Afropolitanism; Making Sense of Contemporary African Diasporic Identities

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For decades the sustained debate surrounding 'African identity' has focussed directly on the oppositional qualities of the topic. Contrasts between Western and African identity in dichotomous terms has highlighted the perceived disconnectedness of the two spheres. Years after independence and into the post-colonial world, an undifferentiated holistic identity has been reproduced through prolonged attachment to Africa by popular discourse in the West; 'Africa is a product of the Western political and philosophical imagination' (Eze, 2014:236). This view is anachronistic and damaging, it disrespects the diverse identities present within the 55 nations of the African continent as well as the ever-growing diasporic communities around the world who identify themselves as being African.

I aim to offer an opposition to this understanding and strive to elucidate the continuity of African identity within the global, Western, world. The inherent complexities of such a topic of investigation raise a number of analytical barriers that need to be constantly negotiated. Therefore, for the purposes of this discussion, I will explore one specific conceptual understanding of African identity: Afropolitanism. Afropolitanism is *one* way in which Africans are empowering themselves within critical debates around what is *means* to be African. However, this conception also raises several problems concerning inclusivity and these shortcomings will also be discussed. This discussion aims to illuminate the importance of breaking down restrictive Western imaginations of *what it is to be* African and the obstructive implications these hold for representations of African identity.

One characteristic of the contemporary world is permeability; one where identities and ideas are exchanged within a porous framework of interconnectedness. As Kwame Anthony Appiah states: 'Cultural purity is an oxymoron. The odds are that, culturally speaking, you already live a cosmopolitan life, enriched by literature, art, and film that come from many places, and that contains influences from many more' (Appiah, 2006:113). This 'contamination' (*ibid*) is present in all aspects of contemporary social life but comes to the fore in discussions of diasporic communities. For individuals born in Africa, educated in the States and living in France, what does it mean *to be* African?

One in way in which these conceptions are being explained is through the lens of Afropolitanism. This worldview approaches identity in an open manner, minimalizing geographical difference and transcending race. In early 2005, a young writer named Taiye Selasi wrote a short article entitled 'Bye-Bye, Babar: Or, What is an Afropolitan?'. Born in Ghana, educated at Yale and living in London, Selasi characterized the diasporic African:

> 'We are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos.'

In this vein, Afropolitanism offers a framework for understanding the identity of those people of African origin who 'understand themselves as being part of the world rather than being apart' (Balakrishnan, 2016:29). This community of upper-middle class, university educated, white-collar employed individuals of African origin is diverse and polychromatic, it encompasses a vast identity that cannot be subsumed by national association: 'Afropolitanism has to be primarily understood for

what it is: a mere effort to grasp the *diverse* nature of being African or of African descent in the world today' (Eze, 2014:239).

The cosmopolitan fusion of the term can be interpreted as the ability to 'recognise one's face in that of a foreigner' (Mbembe, 2007:28). For many diasporic Africans the anxieties over 'African-ness' are central to their search for identity. These are individuals who may never have visited their father's home, cannot speak local dialects, yet associate themselves with the vast continent of Africa: 'Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many' (Selasi, 2005). Afropolitanism offers an authentic and limitless identity for the number of 'Africa-hypenated' individuals who wish to refrain from the terms '*half*' or '*mixed race*'. It is a claim to be something that is recognisable in the sea of Western generalisations and an example of the 'ingenious, imaginative modes of survival' (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012:8) being played out by individuals of the global south against the ideological antecedents of the global north.

Despite evidence of the analytical and ideological promises afforded by such a concept and the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) it has unified, Afropolitanism is still analytically insufficient as a concept. There are a number of core critiques that I wish to illuminate in order to paint a more holistic understanding of the innate challenges concerning African identity. Firstly, the fusion of 'African' with 'Cosmopolitan' crystallises the notion that 'Africa' itself is not cosmopolitan enough to be described thus. That there is a Western qualification for cosmopolitanism being imposed upon those in Africa; 'The very necessity of qualifying Africans' being in the world only makes sense when we assume that, ordinarily, Africans are not of the world' (Musila, 2016:112).

Furthermore, the concept is polished to the point of commercialisation as if the pessimistic associations of a whole continent have been 'botox out' (Nixon, 2011:184) in favour of a slimline version of identity. The connotations of Afropolitanism with fashion and chic lifestyles is evident in events such as the 2011 show at the V&A Museum in London titled 'MsAfropolitan presents 'The Rise of Afropolitan Fashion' attended by 5,000 guests. The production of African-flavoured versions of Western social milieu does nothing but add layers of glossy aesthetic over what is already a complex social issue, while the promotion of an image of African devoid of any African-based individuals falls back full circle to discussions concerning the de-centring of Africa in the global world. We don't hear Europeans proclaim themselves 'Europolitans, or Americans as Ameropolitans' (Musila, 2016:112). In this light Afropolitanism retracts African-ness to a point of comfort, negating the holistic portrayals of a whole continent in favour of something more dangerous; strategic exoticism.

As a final point, it is clear that the concept of Afropolitanism was conceived in the elitist echelons of transnational movement, this emphasis on international travel privileges wealthy educated Africans enjoying success in the globalised world, far removed from the quotidian existence of the 1.2 billion who live on the continent. As Dabiri (2014) argues, 'most Africans have almost absolute immobility in a contemporary world that works very hard to keep Africans in their place on the African continent'. Afropolitanism does very little for the thousands of Africans fleeing conflict over the Mediterranean and renders itself useful to a small margin of African intellectual diaspora.

The complexities of identity politics within diasporic African communities is something which cannot be understated. In this short discussion I have aimed to illuminate the ways in which a specific demographic is empowering themselves in their search for identity. Afropolitanism, as I have shown, is a useful analytical concept and lends itself to broader discussions concerning the positionality of Africa within the global sphere. However, the shortcomings of the concept should not be ignored as

they help to expand to the scope of the discussion into other realms. The impetus for this article was not to subscribe the reader to Afropolitanism, nor to personally critique those who have found it a positive tool in their search for identity, but rather to illustrate one example of how identity is being discussed within an African context. It is my hope that the discussions explored will fuel further debate into this important area of investigation.

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