Talks from the Convention

Afropolitanism and Social Class

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The twin textual origins of Afropolitanism are well known. First, Taiye Selasi's "Bye-Bye Barbar," published in *The Lip Magazine* in 2005, declared that Afropolitans are "the newest generation of African emigrants. . . . You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes" (528). Second, Achille Mbembe's analysis, written for the art exhibition *Africa Remix* in Johannesburg in 2007, saw Afropolitanism as a new analytic for apprehending African identities and histories as "worlds in movement," characterized by the "paradigm of itinerancy, mobility, and displacement," given the long-standing migrations that have taken place to and from Africa ("Afropolitanism" 58). For Mbembe, Afropolitanism supersedes earlier paradigms of anticolonial nationalism, African socialism, and pan-Africanism that have "ossified to such a degree" that they fail to account for changes to contemporary African societies (57). Afropolitanism has since proliferated—as a cultural identity, an aesthetic practice, an aspirational brand, and an ethical norm—in the fields of fashion and lifestyle, music, literature, art exhibitions, academic scholarship, and the digital and vernacular worlds of social media. At the same time, it has prompted a series of polemical evaluations. For its proponents, Afropolitanism names both an empirical reality and an ethical practice that repudiates racial and ethnic homogeneities in favor of cosmopolitan pluralisms in conceptions of Africa. After all, the history of Africa is unthinkable outside its entanglements with the world, and the wars and violence plaguing postcolonial Africa were often discursively couched in claims to nativism and autochthony. By contrast, detractors of Afropolitanism point out that unimpeded geographic mobility is the sole province of an elite class—the Afropolitan jet-sets between Lagos and London while Fortress Europe builds its walls against most of the continent's

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inhabitants—and that the term, repurposed to brand products with local flavor, is simply the latest attempt to traffic in the "strategic exoticism" of "Africa lite," as Grace Musila puts it (111).[1]

In these assessments, the promises and pitfalls of Afropolitanism bifurcate on the lines of race and class: Afropolitanism's racial politics is read as progressive for its articulation of hybrid and fluid identities, while its class politics is read as regressive in its obliviousness to the privileges that wealth confers and its commodification of culture. Yet it is worth taking up Teju Cole's provocation that "[t]he discourse around Afropolitanism foregrounds questions of class in ways the 'I'm not Afropolitan' crowd don't want to deal with and in ways the 'I'm Afropolitan' crowd are often too blithe about" ("Interview"). Indeed, Afropolitanism is best understood as a symptom of and response to conditions of economic globalization: not only Africa and the world—to use W. E. B. Du Bois's older formulation—but Africa and the world economy, shaped by the transnational migrations of the new African diaspora; the uneven integration of the continent into world markets, with increasing access to global commodities; and the displacement of social services and development from the state to transnational nongovernmental organizations and international financial institutions. If anticolonial nationalism, African socialism, and pan-Africanism are no longer adequate frameworks through which to understand contemporary Africa, as Mbembe maintains, this perhaps has less to do with their racial ideologies—which were never as fixed or singular as he makes them out to be—and more to do with the different political economy of the present, in the wake of the Cold War's end and the rollbacks of the postcolonial nation-state that have produced shifting and unstable distinctions in class and status. The mobility underpinning Afropolitanism's ethos, in other words, is not simply geographic but also social. And the class binaries that structure critiques of Afropolitanism—mobile versus static, elite versus impoverished, bourgeois versus proletariat, diasporic versus continental Africans—do not fully capture the range, flux, and complexity of social class as lived experience and aspirational identity under globalization. As a cultural discourse, Afropolitanism gives representational texture to variegated social identities and, furthermore, participates in the production of class through signifiers of status, distinction, and taste. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological work is useful here: first, his reminder of the various forms of capital beyond material wealth that constitute the habitus of social class—economic, cultural, and social—and that are used as relational markers of differentiation; and second, his argument that social classes are not objective groups simply "out there" to be empirically classified, but instead are produced and contested in the field of representation, in "the symbolic work of [the] fabrication of groups, of group-making" ("What Makes a Social Class?" 10). The discourse of Afropolitanism across the domains of literature and culture is engaged in this symbolic work of class making, mapping out and constituting the different experiences of social class as a consequence of globalization.

