⁸ Yet because she and Mbembe deployed a similar vocabulary to describe Afropolitanism as a new form of transnational 'African modernity', scholars have treated them as if they were in conversation, although this was not likely the case.⁹ Nevertheless, both figures created an image that scholars and artists have together found alternately provocative and objectionable: an African modernity that seeks to let go of an essential 'Africanness', to dissolve 'Africa' into the world.

This essay argues two points: first, that the turn to cosmopolitanism initiated by scholars in the 1990s has, in African studies, reversed an important train of thought towards pluralism and the state. The organic analogy, which posited that states slowly coalesce from many multifarious elements into one nation (as built off the European model of feudalism to statehood), has turned around to uphold a state which, beginning as a homogenous germ, steadily grows more complex, heterogeneous and worldly. The result is that cosmopolitan societies are thought to be more politically sophisticated, a form of universalism believed to develop from the close elision of cultures. Second, the concept of Afropolitanism advanced by Mbembe and Selasi has been a radical break with a longer intellectual history of emancipatory politics in African studies. Pan-Africanism and Afrocentrism, two important movements in Black politics since at least the 19th century, found their power and sustenance in a racial solidarity underpinned by a determinedly non-European epistemology – a way of seeing, being and thinking through the world that was uniquely 'African'.

In its most principled form, Afrocentrism contended that a common humanity could only be created if the Other, in this case the Black or African, was so radically Other, so uncompromisingly themselves, that engaging them would mean surmounting seemingly unsurmountable difference. Afropolitanism, by contrast, is in Mbembe's words, 'the ability to recognize one's face in that of a foreigner ... to domesticate the unfamiliar'.¹⁰ It imagines a future where difference is so superfluous that abject difference, the Other, breaks down entirely. It is in this sense that Afropolitanism marks a radical turn in the history of Black emancipatory thought.

Cosmopolitan Africa: A Historiography to 1990

In the 1990s, the study of African cosmopolitanism grew out of, and against, the legacy of the African 'tribe' – politically primitive, ahistorical and self-perpetuating, determinedly local. It was assumed by early anthropologists that tribes reproduced the same social configurations from generation to generation, and that by studying them, scholars could gain insight into the elementary building blocks of human society. Famed structural-functionalist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown was pioneering to argue in the 1950s that a multiracial city ought to be studied as one structural system rather than separate systems conjoined by diffusion.¹¹ But in general, the possibility of studying Africa's multiethnic communities, even cities like Nairobi or Dakar, was precluded by the myopic approach of early ethnographers who surveyed what appeared to them as bounded communities, transcending both time and change.¹²

The 1940s, however, called several of these suppositions into question. For both colonial officers and anthropologists, it became increasingly impossible to ignore the effect that the

colonial economy had on Africans' social structures. Indirect rule, installed by figures such as Lord Lugard and Donald Cameron, had cleaved village from city, rural from urban and sequestered so-called tribes into 'ethnic homelands' whose migrations were tightly controlled by the colonial government. The effect was a veritable set of transformations in the socio-spatial relationships of kinship – or what anthropologists had called 'social change' and what colonial planners feared was 'detribalization'.¹³ The multi-ethnic city was conceptualized by colonists not as estuaries of coexisting pluralism but as a domain in which ethnicity would gradually erode, imperilling the colonial project by transforming its exploited labourers into a unified class.¹⁴

It is only in more recent scholarship, since the 1990s, that colonial cities have been investigated as cosmopolitan spaces. Certainly, they were not universalist in any moral sense. But as nexuses for migrant labourers, imperial officers, families and immigrant diaspora, they were undeniably multiethnic, multiracial spaces where people constantly bridged colour lines to undermine the biopolitical order of colonial rule.¹⁵ For this reason, Mahmood Mamdani refers to civil law in cities (contrasted with customary law in villages) as a type of 'settler cosmopolitanism' – a set of legal strictures which were continuously retailored to maintain difference and control over people.¹⁶ With the rise of interest in the African city in the early 2000s, scholars have looked back on colonial cities and frontiers as areas for the study of pluralism. Yet it was not until the decolonization era that African pluralism took centre stage in scholarship, but then as a threat to state security.

