Talks from the Convention

Afropolitanism and Afro-Chinese Worlds

DUNCAN M. YOON

Over the past decade or so, *Afropolitanism* has become a hotly contested term within literary studies, celebrated for its capacity to articulate an African[1] experience of transnational mobility and success in the West[2] as well as criticized for how it elides the everyday experience of individuals on the continent and for its alleged lack of political critique.[3] Many of these debates focus on the intended audience for Afropolitan texts, which, because of the location of publication houses and distribution networks, remains primarily the Western reader. My purpose in this introduction to alternative networks of Afropolitanism, however, is not to rehash this well-covered debate.[4] Instead I would like to examine the shifting worlds of Afropolitanism as they manifest themselves through an engagement with East Asia, and with China in particular.[5] My goal is less to map Afropolitanism, as it is understood in the West, directly onto Asia than to demonstrate how African literature imagines Asian worlds and, in doing so, redefines what qualifies as "worldliness." My point of departure, then, is Achille Mbembe's definition of Afropolitanism as "a cultural, historical, and aesthetic sensitivity" that points to "the interweaving of worlds, in a slow and sometimes incoherent dance with forms and signs . . . , the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa" (Mbembe and Chauvet 59–60). If there is one clear takeaway from my essay, it is that the Western subject is no longer the only Other against which postcolonial African identities conceptualize themselves. While such a relational identity is nothing new, I argue that it is time for a radical decentering of the West so that it is no longer the primary point of comparison for postcolonial literature.

The two novels I use to support this reading are taken from West and East Africa: Guinea-Conakry and Kenya. The first is Ibrahima Soumah's *L'Afrique, un continent en voie de "chinisation"* (*Africa, a*

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"Sinicizing" Continent), a primarily francophone text that was published by L'Harmattan in 2018. The second is Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*, a primarily anglophone text that was published in 2019 by Alfred A. Knopf. The novels are also vibrant examples of literary multilingualism. Mandarin appears in both texts, and Swahili is intertwined with English throughout *The Dragonfly Sea*. Although such an analysis lies outside the scope of this essay, each of these respective countries has long histories of engagement with Asia, and with China in particular, through the Third Worldism of the global cold war (Westad). In the case of what is now Kenya, encounters between the eastern coast of Africa and East Asia through trade networks date back to before the ninth century (Kiriama). While this "incipient globalization" features prominently as the catalyst for the plot of Owuor's novel, demonstrating the relevance of pre-European contact to contemporary Kenyan-Chinese relations, Soumah's narrative takes place in the year 2070, a future in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) has become the global hegemon (Kiriama 79).[6] Together, these texts imagine Afro-Chinese worlds—past, present, and future—that either precede or follow Western dominance.

What are the literary forms these two narratives employ to represent China in African imaginaries of the world? Soumah's novel articulates an Afro future past through an analeptic form inspired by the griot tradition in West Africa, which interrogates how China's contemporary presence triggers the trauma inherited from European colonialism. In contrast, Owuor's novel uses a proleptic, littoral form inspired by the Indian Ocean to unpack how diasporic identity can be instrumentalized by geopolitics.[7] This initial reading raises a whole set of secondary questions that have an important disciplinary impact:[8] How is language configured here? How does this reading configure race? gender? cultural exchange? Is this the Global South? The close readings that follow broach these debates.

The Speculative Griot and Guinean-PRC Relations

One of the most widespread assertions about the PRC is that it intends to colonize the African continent, reproducing, wholesale, the domination of European imperialism. I have examined this claim in detail elsewhere, demonstrating that it is necessary to distinguish between Western (neo) colonialism and a Chinese extractivism because of the fundamental differences in historical moments ("Africa" and "Figuring Africa"). Yet what accounts for the persistence of this highly charged accusation? I argue that the Chinese presence triggers the colonial trauma endured by African populations. This trauma can often be manipulated by local elites to incite an "anti-Chinese populism" (Hess and Aidoo 129). In Soumah's *L'Afrique, un continent en voie de "chinisation,"* the former minister of mines as well as technical education of Guinea-Conakry homes in on this reanimation of colonial trauma through his piece of speculative fiction, written from the future with fifty years of historical hindsight. When the story opens, in the year 2070, China is in control of Africa, or Gondwana, a name taken from the supercontinent of the Pleistocene era that invokes what Wai Chee Dimock has called "deep time" (6) and what Mbembe has called the "planetary question" of Chinese investment in Africa (Mbembe and Dubois 38). The narrative's griot-like construction loops backward and forward in time to explain how Gondwana became Chinese; it recounts an imagined past to predict—or speculate on—the real world's future.