Simon Gikandi observes that Afropolitanism is best understood as an attempt to "overcome the malady of Afro-pessimism" and to "rethink African knowledge outside the trope of crisis" (9), a riposte to the idioms of disease and starvation, political instability and corruption, civil war and violence that dominated representations of Africa throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Afropolitanism conversely came to prominence in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a cultural identity made possible by a changing narrative in the public sphere. The editorial headline "The Hopeful Continent: Africa Rising" appeared on a 2011 cover of *The Economist*, which had, just eleven years earlier, declared Africa "The Hopeless Continent." The later account typifies the rhetoric touted by foreign investors, governmental and nongovernmental institutions alike: "Over the past decade six of the world's ten fastest-growing countries were African," the editorial announced, positing that African lions might replicate the trajectory of the Asian tiger economies. The continent offers a "demographic dividend" of youth, unlike the aging populations of the West, and its wealth of natural resources and embrace of technology—"more than 600m mobile phone users"—reflect the promise of

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accelerated development ("Hopeful Continent"). The rise of Africa is accompanied by an expanding middle class: a 2011 report from the African Development Bank suggested that by 2010 "the middle class had risen to 34% of African's population" (Mubila et al. 1). To be sure, these accounts cannot be taken at face value and have been rightly subjected to trenchant critique: Africa's rise rests largely on increases in commodity prices and infrastructural investments by China, reflecting an economy still predicated on resource extraction; growth is experienced and enjoyed unevenly across different demographics and nation-states throughout the continent; and economic definitions of what make up the middle class can be spurious.[2] The African Development Bank's report, for instance, defines the middle class as composed of individuals who spend between two and twenty US dollars per day, a range that includes a precarious "floating class" always at risk of falling back into poverty (2), and that is not a meaningful metric in wealthier countries of the Global North. Yet bearing in mind Bourdieu's point that class is constituted through "the existence of a space of differences based on a principle of economic and social differentiation" ("What Makes a Social Class?" 3)—that is, class is always a relational category—these attempts to hypothesize a growing middle class are less interesting for their empirical validity or truth and more for the kind of social space they seek to map for a heterogenous group who may self-identify as neither very poor nor very rich. These accounts do not so much reflect a preexisting middle class as call it forth through the boundary work of shaping distinctions between classes.

In that respect, it is perhaps unsurprising that Afropolitanism has flourished particularly in the realm of consumer culture. Emma Dabiri complains that a search for "Afropolitanism" in *Google* yields "mainly online shops and aspirational luxury lifestyle magazines. There is a great deal of African-y stuff: jewellery, art and ankara toys" (105). But it is in the sphere of taste and consumption—rather than in conventional Marxist definitions of one's relationship to the means of production—that class is most visibly and publicly performed. As Bourdieu argues, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier," and the "science of taste and cultural consumption . . . unite apparently incommensurable 'choices,' such as preference in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle" (*Distinction* 9). A blanket critique of an Afropolitan culture industry as mere commodification thus risks flattening out differences in how and where that term is deployed as a social and class identity expressed through consumption practices and lifestyles, and there has not yet been adequate empirical analysis of actually existing Afropolitanisms along these lines. The South African radio station Kaya FM, which broadcasts from Johannesburg, "defines its public as Afropolitan," whom it describes as comprising "self-assured, mature, sophisticated, socially conscious" individuals (*Kaya FM*), even as it more specifically targets urban Black listeners from the ages of twenty-five to forty-nine. The station's emphasis on social conscience is also linked to its mobilization of charity as "a strong pillar of [its] identity work" (Turner 202). In Nigeria, the menswear brand Vanskere launched an "Afropolitan 3piece collection" over several years. While this collection riffs on the Western three-piece suit, it comprises two traditional tunics—one formal and one informal, a mix and match as it were—that can be worn interchangeably with a single trouser and is therefore, the designer notes, "cost-effective" for the "conservative, mature man" (qtd. in Awodipe). A blog like *MsAfropolitan*, run by the Nigerian-Finnish writer Minna Salami, grounds Afropolitanism in a modern sexual politics, claiming that "Afropolitanism is a feminist space . . . [and] also a queer space," reflecting transformations in intimacy and domesticity that constitute middle-class existence. These examples do not signify the same things or the same values, even if they may employ the same term. Afropolitanism names a site and process of identity formation, particularly through explorations of taste and consumption that reflect, constitute, and contest a social class, and these explorations are far from homogenous across different locations in Africa or between continental and diasporic Africans.