The independence era in Africa coincided with the outbreak of many civil conflicts, notably the Biafran War in Nigeria, the Shifta war in Kenya and the campaign for Katanga's secession in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is a testament to the political-mindedness of that era's scholars that much of their work, from the 1960s–70s, focused on the anatomy of the state. One effect was a body of theory which explored the necessity of a unified nation.¹⁷ Pioneering in this vein were Leo Kuper and Michael Smith's 1969 volume *Pluralism in Africa*, Alvin Rabushka and Kenneth Shepsle's *Politics in Plural Societies* and Crawford Young's 1979 *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*.¹⁸ The question concerning the authors was why the state was unable to supersede other forms of identity – why pluralism impeded unification, and, at least in Rabushka and Shepsle's analysis, locked groups into competition over resources and power.

This issue was thought to be particularly grievous in Africa given that its borders, wantonly parcelled at the 1884–85 Berlin Conference, had spliced together many groups while dividing others. African pluralism was understood as the legacy of colonial rule: ill-wrought borders, tribal homelands forcibly ossifying populations, certain dialects legitimized over others by having been elevated into print. The argument that Africa's tribes were 'inventions', integral to the maintenance of colonial rule, was first articulated by Archie Mafeje in 1971 and grew to be commonplace in the 1980s, following Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's 1983 *Invention of Tradition*.¹⁹ In the words of A. Adu Boahen in 1987,

Because of the artificiality of these boundaries, each independent African state is made up of a whole host of different ethnocultural groups and nations having different historical traditions and cultures and speaking different languages. One can imagine, then, how stupendous the problem of developing the independent states of Africa into true nation-states is.²⁰

The problem of the postcolonial African state was believed to be conjunctive with the problem of the African nation, each one's grievances destabilizing the other.

Through the 1970s–80s, however, a refutation to this argument was a vein of scholarship demonstrating that Africa's societies had always been diverse, mobile and composite – that cosmopolitanism was indigenous. Seminal in this vein was Igor Kopytoff's 1987 volume *The African Frontier*, wherein he argued that African politics had always been pluralist because, with so much

land available to them, whenever there was a conflict, the offended party would leave to a new land and settle, often on the margins of the original society.²¹ Sometimes this new polity would remain an extension of the original. Other times it became sovereign and attracted dependents from other areas. Kopytoff argued that this pattern of political settlement was still prevalent in Africa, and it explained why colonial administrators and anthropologists had so often confronted societies that they could not recognize: those which seemed relatively new, an odd hodgepodge of other surrounding polities.

Nowhere was Africa's indigenous pluralism a more prevalent concept than the Eastern Swahili coast where Arab and Indian Ocean influence had been present for over a thousand years. The Swahili language speaks itself to its multicultural origins: it is a primarily Bantu language with a large number of Arabic loan words. Through the second half of the 20th century, the Eastern horn, more than anywhere in Africa, was referred to as 'cosmopolitan' for two reasons: first, that its multiracial, polyglot culture had developed inside a long history of urbanism and global trade; and second, that Islam, the primary religion of the Swahili coast, is associated with a kind of universalism.²² The fact that Islamic madrassas acted as transnational centres for literacy, that the *hajj* to Mecca every year permitted global Muslims to meet each other, and that the *umma* linked all Muslims into one world community, meant that it was easy to think of East Africa's coastal Muslim cities as more global, diverse and sophisticated than the hinterland.

The study of cosmopolitanism in Africa before the 1990s consequently encompassed two opposing trains of thought: those that saw pluralism as a legacy of colonial rule and a threat to state stability, and those that saw pluralism as a mode of political equilibrium which had long balanced diverse elements inside mobile, perpetually fragmenting African polities. The cosmopolitan turn in the 1990s linked these trains together: the conclusion of the 'postcolonial era' came via thinking of Africa as having always been so diverse, so mobile that legacies of 'difference' and 'Otherness' crafted by the colonial encounter could not perpetuate into the 21st century.

