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Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures

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**Untitled (Positions Series Part II, VI).**

Charcoal, stencil, pastel, spray paint, watercolor, ink and collage on paper: 91.5 × 75 cm.  
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# Pan-African Legacies, Afropolitan Futures

a conversation with **Achille Mbembe**

## Sarah Balakrishnan

*AFROPOLITANISM IS A concept advanced by theorist and philosopher Achille Mbembe to describe the position of Africa and Africans in the global world. It is, as he elaborates, a new moment in practical philosophy for Africa—one that leaves Afrocentrism and Pan-Africanism to the annals of history. In April 2016, Sarah Balakrishnan spoke with Mbembe on the genealogy of this idea and its location inside the history of African political thought.*

**Sarah Balakrishnan:** Can you tell me about “Afropolitanism?” In 2007, you spoke of Afropolitanism as being something “beyond Pan-Africanism.” Then at the Africa Workshop at Harvard in February, 2016 you said that you thought Afropolitanism was also about allowing the free immigration of Africans inside Africa. So I see a kind of expansion of this idea.

**Achille Mbembe:** It’s a term that’s part of a set of reflections, most of which originate from my location in South Africa. I started thinking in those terms when I moved to South Africa—those terms which came out of a preoccupation about the place of Africa in the world. Afropolitanism refers to a way—the many ways—in which Africans, or people of African origin, understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart. Historically, Africa has been defined in the Hegelian paradigm as out of history, as not belonging to the world—as being some region of the planet which has no significance whatsoever in terms of the real history of the human in the world. But of course, that is not true. Afropolitanism is a name for undertaking a critical reflection on the many ways in which, in fact, there is no world without Africa and there is no Africa that is not part of it. So that’s the philosophical inflection of the term.

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**Balakrishnan:** Can you elaborate on how Afropolitanism is located with respect to Pan-Africanism?

**Mbembe:** Pan-Africanism, to a large extent, is a racial ideology. Afropolitanism is not, insofar as it takes into account the fact that to say “Africa” does not necessarily mean to say “black.” There are Africans who are not black. And not all blacks are African. So Afropolitanism emerges out of that recognition of the multiple origins of those who designate themselves as “African” or as “of African descent.” Descent here, or descendants, or genealogy, is a bit more than just biological or racial, for that matter. For instance, we have in Africa a lot of people of Asian or Indian origin. We have people who are Africans but they are Africans of European origin in South Africa, and other former settler colonies like Angola, Mozambique. We have Africans who are of Middle Eastern origin, for example in West Africa, Senegal, and Côte d’Ivoire. And more and more, we have Africans of Chinese origin. So Afropolitanism differs in that sense from Pan-Africanism because Pan-Africanism was fundamentally rooted in the idea of a belonging to a particular racial grouping, whether that’s via Marcus Garvey or others. This concept of Afropolitanism comes really from South Africa. I think that South Africa is, in that sense, from a theoretical point of view, a very rich laboratory for anyone who would like to think beyond the racial.

**Balakrishnan:** One reason that the idea of Afropolitanism attracted me was because I was reading a lot of the 1980s–1990s work on Afrocentrism, which really took hold in America; this idea that people like Molefe Kete Asante put to the forefront, which was that we need to create an ethno-centrally-based epistemology from which we narrate and think through the world. And of course, for African Americans that center was Africa. Asante basically said, even if we accept that all these African traditions were “invented” as per Terrence Ranger etc., it still matters that we have some kind of traditional or different base upon which one can think through our questions, because only when we get to a world in which there are multiple centers for narrating, thinking, or speaking can we reach a common humanity. That seems to be Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s thinking, as well. How do you think Afropolitanism figures into an idea of epistemological narration? Is it about thinking of Africa as a site through which these flows and networks

create multiple ruptures and disjunctions in which new ideas are created, or is there an idea of Africa which is letting go of creating its own center?