Taste making is contiguous with the work of many novels labeled Afropolitan, which likewise

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engage in the production of class identity. Consider Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2013 novel *Americanah*. The protagonist, Ifemelu, leaves Nigeria to study and live in the United States, making a career for herself as a successful blogger on issues of race, but returns home to Nigeria as "one of the new middle class that our democracy created" (531). The job she takes on is as the "features editor for [a] leading women's monthly magazine," and she imagines "turning it into a vibrant, relevant companion for Nigerian women" (482, 83). *Americanah* is arguably engaged in the same project as Ifemelu, parsing out and shaping distinctions in taste among a Nigerian middle class that also belongs to a global middle class: distinctions between White and Black, between British and American imperial influences, between African and African American, and especially between Nigerian locals and those returned from abroad who form a "Nigerpolitan Club" (501). When Ifemelu visits her employer's house with a friend, she complains about its ostentatiousness "with the haughty confidence of a person who recognized kitsch," while her friend extols its infrastructural grandeur: "Her generator is as big as my flat and it is completely noiseless!" (484). "This was what a true Lagosian should have noticed: the generator house, the generator size" in a place where power outages are the norm (484–85).

Americanah proliferates with such instances where taste is assessed and legitimacy is conferred on the aesthetic and cultural pleasures in which this "new middle class" partakes across local, continental, and transnational scales. The novel also imagines the transformations of sexual and kinship relations that arise in these new social formations and articulates the different pathways that make global social mobility possible. This returns us to a very familiar story from the history of the novel—to wit, the novel as a cultural form originating in the eighteenth century that narrates and constitutes the rise of bourgeois subjects as rational economic actors (in Ian Watt's account) or as domestic and private selves (in Nancy Armstrong's and Jürgen Habermas's)—and also explains Yogita Goyal's observation that most Afropolitan novels return to the aesthetics of realism in their narratives, with middle-class protagonists invariably at their centers (174–75). Just as the eighteenth-century bourgeois reading public used the emergent form of the novel to hold up a mirror to itself as a vehicle for self-understanding, Afropolitan novels perform the cultural function of shaping and clarifying the processes of taste making and class formation for Afropolitan subjects. In Cole's *Open City* (2011), the protagonist flits between "Barthes's *Camera Lucida*, Peter Altenberg's *Telegrams of the Soul*, Tahar Ben Jelloun's *The Last Friend*" (5); is affronted by Hollywood films that misrepresent Africa (28–29); and is also an afficionado of Western classical music. Sefi Atta's *A Bit of Difference* (2015), which depicts Deola's return to her hometown Lagos from London in her capacity as a financial reviewer for a humanitarian organization, is likewise saturated with observations about what people wear, what they eat and drink, what manners and etiquettes they adopt. Deola reflects, "She is never quite sure what takes precedence in the way Nigerians constantly rank each other according to wealth, education and Westernization, with ambiguous results: this one is bush, that one is *oyinbo* [White]. This one is local, that one is colonized" (115). The ambiguities of such signifiers of status suggest a social class whose external self-presentation and symbolic norms are still in flux, and the worlds of Afropolitan novels participate in imagining and making this class identity.

To be sure, the conjuncture between Afropolitanism and middle-class tastes and consumer culture could be read as yet another manifestation of the self-serving and corrupt national bourgeoisie in postcolonial Africa whom Frantz Fanon had famously excoriated: the national bourgeoisie, made up of "traders, landowners and professionals" with no real economic clout to create industries or accumulate capital (98), simply lines its own pockets after national independence and masks its failures through conspicuous cosmopolitan consumption, "ostentatious projects for individual prestige, chromium-plated American cars, vacations on the French Riviera and weekends in neon-lit nightclubs" (120). This is a parallel that