The Cosmopolitan Turn: Scholarship Since the 1990s

The 'cosmopolitan turn' swept through all fields in the humanities in the 1990s and early 2000s. Anthropologists, who were among the first to initiate the inquiry into cosmopolitanism, used the term to describe the cultural form that urbanism, globalization and migration was taking in a world radically transfigured by the end of the Cold War. For Africa, the fall of the Berlin Wall had provoked a wave of internal democratization movements, ousting former dictators and permitting unprecedented mobility for people and business in and out of the continent. Philosophers in the 1990s, however, were interested in cosmopolitan as a universalist thinking that they believed could be put in place after the Cold War – an ethic of responsibility that did not distinguish between people of one's own nation and those from another. I argue that these two definitions of 'cosmopolitan' came to inflect each other. Anthropologists examining multiracial neighbourhoods interpreted the pluralism therein as a sign of a burgeoning universalism. Philosophers, in turn, looked encouragingly on globalization as an architecture which made possible the installation of true cosmopolitan ethics.

The 'cosmopolitan turn' consequently marked an interrogation of the nation-state and its telology. Whereas in the 20th century, liberal scholars had focused on how to reconcile Africa's pluralist elements into one nation so as to put an end to intrastate conflict, scholarship of the 21st century emphasized, by contrast, the humanist possibility of global currents naturally breaking down barriers to inclusion, eroding ethnicities. The political teleology of the state was reversed: instead of states being expected to gradually coalesce into unified nations, those which did not open themselves to diversity were thought to have erected unnatural barriers to worldly contact.

Pluralist, multiracial zones became objects of study for the possibility of their futurist politics. Africa, then, instead of being a tapestry of failing nation-states, became the harbinger of a new world order – a politics of mediating between many countervailing mobile identities.

The academic turn towards cosmopolitanism began in the early 1990s off the heels of a number of texts released by important scholars: K.A. Appiah, Ulf Hannerz, Martha Nussbaum, Walter Dignolo, David Harvey, Homi Bhabha and others.²³ In African studies, K.A. Appiah, in a 1997 article, was a key figure bridging the gap between philosophy and political ethnography. His later 2006 book *Cosmopolitanism* detailed a method for creating a universalist ethic which relied on the kind of on-the-ground cosmopolitanism that interested anthropologists and historians: multiracial urbanism, transnational migrations and the globalization of certain cultural materials.²⁴ Each of these features facilitated for Appiah ‘conversations across boundaries of identity’ – an ‘imaginative’ process which awoke one to other possible worlds, lives and people.²⁵ In other words, in order to care about the world, it helped to viscerally interact with it.

The fact that Appiah interlaced philosophical universalism with pluralism-as-experienced prompted others to follow him, and consequently there came a close, if not assumed, association between the two concepts. Of course, contact theory had, for many scholars, provided a justification to interpret pluralism as a sign of philosophical universalism.²⁶ However, some scholars were explicit about their inheritance of the concept from Appiah. Derek Peterson, for example in his *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival* began by explicating Appiah’s cosmopolitan ethics, and then ventured to study what he called the ‘infrastructure of cosmopolitanism’ – the technologies by which people adopted extra-local forms of belonging.²⁷

These forms of belonging which were not local, yet not obviously Western, were what ethnographers of the 1990s and early 2000s identified as a cosmopolitan self-styling. James Ferguson’s 1999 *Expectations of Modernity* was groundbreaking in his account of how migrant workers on the Zambian Copperbelt fashioned themselves according to different fabrics of belonging in their home villages or urban workplaces.²⁸ Identifying a sharp cleavage between what he called ‘localist’ and ‘cosmopolitan’ styles, he argued that those who fashioned themselves according to local custom had comparatively more ties to their village. By contrast, those who opted for a pell-mell cosmopolitan style were typically workers who had less connections to home, those for whom migration had loosened their social grounding.