Soumah has translated his title into both English and Mandarin, which feature paratextually below the novel's genre-bending subtitle, *Roman d'économie-fiction* (*A Novel of Economy-Fiction*), and gesture to the author's own background and expertise. The title's English translation is *Africa, a "Sinicizing" Continent*, which preserves the phonetic resonance of "chinisation" while maintaining the negative connotations associated with cultural and economic assimilation. The idea of assimilation is powerfully triggering, because it directly invokes the policies of French imperialism in Africa and Asia (Diouf; Norindr). The Mandarin translation also invokes the linear temporality of an inexorable path (*voie*) of becoming (化; *hua*) Chinese: 中国化进程中的非洲大陆 (*zhongguohua jincheng zhongde feizhou dalu*). As a gesture to the lexicon of geopolitics, one possible English translation of the Mandarin

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is "Africa, a continent now with Chinese characteristics." This paratextuality captures the evolving politics of language at work in postcolonial cultural production. Soumah signals a new audience for the African novel, however superficially, which suggests the Guinean gaze is turning from west to east. The narrator goes on to relate how the Chinese have brought about a "recomposition du monde" ("reordering of the world") by enacting a new settler colonialism on the African continent over the last fifty years after having surpassed the United States in "la puissance économique et militaire" ("economic and military power") in 2030 (15).[9] One of the capitals of Chinese colonialism is the hypermodern "Daxin, ville située à l'extrême ouest du continent Africain" ("Daxin, a city situated in the far western reaches of the African continent"), which has "100 gratte-ciel dont les plus petits ont 50 étages" ("one hundred skyscrapers, the smallest of which have fifty floors") and is "une ville entièrement chinoise où presque dans la mesure où la langue officielle est le mandarin" ("a city almost entirely Chinese, especially as the official language is Mandarin"; 11). Both the name, *Daxin*, and geography, the western reaches of the continent, suggest a "sinicized" Dakar—a new (新; *xin*) Dakar. The passage further invokes colonial trauma because the former capital of French West Africa is now a dense, Chinese-speaking metropolis where Mandarin has replaced French as the lingua franca of education and business.

The narrative locates the current site of tension in the looming decision by the Chinese in their "capitale impériale Narito" ("imperial capital, Narito"), which was formerly "l'ancienne capitale du Kenya à savoir Nairobi" ("Kenya's old capital once known as Nairobi"; 15), to solve the Malthusian conundrum of overpopulation and limited resources by deporting a billion Africans "en dehors de la terre, par exemple, sur la Lune ou sur Mars" ("off the earth, for example, to the moon or to Mars"; 159). As the griot cum narrator indicates, this expulsion to outer space is the result of a new system of apartheid *à la chinoise* instituted by the "domination indirecte de la nouvelle Chine" ("indirect domination of the new China") that requires "un pass ou une autorisation" ("a pass or authorization"; 13) to move through Chinese cities like Daxin and echoes the destructive Group Areas Act of 1950, whereby the Afrikaaner nationalist state in South Africa created the notorious Bantustans for indigenous populations (Mabin). This decision is waylaid, however, by an improbable encounter in which Wang, the heir of the ruling Qing family, falls in love with the local chief's daughter, the beautiful Binta, while on a walk with his entourage along the Bako River outside of Daxin.