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Dabiri also draws: "It is largely in the pockets of the mobile Afropolitan class that much of the wealth is held. . . . [W]ho really are the beneficiaries of this branded Afropolitanism?" (105). Although Fanon's analysis is prescient and seminal in its awareness of how tribalism is deployed to mask economic inequalities within the nation-state, his view of African societies as stratified into an exploitative, consuming bourgeoisie and a proletarian mass is inadequate for apprehending the ways in which globalization has transformed the lived experience and the structures of social class in the present, since class dynamics no longer operate within purely national contexts. If Afropolitanism is characterized, above all, by mobility, especially under globalization, two things complicate its straightforward equation with the identities and practices of a secure, elite class: first, the global circulation of images of wealth and consumption that are increasingly visible to all strata of society, and, second, the instability of social class and status caused by geographic migration.

James Ferguson reflects that globalization in Africa "has brought an increasingly acute awareness of the semiotic and material goods of the global rich, even as economic pauperization and the loss of faith in the promises of development have made the chances of actually attaining such goods seem more remote than ever" (21). The signifiers of a desirable and cosmopolitan life are ubiquitously available as social fantasies through the circulation of mass media no longer territorially confined, although only a small number may enjoy genuine opportunities for upward mobility. In NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013)—an Afropolitan text that has been criticized for engaging in "poverty porn"—the protagonist, Darling, lives in an informal settlement, ironically named Paradise, but she and her friends are nonetheless entangled in a global economy even as they are materially excluded from it, with evidence of this economy surrounding them: "Bastard wears black tracksuit bottoms and a faded orange T-shirt that says Cornell" (14). Darling sees a Lamborghini and thinks, "I just know, because of this feeling in my bones, that the car is waiting for me in America" (113). The children play a "country-game" where each one takes on the identity of a country:

> But first we have to fight over the names because everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them. These are the country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you just have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in—who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart? (51)

The desire for geographic mobility is inextricable from that of social mobility. The children understand social class no longer as something internal to the nation-state but as a transnational phenomenon produced through an unequal world system wherein different countries afford citizens different socioeconomic opportunities and can therefore be ranked correspondingly in status. Darling and her friends fashion themselves as mobile subjects stuck in place by poverty while the world is at the door: they traverse wealthy neighborhoods inhabited by foreigners, encounter Chinese developers building malls, and receive aid from transnational humanitarian organizations.

Afropolitanism thus also captures the experiential disjunction between the mobile cultural possibilities and images of global wealth and consumption practices, on the one hand, and the physical and economic entrapment that the vast majority of Africans continue to be immiserated in, on the other. Afropolitanism is invariably seen to "reference a particular kind of affluent mobility in the global north" (Musila 111), but the circulation of these images to form a social imaginary means that they shape the desires, aspirations, and subjectivities beyond those who are affluent. Indeed, the contradictions of these exclusions accentuate the problem of class stratification and social inequality

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on a global scale. Nor is this experiential disjunction the sole province of the very poor. The increasing precariousness of middle-class existence and the uncertain pathways to embourgeoisement mean that there is not always a correlation between the performance of social class and material wealth. High levels of debt are often required to sustain the appearance of status,[3] and education—the traditional vehicle of social mobility and of acquiring cultural capital—frequently no longer suffices as a means for professional classes to accrue economic capital. Tambu in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018) clings to the remnants of middle-class respectability as signified by a Western commodity —"the two-tone Lady Di heels of real European leather shoes that were a present received some years ago from [her] cousin who travelled abroad to study" (10)—while remaining unemployed. How, she wonders, "with all your education, do you come to be more needy than your mother?" (37). These desires for "affluent mobility," signified through access to global goods and services, cannot be reduced to the hegemony of neoliberalism's consumer cultures. Instead, as Ferguson points out, "yearnings for cultural convergence with a global standard . . . can mark not simply mental colonization or capitulation to cultural imperialism, but an aspiration to overcome categorical subordination" (20).