In Ferguson’s cosmopolitanism, there was thus a marked ambivalence that is, in many respects, characteristic of scholarship on the new African city. On the one hand, the postcolonial African metropolis is seen to offer new forms of belonging and community to its often foreign, temporary inhabitants. On the other hand, the city also foments displacement, precarity and loss. Scholarship on the African city rose in the 1990s alongside the global and cosmopolitan turns, paying particular attention to the new estuaries of life that cities both made possible and imperilled. Cosmopolitanism, in the context of this scholarship, signalled the porous capacity of urban belongings to take in and remake strangers. AbdouMalik Simone’s work, for example, examined Dakar as a city which still cohered through principles of Islamic universalism – belonging to the *umma*, or the Sufi institution of providing lodging via the *zawiyyah*.²⁹ Loren Landau similarly wrote that migrant workers in Southern Africa engendered a certain ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ by forging tensile communities of intimacy in a city marked by threats of impoverishment, deportation or xenophobic violence.³⁰

In a sense, the cosmopolitanism that urban anthropologists have studied ‘on the ground’ is not quite Kantian, nor quite Appiah’s paradigm, although it nonetheless appears to speak to a kind of humanistic universalism. To turn to an insight made by Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*, if the Enlightenment’s legacy was to posit that people were unified according to reason – that ‘reason, by focusing the mind on the general and the universal, would guide the individual’s passions into its rightful place in the social realm’ then what perhaps distinguishes

the pluralism fascinating today's anthropologists is the provocative suggestion that a common universalism can be born out of sentiment.³¹ Friendships and intimacies can draw people across boundaries, without the need for the central reason that Enlightenment theorists had believed was imperative to the formation of political communities. In this sense, the anthropologists' cosmopolitanism appears to lie tantalizingly outside of Enlightenment rationale.

The Afropolitan Idea

To understand the intervention that Afropolitanism made in today's scholarship, it is necessary first to take a closer look at the two essays which provoked global audiences: Taiye Selasi's 2005 'Bye-Bye Babar' and Achille Mbembe's 2007 'Afropolitanism'. Selasi, now a notable novelist, witnessed her *LIP Magazine* essay veritably launch her career. Within two years of publication, 'Bye-Bye Babar' was reprinted by the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town and the Nigerian *Daily Nation*. In the following decade, numerous exhibits on Afropolitanism had opened in galleries from South Africa to the US and the UK, facilitated by publications like *Afropolitan Magazine* and *Ms. Afropolitan*. Although some texts mentioned Mbembe as a founder (or co-founder) of the Afropolitan idea, far more attributed origin to Selasi's essay. The question for us, then, is: what about Selasi's essay could have provoked this response?

From 'Bye-Bye Babar', it is possible to distill two main ideas. First, the term 'Afropolitan' was used by Selasi to describe the diaspora generation whose parents had left the continent in the 'brain drain' of the 1960s–70s, and who had consequently moved across many different Western metropolises, provoking a heterogeneous sense of heritage. As Selasi typified:

This one lives in London but was raised in Toronto and born in Accra; that one works in Lagos but grew up in Houston, Texas ... Some of us are ethnic mixes ... others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos.³²

'Afropolitan', in these terms, meant 'cosmopolitan' in the pluralist sense.

However, Selasi also used the word to imply a particular kind of modernity. Afropolitanism was a phenomenon that she located specifically to her generation because the globalism of their youth had, according to her, liberated them from antiquated African stereotypes. No longer could the African diaspora be represented as a 'scattered tribe of pharmacists, physicists ... and the odd polygamist'; instead, the Afropolitans chose jobs in art, music, politics, or design, preferring the creative high society to fields traditionally reserved for immigrants. They lived in the metropolitan capitals of the world, 'achieving things [their] "people" in the grand sense only dreamed of'. Their generation, according to Selasi, signalled the arrival of a modernity which occluded stereotypes previously put forth by Western media.

Selasi's essay drew in equal parts ire and praise from the African arts community. On the one hand, her discussion of multiple African belongings resonated with many in the diaspora, spawning a branch of literary scholarship devoted to exploring 'Afropolitanism'.³³ On the other, her claim that today's diaspora youth were the unique saviours of Africa's image drew the rebuke of many.³⁴ Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina, for example alleged that Selasi's view was fundamentally classist; she reserved modernity exclusively for a population who was wealthy enough to travel around the world.³⁵ Yet more centrally, what Selasi had argued was that Africa's new modern image should let go of a cultural integrity: instead, the future lay on the shoulders of those 'cultural mutts' with their 'European affect' and 'African ethos'.