**Mbembe:** This is a very important and complex question. My take on this is the following: from a political, economic, military, and cultural point of view, of course Africa has to become its own center. It has to become its own force. Not as a way of separating itself from the rest of the world, but as a precondition for it to exercise its weight among other forces in the world. So for Africa to constitute itself as a force is something I am in agreement with. This having been said, it seems to me that from a purely historical point of view, what we call “Africa” is a bit more than just a geographical entity or a geographical accident, if only because Africa as such is not only a container of the broad history of the world, but also an agent in the making of that world, especially since the fifteenth century. Let’s take the modern world. Africa has been a major platform and also an agent in the making of the modern world order. And in that sense, it seems to me that what it has become can hardly be understood outside of its entanglement with multiple elsewhere—**Afropolitanism is a non-ethnocentric reading of all of this. It’s a planetary reading of our predicament. And it is to be understood within that broader project, rather than from the perspective of Afrocentricity.** an entanglement that has produced different outcomes, and not all of them are necessarily catastrophic. So my take in this is that these entanglements need to be the starting point of any epistemological proposition we want to make about this region of our planet. But I would go even further than that. I would argue that, in fact, what is important is, at this point in time, that there is a planetary turn of the African predicament. And that planetary turn of the African predicament should be the starting point of any epistemological project. If only because, to a large extent, the future of our planet might be played out on the African continent. So as you can see, Afropolitanism is a non-ethnocentric reading of all of this. It’s a planetary reading of our predicament. And it is to be understood within that broader project, rather than from the perspective of Afrocentricity.

**Balakrishnan:** I can see why you identify Afropolitanism as really taking place in South Africa. I was in Johannesburg in April, 2015 right after the removal of the Rhodes Statue and August, 2015 just before the protests. In these critical moments, one can see why this space has become a locus for the mass mobility of people, as you say, provoking the openings of what one might call “precarious liberation.” My question is: where is race in all



**Untitled (Positions Series Part II, IX).**

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of this? We can say that race becomes opened by Africa being in the world, by being this site of travel and exchange? Does the planetary turn towards Afropolitanism erode race, or make it more malleable? Or what happens?

**Mbembe:** From a sociological point of view, of course there's a recording of the racial that is going on. The racial hasn't disappeared as such; I don't know if it will ever disappear. But it's being recorded and renamed and repurposed for all kinds of political and individual projects. So what I'm interested in is these processes of recording and what

it is that they end up producing. Of course, what they end up producing are new sites of struggle, new sites of contestation, but also new sites of encounter, because the two always go together. In the particular case of South Africa, the specificity of South African histories of racism lies in the fact that South Africa was never like Australia or like the United States, or for that matter like Brazil. What I mean by this is that it was not

a place where elimination or the eradication of native populations ever actually occurred. It was not a kind of genocidal colonialism that was obtained, as it was in Australia. This means that, for their own survival, the settlers understood that they had to strike certain scales of dependency or co-dependencies with local indigenous populations. These scales of co-dependency were, of course, asymmetrical and exploitative, but nevertheless brought together the various racial groups in some form of entanglement and concatenation that is typical of South Africa. It seems to me that what is at stake now is the renegotiation of those levels of co-dependency and mutuality, if one wants to put it in those terms, all of which implies (if we listen to the actual social forces that are involved in these conversations) the end of so-called white supremacy and the possibility of a different redistribution of power and resources. But it seems to me that in this historical moment we live in, race is a part of it, but reconfigured. Racial struggles are giving way to entirely different forms of struggle. But there won't be a moment where, to put it crudely, whites will be thrown out of South Africa. Anyone who believes that is having a nightmare. It won't happen. Nor will it be that South Africa will go back to apartheid as we know it. So they have to find a different kind of *modus vivendi*. The terms of the new *modus vivendi* is what is actually being fought. But what did you have in mind when you brought in the question of race and Afropolitanism?

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**Balakrishnan:** Well, I have been thinking through why Afropolitanism strikes me as so different from Afrocentrism or Pan-Africanism. You can

even say that Afrocentrism belongs inside the Pan-African canon; they are not mutually exclusive, although they are distinct.

**Mbembe:** But Afrocentricity, if one was to be a bit naughty, is really a form of epistemic counter-racism. The very interesting person on this note is Cheikh Anta Diop, who believed that science basically was rational but that there was an ideological dimension of science, and also a mythological dimension of science. Science is the myth that the dominant elites or groups managed to impose on everyone else. It's not really a matter of truth and falsity. It's a matter of a dominant way of make-believe

**There's a moment when French, English, or even Portuguese are no longer foreign languages. These are African languages.**

that a group or an imperial power manages to impose on those under its subjection. So this being the case, Diop's idea was that if it's a mythology, we can articulate a mythology just as powerful as the other—a counter-mythology in these big struggles of one myth against another. Concretely, it meant that if they want to hit us with Greek mythology, let's hit them with Egyptian mythology. So you have myth against myth. And I think Afrocentricity is part of that mythological structure.

**Balakrishnan:** I agree. I also think the most charitable forms of Afrocentrism deal with a question that Afropolitanism has a different answer to. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o has a text called *Moving the Centre*—and this title implies the actual spatial idea of center that so configures these works. When we get to Afropolitanism, by contrast, we're talking about "flows," about "networks," about a different spatial metaphor.