It is this desire for social mobility and a better life that has fueled the migration—both intra- and intercontinental—on which Afropolitanism is predicated. In a more extensive chapter on Afropolitanism, Mbembe reflects that "a central fact of recent decades [in Africa] has been the emergence of practices consisting of travelling to far-off places in order to earn money" (*Out of the Dark Night* 185). If this is the case, as the anthropologists Cati Coe and Julia Pauli argue, "[m]igration complicates the concept of social class as a stable identity" (9), since migrants "usually have multiple class statuses . . . in different social fields and geographic locations" (9–10). In contrast to a view of Afropolitan subjects as secure beneficiaries of wealth in their transnational mobility, it is worth considering the ways in which migration effects changes in social class as these mobile subjects inhabit new social relations and frequently experience a loss of status in societies that may afford more economic opportunities or political freedoms but are also xenophobic and racist. It is these fluctuations of class and status—and their intersections with racism—that many Afropolitan novels dramatize through characters who move from rural to urban areas and from poorer to richer countries. Elvis, the protagonist in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004), moves from a middle-class existence in a rural township in Afikpo to the informal settlement of Maroko in Lagos. Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2011) is about the racism experienced by immigrants into South Africa—"black foreigners from African countries, vulgarly referred to as *Makwerekwere*"—who are blamed for spreading diseases like HIV (20). In *Americanah*, Obinze, the middle-class son of a Nigerian professor, arriving without a work permit in Britain, takes a job as a janitor and meets an immigrant from Ghana: "He sensed, in the way she spoke and carried herself, a background similar to his, a childhood cushioned by family, by regular meals, by dreams in which there was no conception of cleaning toilets in London" (Adichie 292). If the recurrent critique of Afropolitanism sees geographic mobility as underwritten by class privilege, it is also the case that geographic mobility frequently destabilizes this privilege, given that the experience of class is relational. We therefore need a much more nuanced account of the relation between social class and migration in the new African diasporas, one that does not assume that class identities remain permanent or static across transnational borders.

In her opening paragraph of "Bye-Bye Barbar," Selasi describes the Afropolitan as "the Cultural Hybrid," and most scholarship has focused on how Afropolitan writing and culture are characterized by hybrid mixing and creolity, novel combinations of the global and local, and cosmopolitan and ethical negotiations of cultural and racial difference. But Selasi's essay also emphasizes African emigrants' desire for credentialing and professional success. The emigrants pursue "higher education" (528); they are "matching [their] parents in number of degrees"; some are "dapper lawyers in global firms"; and some are "branching into fields like media,

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politics, music, venture capital, design" (529). Class is central to her conception of Afropolitanism, and, in a subsequent interview, Selasi refutes accusations of privilege, noting that what she has described "is not an experience of relaxed wealth." The "immigrant kid" is sent abroad "not because of his parents' abundant wealth but because of their obsession with upward mobility" and is told to "hustle" until he arrives in the "global middle class" ("Revisiting Afropolitanism"). Taking the conjunction between Afropolitanism and class seriously opens up a range of avenues for thinking about social class as it operates on a transnational scale and, more specifically, about Africa's complex integration into and exclusion from the global economy: for instance, the opportunities and limitations that an unequal world system creates for social mobility, the way status and rank are articulated and imagined across national borders and the kinds of boundary work that go into producing these social distinctions, the formation and consolidation of class identities through the transnational circulation of cultural images and products, the changing dynamics of class as a consequence of migration, and the economic and kinship relationships forged between diasporic and continental Africans through remittances and development aid. Afropolitanism may be most useful not as the substitution of Afro-pessimism (the view of Africans as perpetually "the wretched of the earth") with Afro-optimism (the view of a triumphant and wealthy "Africa Rising"), but rather as an invitation to think beyond these class dichotomies.

Notes

1. The scholarship on Afropolitanism is substantial. Beyond Selasi's and Mbembe's texts, key pieces include Balakrishnan; Balakrishnan and Mbembe; Skinner; Hassan; and the cluster "Contemporary Conversations: *Africa: Reboot*" in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (vol. 28, 2016), edited by Carli Coetzee and containing short essays by Emma Dabiri, Musila, Chielozana Eze, and Stephanie Bosch Santana.

2. For scholarship assessing the "Africa Rising" narrative, see Taylor; Frankema and Waijenburg; and Khisa.

3. See, for instance, James, who gives an account of the high level of indebtedness incurred by the new Black middle class that emerged from the Black Economic Empowerment program in South Africa after apartheid. For scholarship on middle classes in Africa more generally, see Melber.

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