In this respect, she and Mbembe's essays closely elided, causing some of the confusion over whether they wrote collaboratively. Mbembe's 2007 essay 'Afropolitanism', first appearing in the Johannesburg Art Gallery's catalogue *Africa Remix*, also contended that the meaning of

'being African' had to be dislodged from race, nativist traditions and be opened to the flows of global networks and worldly hybridities. Yet, rather than locate this phenomenon to the era of the 1990s onward, Mbembe carefully explicated the ways that Africans had always been integrated in the world. There could never be an African cultural integrity to preserve, he argued, for the racial solidarity undergirding movements such as Pan-Africanism and *négritude*, not to mention 'African culture', rested on a fictionalized foundation of autochthony, which in too many ways was politically dangerous; autochthony had been the basis for innumerable conflicts since the colonial era. 'As soon as contemporary Africa awakens to the forms of multiplicity (including racial multiplicity) which are constituents of its identity,' Mbembe wrote, 'Negro solidarity alone becomes untenable.'³⁶

Mbembe's Afropolitanism, therefore, was a way of imagining an African identity which left its constitutive elements open-ended. He located the invention of Africa inside thousand-year processes of migration, intermixture and cultural transmission; the future, likewise, promised only more change and exchange. In some ways, Mbembe's Afropolitanism can be seen to answer the question that he himself had asked in his 2002 essay 'African Modes of Self-Writing'.³⁷ The problem with African liberation politics, he had there contended, was that it had never thought itself out of race. By taking blackness as its founding principle, it could not – as Sartre had challenged the *négritude* movement – drive itself to the point of dissolution; solidarity around race could not destroy race.³⁸ The refusal to step outside racial paradigms meant, for Mbembe, that African philosophers could not philosophize in a universalist way.

A similar critique had been levelled by Appiah a decade earlier in his essay collection *In My Father's House*, wherein he took the Pan-African leaders to task.³⁹ Like Mbembe, Appiah acknowledged that racial solidarity had once provided an important revolutionary basis for the decolonizing movement. However, today, he impressed, these theorists had to be set aside. They otherwise mired their followers in a regressive racial politics. Thus, contrary to what some scholars have written about Afropolitanism's relationship to Pan-Africanism,⁴⁰ the Afropolitan idea proposed by Selasi and Mbembe (and Appiah) seems to mark a radical break in the history of African emancipatory politics, instead of its continuation.⁴¹ By shifting away from a race-based epistemology, which undergirded both Pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism and *négritude*, proponents of Afropolitanism are leading the challenge that Mbembe had raised 15 years ago: to engage in universalist non-racial thought from an African perspective. Afropolitanism is both of Africa and the world.

Consequently, since its mid-2000s creation, Afropolitanism has become a useful concept for scholars, although not without certain dangers. Following Mbembe and Selasi, a train of world literature has been dedicated to theorizing Afropolitanism as a new mode of being in the world.⁴² Other academics have used the term to describe the kinds of transnational fissures through which cultures flow throughout Africa, transporting and transforming material like fashion, music and art.⁴³ Central to this process is the African city, which is thought to act as a hub for exchange while simultaneously generating much of its own bricolaged content. From the African metropolis, these scholars claim that one can think through worldly phenomena, including the tentative non-racialisms formed from its intermeshed races, ethnicities and cultures.⁴⁴

Yet this scholarship also risks creating a redemptive narrative for the societies guiltiest of historical violence. Invariably, the most 'cosmopolitan' areas in Africa are those which suffered the greatest colonial penetration, leaving behind white settler populations, imported Asian diaspora or a medley of African labourers brought to feed colonial industries. That a kind of multiracialism now therein exists is also an artefact of the forces which initially created its pluralism.