When Wang solicits Binta's father, Zambo, for her hand in marriage, a fiercely contested debate ensues, in which the Chinese takeover of African lands through the "debt-trap diplomacy" (Brautigam 1) of resource-for-infrastructure projects over the past fifty years is put on trial:

> Wang poursuit en précisant que c'est par des accords successifs que les Chinois se sont installés sur les lieux qu'ils ont par la suite modernisés et développés comme cela apparaît aujourd'hui. Pour Wang tous ces accords gagnant-gagnant ont été régulièrement approuvés par le gouvernement, le Président de la République et les institutions souveraines de Bako.
>
> C'est alors que Binta, furieuse, vient au secours de son père et d'une voix percutante nie en bloc tout ce que vient d'exposer le jeune Wang. Pour elle, en effet, les accords en question étaient totalement léonins. On peut même les qualifier d'accords gagnants perdants. Le perdant étant évidemment du côté des Africains, dans la mesure où il est incroyable de monnayer l'ensemble des ressources naturelles d'un pays contre des fournitures volatiles et surtout contre des infrastructures qui sont de véritables éléphants blancs et qui se dégradent avant même leur livraison aux Africains. (Soumah 19)

> Wang pursued the point, specifying that it was through successive agreements that the Chinese came to occupy the place—after which they modernized and developed the area into its current state. For Wang, all these win-win agreements were systematically approved by the government, the president of the republic, and the sovereign institutions of Bako.
>
> That was when Binta, now furious, came to her father's aid. With a forceful voice she refuted, wholesale, all the points the young Wang had just laid out.

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> According to her, the agreements in question were utterly one-sided. In reality, these agreements were win-lose. With the losing party obviously being the African side because it was simply ludicrous to liquidate the totality of a country's natural resources in exchange for unreliable goods and above all for white elephant infrastructure, both of which broke down before they were even delivered to the population.

The passage first captures how the naive Wang maintains the official rhetoric of "mutual benefit" and "win-win" that accompanies virtually every joint venture between African states and the PRC. Despite toeing the official line, Wang's assertion pinpoints how African officials were complicit in this process of extraction and eventual takeover. That is to say, Wang inadvertently reveals how, under the auspices of an ersatz agency, African elites grew wise to the neoliberal game of the 2020s and swapped Western neocolonialism for Chinese extractivism. Binta decries this so-called development altruism as in fact slow-motion exploitation, which has not only drained African states of their resources but also saddled them with costly infrastructure they could not maintain. She argues, echoing the actual concerns of many activists, that these deals have created new states of dependency because of the lack of skilled labor and mounting debt. She also underlines the critical, "real-life" importance of technology transfer, whereby African workers gain the skills necessary not only to run and repair infrastructure but also to improve on it according to the on-the-ground needs of local populations. A potent postcolonial critique is thereby embedded in the passage, warning against a model of investment and development wherein actors sacrifice transparency in business deals so that they can maximize profit at the expense of individual quality of life.

Wang's ardor for Binta is thereby manipulated into much-needed geopolitical leverage, which Zambo uses to demand a "retour à l'ordre il y a 50 ans" ("return to the order of things as they were fifty years ago"; 23). The Chinese agree to make the case to "des Proconsuls et même du Timonier suprême à Beijing" ("the proconsuls and even to the supreme leader in Beijing"), and a thirty-day interregnum ensues during which the two families embark on a series of cultural exchanges and homestays (23). To fill the time of both the plot and the act of reading, the narrator then weaves together a series of anecdotes through heterodiegetic analepses, emulating a technique that griots have used for centuries to tell the great Sundiata epic of West Africa (Gomez). Jumping back in time from the year 2070, these flashbacks from the future flesh out the critique described above. They explain how the systematic disenfranchisement of Gondwana was brought about by the complicit dereliction of local elites. Through deals that hocked land and resources for "white elephant" infrastructure and prestige projects, the flashbacks suggest these elites share the blame for this new occupation. Taken as whole, this piece of speculative fiction employs an analeptic technique to articulate an Afro future past. In doing so, the novel not only subverts the inevitable assimilation to the Middle Kingdom put forth in the title but also captures how colonial trauma can manifest itself in contemporary Africa-China relations.