**Mbembe:** Yes. Afropolitanism is a geography of circulation and mobility. Ngũgĩ's concept is really one of territoriality.

**Balakrishnan:** Exactly. I think the major contribution of Afrocentrism is the idea that to be able to understand someone who is culturally distinct from you, who operates from a different *center*, you have to *translate*. And this idea of translation is actually a movement into a lacuna between the centers—a kind of no man's land—and it requires forfeiting something of yourself to enter. This seems to be, again, at its most charitable, the foundation for the Afrocentrist idea of a common humanity. It is an extractive process of translation. Whereas Afropolitanism really seems to be a break because it's not about the lacuna between the centers. It's instead a hypermobility where we're not talking about translation because no language remains stable enough that translation can take an extractive effect.

**Mbembe:** Yes, exactly. And it allows us to say, contrary to our dear friend Ngũgĩ, that English or French—there's a moment where they become

African languages! That's an argument one can make today: There's a moment when French, English, or even Portuguese are no longer foreign languages. These are African languages. And with the way in which they are practiced in the continent, you can read a Francophone novel, but it's a linguistic formation that is not typically French. It's something new. It's something—let's use that old term—*hybrid*. And therefore, the concept of the “center” should be kept open at the minimum.

**Balakrishnan:** The last thing I'll ask on this note is about the city. So much is currently being written about the African city and, of interest to us, the idea of “the moving center.” Abdou Maliq Simone and Filip de Boeck were recently in conversation about the way African city centers are being radically reconfigured. In Dakar, Senegal, which is Simone's example, the city has expanded to such an extravagant extent that the airport must be moved because it is no longer central. It seems that this concept of “cosmopolitanism,” or “Afropolitanism,” in the new African city, touches on a way of thinking about people's capacities to forge their own space. Like Chris Abani has said, Lagos has more canals than Venice because when someone needs water, they crack a line into the ground. So there is an idea of cosmopolitanism as this spatial egalitarianism that makes it impossible to talk about a center.

How does this idea of movement between these spaces, that also puts Africa in the world, relate to people and their everyday lives? I ask because there's a critique of Afropolitanism that says one is glorifying the migrant worker and the worldliness they bring.

**Mbembe:** This is a very huge thing. We need a detailed cultural history to show the extent to which these kinds of experiments and practices have not simply been confined to the elites or even to the urban spaces. In fact, if we define Afropolitanism the way I have done—in terms of movement, mobility, circulation—and if we study popular forms of everyday life, these popular forms of everyday life are the richest archives of Afropolitan practices. Survival, both in rural areas or in popular parts of our main cities, is to a large extent dependent on the capacity to move and to move constantly; on the capacity to recycle all kinds of things, to put them to uses they were not originally intended for. So referring to all of this, it's the amount of things that are being done on an everyday basis to turn one thing into another—this process

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of conversion, converting one thing into another. That's what I mean when I refer to a specific way of embracing the world. But this is also happening in rural Africa. The drama is that rural Africa is not properly studied right now. It's studied through broad categories, these hydraulic concepts like "development." But we haven't paid sufficient attention yet to the ways in which people meet their everyday needs in these so-called rural areas, which in any case are no longer delinked from the urban. In fact, the traffic between the urban and the rural has intensified, and risen to a point where the rural is in the urban and the urban is in the rural. That's how I would look into this. And this is certainly not new. In places like Cameroon, people moved constantly between the village and the city. When I say they moved, physically, they brought this whole intense traffic of objects and of worldviews, especially in those rural areas that are now electrified. I have seen the critique you mentioned. It's just an elitist urban thing. I don't believe it.

**Balakrishnan:** There also seems to be a kind of undercurrent inside this scholarship that thinks of the colonial city as a very planned space. And of course during the end of the colonial era, the worry for cities was "detrribalization": you come to the city, you lose your tribe, you become a class, and then you're going to overthrow someone. The real revelation that has been coming out of postcolonial urban African studies is that people, of course, don't just "detrribalize"; they come with different dependency networks, they come with ties to the rural, and those become reconfigured in the space of the city. And the second revelation has been that people have a profound ability to change their space, and that actually there is a kind of egalitarianism in making the land malleable, which was precisely what it was not conceived to be during colonialism. The idea that you could not just make of the land what you wanted—that land was thought in terms of being confining—was the undercurrent of colonialism.

**Mbembe:** Yes, definitely. I totally agree with that. I think that's the correct way of interpreting what is going on, as a limit of those early readings of the becoming urban of African people. 🌐