In South Africa, Afropolitanism has been used to offer a particular kind of post-apartheid redemption; it interprets the country's multiracial cities, like Durban or Johannesburg, as estuaries of the post-racial future, thus mapping their violent histories onto a teleology of racism-

to-universalism. Sarah Nuttall's work, in this way, is both revolutionary and exemplary. As she described xenophobic violence in Johannesburg's multiethnic Hillbrow:

Race and racism in Hillbrow are still beset with contradictions and anomalies ... [It is] a context in which the anti-apartheid struggle did not breed a ... respect for diversity, but which is nevertheless leading to the unofficial forging of the highly tensile beginnings of an "Afropolitanism".⁴⁵

This interpretation of Afropolitanism is, like many ethnographies, reliant on contact theory to substantiate its relationship to universalism. However, in the South African context, contact theory operates in fraught, difficult ways which often read the violence of intimate encounter as a transitional cost of cosmopolitan universalism. The logic is perhaps uniquely apartheid's legacy. The violence of apartheid was sheltered by the opacity of segregation. White people were kept apart from others, intentionally blinded to the suffering of apartheid.⁴⁶ Now, hope is anticipated in the postcolonial city's boundless possibility for contact.

Conclusion

This essay traced the historiography of cosmopolitanism in African studies. It contended that, first, the cosmopolitan turn, beginning in the 1990s and early 2000s, reversed prevailing theories on the relationship between ethnic pluralism and African nationhood. Instead of treating pluralism as a threat to state stability, scholars instead presented Africa's multiracial societies as harbingers of a futuristic post-racial order. Second, it argued that Afropolitanism, introduced separately by Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi in the mid-2000s, marked a radical shift in the history of African emancipatory politics. In different ways, both Selasi and Mbembe contended that a new African modernity could be achieved only by disavowing belief in African cultural integrity. There had never been an Africa free of racial diversity or global exchange; African theory thus needed to dispense with racial solidarity as its foundation. Consequently, Afropolitanism, contra Pan-Africanism or *négritude*, located its liberating potential inside the multifarious transnational exchanges of ideas and belongings occurring all over the continent but especially in the African metropolis. By studying these sites as futurist zones, the colonial city's violent pasts became also refocused as a precondition to post-racial universalism. The Afropolitan idea was an emancipatory one, claiming Africa as the future while simultaneously letting go of its colonial past.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the two anonymous History Compass editors for their comments, as well as Sarah Kennedy Bates, Buzz Klinger, Nana Osei-Opare, and Matthew Signer.

Notes

* Correspondence to: Sarah Balakrishnan, Robinson Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA, 02138. Email: sbalakrishnan@g.harvard.edu

¹ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*.

² August, 'Africa Rising'.

³ Selasi, 'Bye-Bye'.

⁴ Nuttall, 'City Forms'.

- ⁵ Nuttall and Gevisser, 'From the Ruins'.
- ⁶ Mbembe, 'Afropolitanism', 28.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 29.
- ⁸ Selasi, 'Bye-Bye Babar'.
- ⁹ Eze, 'Rethinking'; Ede, 'Politics'.
- ¹⁰ Mbembe, 'Afropolitanism', 28.
- ¹¹ Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure*, 201–202.
- ¹² See Moore and Vaughan, *Cutting Down Trees*, for a vivid explication.
- ¹³ Richards, *Economic Development*; Wilson and Wilson, *The Analysis*; Redfield, *Primitive World*.
- ¹⁴ Cooper, *African Waterfront*.
- ¹⁵ Cooper and Stoler, *Tensions*.
- ¹⁶ Mamdani, *Define and Rule*.
- ¹⁷ Cohen and Middleton, *Tribe*.
- ¹⁸ Kuper and Smith, *Pluralism*; Rabushka and Shepsle, *Politics*; Young, *Politics*.
- ¹⁹ Hobsbawm and Ranger, *Invention*; Mafeje, 'Tribalism'.
- ²⁰ Boahen, *African Perspectives*, 96.
- ²¹ Kopytoff, *African Frontier*.
- ²² Pearson, 'Indian Ocean', 43–44; Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent*; Voll, *Islam*, 11, 75.
- ²³ Appiah, 'Cosmopolitan Patriots'; Nussbaum, 'Patriotism'; Hannerz, 'Cosmopolitans'; Bhabha, 'Looking Back'; Mignolo, 'Many Faces'; Harvey, 'Cosmopolitanism'.
- ²⁴ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 85.
- ²⁶ Sennett, 'Cosmopolitanism'; Hall, 'Cosmopolitan Promises'.
- ²⁷ Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism*.
- ²⁸ Ferguson, *Expectations*.
- ²⁹ Simone, *For the City*.
- ³⁰ Landau, 'Living Within'; Landau and Freemantle, 'Tactical Cosmopolitanism'.
- ³¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 131.
- ³² Selasi, 'Bye-Bye Babar'.
- ³³ Fasselt, 'Nigeria'; Gehrman, 'Cosmopolitanism'.
- ³⁴ Fasselt, 'I'm not Afropolitan'; Dabiri, 'Why I am'.
- ³⁵ Bosch Santana, 2015, 'Exorcizing'.
- ³⁶ Mbembe, 'Afropolitanism', 29.
- ³⁷ Mbembe, 'African Modes'.
- ³⁸ Sartre, 'Orphée Noir'.
- ³⁹ Appiah, *In My Father's House*.
- ⁴⁰ Sterling, 'Race Matters'.
- ⁴¹ Mbembe and Balakrishnan, 'Pan-African Legacies'.
- ⁴² Wawrzinek and Makokha, *Negotiating Afropolitanism*.
- ⁴³ Batra, 'Worlding Sexualities'; Farber, 'Africanising Hybridity?'; Skinner, *Bamako Sounds*; Coetzee, 'Afropolitanism'.
- ⁴⁴ Mbembe and Nutall, *Johannesburg*; Calburn and Mbembe, 'Designs in Motion'.
- ⁴⁵ Nuttall, 'City Forms', 744.
- ⁴⁶ Krog, *Country of my Skull*.

Bibliography

- Appiah, K. A., 'Cosmopolitan Patriots', *Critical Inquiry*, 23/3 (1997): 617–639.
- Appiah, K. A., *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).
- Appiah, K. A., *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*. (Oxford UP: Oxford, UK, 1992).

- August, O., 'Africa Rising: A Hopeful Continent', in *The Economist*, (March 2, 2013) from: <http://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21572377-african-lives-have-already-greatly-improved-over-past-decade-says-oliver-august>
- Batra, K., 'Worlding Sexualities Under Apartheid: From Gay Liberation to a Queer Afropolitanism', *Postcolonial Studies*, (2016): 1–16.
- Bhabha, H., 'Looking Back, Moving Forward: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism', in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), ix–xxv.
- Boahen, A., *Adu, African Perspectives on Colonialism*. (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
- Bosch Santana, S., 'Exorcizing the Future: Afropolitanism's Spectral Origins', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 128/1 (2015): 120–126.
- Calburn, S. and Mbembe, A., 'Design in Motion? Urban Design and the Post-Apartheid City', *The Johannesburg Salon*, 3 (2010): 65–69.
- Chakrabarty, D., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000).
- Coetzee, C. (ed.), 'Afropolitanism: Reboot', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 1 (2016): 61–224.
- Cohen, R. and Middleton, J., *From Tribe to Nation in Africa: Studies in Incorporation Process*. (Scranton, PA: Chandler Publishing Company, 1970).
- Cooper, F., *On the African Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1987).
- Cooper, F. and Stoler, A., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Culture in a Bourgeois World*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
- Dabiri, E., 'Why I am (still) not an Afropolitan', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28/1 (2016): 104–108.
- Ede, A., 'The Politics of Afropolitanism', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28/1 (2016): 88–100.
- Eze, C., 'Rethinking African Culture and Identity: The Afropolitan Model', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 26/2 (2014): 234–247.
- Farber, L., 'Africanising Hybridity? Toward an Afropolitan Aesthetic in Contemporary South African Fashion Design', *Critical Arts*, 24/1 (2010): 128–167.
- Fasselt, R., "'I'm not Afropolitan – I'm of the Continent": A Conversation with Yewande Omotoso', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 50/2 (2015): 231–246.
- Fasselt, R., "'Nigeria" in the Cape: Afropolitanism and Alienation in Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy*', *Research in African Literatures* 46/2 (2015): 119–145.
- Ferguson, J., *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).
- Gehrmann, S., 'Cosmopolitanism with African Roots: Afropolitanism's Ambivalent Mobilities', *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 28/1 (2016): 6172.
- Hall, S., 'Cosmopolitan Promises, Multicultural Realities', in R. Scholar (ed.), *Divided Cities*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 20–51.
- Hannerz, U., 'Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 7/2 (1990): 237–251.
- Harvey, D., 'Cosmopolitanism and the Banality of Geographical Evils', *Public Culture*, 12/2 (2000): 529–564.
- Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T., *The Invention of Tradition*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1983).
- Kant, I., in P. Kleingeld (ed.), *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006).
- Kopytoff, I., *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987).
- Krog, A., *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa*. (New York: Time Books, 1999).
- Kuper, L. and Smith, M. G., 'Part I: Introduction', in L. Kuper and M. G. Smith (eds.), *Pluralism in Africa*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 3–6.
- Landau, L., 'Living Within and Beyond Johannesburg: Exclusion, Religion, and Emerging Forms of Being', *African Studies*, 68/2 (2009): 197–214.
- Landau, L., and Freemantle, I., 'Tactical Cosmopolitanism and Idioms of Belonging: Insertion and Self-Exclusion in Johannesburg', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 36/3 (2010): 375–390.
- Mafeje, A., 'The Ideology of Tribalism', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 9/2 (1971): 253–261.
- Mamdani, M., *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
- Mbembe, A., 'African Modes of Self-Writing', *Public Culture*, 14/1 (2002): 239–273.
- Mbembe, A., 'Afropolitanism', in Simon Njami and Lucy Durán (eds.), *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2007): 26–30.
- Mbembe, A., and Balakrishnan, S., 'Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures: A Conversation with Achille Mbembe', *Transition*, 120/1 (2016): 28–37.
- Mignolo, W., 'The Many Faces of Cosmo-Polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism', *Public Culture*, 12/3 (2000): 721–748.

- Moore, H., and Vaughan, M., *Cutting Down Trees: Gender, Nutrition and Agricultural Change in the Northern Province of Zambia, 1890–1990*. (Suffolk: James Currey Publisher, 1994).
- Nussbaum, M., 'Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism', in Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 3–20.
- Nuttall, S., 'City Forms and Writing the "Now" in South Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30/4 (2004), 731–748.
- Nuttall, S., and Mbembe, A. (eds.), *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008).
- Nuttall, S., and Gevisser, M., 'From the Ruins: The Constitution Hill Project', *Public Culture*, 16/3 (2004): 507–519.
- Pearson, M., 'The Indian Ocean and the Red Sea', in N. Levtzion and R. Pouwels (eds.), *History of Islam in Africa*. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2000).
- Peterson, D., *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c. 1935–1972*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Pouwels, R., *Horn and Crescent: Cultural Change and Traditional Islam on the East African Coast, 800–1900*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- Rabushka, A. and Shepsle, K., *Politics in Plural Societies*. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP, 1972).
- Radcliffe-Brown, A. R., *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952).
- Redfield, R., *The Primitive World and its Transformation*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1955).
- Richards, A., *Economic Development and Tribal Change*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1954).
- Sartre, J.-P., 'Orphée Noir', in L. Senghor (ed.), *Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poésie Nègre et Malgache de la Langue Française*. (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1948).
- Selasi, T., 'Bye-Bye Babar', in *The Lip*, (March 3, 2005), from: <http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>
- Sennett, R., 'Cosmopolitanism and the Social Experience of Cities', in S. Vertovec and R. Cohen (eds.), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 42–47.
- Simone, A. M., *For the City yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004).
- Skinner, R. T., *Bamako Sounds: The Afropolitan Ethics of Malian Music*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).
- Sterling, C., 'Race Matters: Cosmopolitanism, Afropolitanism, and Pan-Africanism via Edward Wilmot Blyden', *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 8/1 (2015): 119–145.
- Voll, J. O., *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994).
- Wawrzinek, J. and Makokha, J. K. S. (eds.), *Negotiating Afropolitanism: Essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010).
- Wilson, G. and Wilson, M., *The Analysis of Social Change: Based on Observations in Central Africa*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1945).
- Young, C., *The Politics of Cultural Pluralism*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976).