Littoral Form and Kenyan-PRC Relations

The Dragonfly Sea is the second novel from Owuor, who writes in the author's note that while the novel is entirely a work of fiction, it was inspired by real events of 2005,[10] when a Kenyan woman from the island of Pate, Mwamaka Sharifu, was declared to be the descendant of shipwrecked Chinese sailors who had participated in the famous Zheng He expeditions during the Ming Dynasty. As Mingqing Yuan has written, Owuor's narrative subverts the founding "myth of Zheng He," which official rhetoric—both Chinese and Kenyan—uses to legitimize declarations of the "win-win" relationship between the PRC and Kenya (13). The narrative follows the coming of age of Ayaana, or, as she becomes known in the PRC, "The Descendant," as she grows up with her mother on the small island of Pate in the Lamu Archipelago off the coast of Kenya. After a DNA test confirms her Chinese ancestry, she is awarded a scholarship to study in the PRC in celebration of her embodiment of

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solidarity between Kenya and China. During her voyage across the Indian Ocean, a symbolic gesture meant to follow in the literal wake of Zheng He's expeditions, she falls in love with the Chinese boat captain, Lai Jin. While completing her degree in navigation studies, Ayaana struggles with the pressures of being "The Descendant," ultimately rejecting the many claims on her identity in favor of a return to Pate, where she forges her own path, one that draws from the liminality between sea and land to articulate the self. At the core of the narrative lies a meditation on the nature of family, a kind of genealogical accounting that employs a littoral, or coastal, form to suggest that the strongest familial bonds may be those that are constructed through surrogacy as opposed to blood lineage. In other words, the most nurturing family can be the community created by strangers who wash up together on the same shore (Quayson 148; Samuelson 17).

To demonstrate how Owuor uses a littoral form inspired by the Lamu Archipelago to overlap Kenyan and Chinese worlds, I would like to focus on a passage where Ayaana and Lai Jin have reunited in another archipelago, the Shengsi Islands, this time perched on the periphery not of Africa but of Asia. This section, as well as the entire narrative, is told through short, episodic prolepses that jump the plot forward in time. This proleptic technique mimics the effect of successive waves rolling into shore. Each episode is a distinct wave, but together they constitute the entire sea (or narrative) and its enigmatic contents. One of the chapter epigraphs renders this point explicit in both Swahili and English: "*Kilichomo baharini, kakingojee ufukoni*. That which is in the sea will wash up on the shore" (411). After losing his ship because he refused to smuggle a cargo of dead and dying African animals, Lai Jin heals from his loss by making pottery, some of which he sends to Ayaana as an anonymous gift. The narrative's turn to pottery evokes the recent archeological digs that have unearthed Ming dynasty ceramics in Kenya and elsewhere along the eastern coast of Africa, gesturing to how the contemporary Afro-Asian nexus is in fact a return to the Indian Ocean's period of "incipient globalization" (Kiriama 79).

Ayaana has sought Lai Jin out in his lighthouse studio to mend the pottery that another foreign student, a lover turned abusive partner, broke:

> *From sea to soil*, she thought as he wove the clay and outside, waves slithered on rocks. She turned on her toes, picking up scents: abalone, sea slugs, and cucumbers; dung of seagulls, the sweat of the sea. . . . He threw clay, wove worlds and comfort with molding-making hands. . . . His old lighthouse was suffused with the scent of light and wild roses as a sea wind howled. Outside, the stumps of petrified wood, calcified by sea salt and time's crouch. Tuning in to the rhythm of the turning wheel. *Ni shi shei*? Whispered the waters, *Who are you?* they demanded. She rose from her knees. She said, "I lost the sea." (382–83)

The passage establishes a dichotomy between interiority and exteriority as Ayaana pivots back and forth ("turn[s] on her toes") according to the overlapping rhythms of Lai Jin's wheel and the water. This corporeal oscillation not only recalls the slow jostling of ocean waves but also blurs the boundary between senses (the "scent of light") as well as the topographic boundary between soil and sea. This muddying of soil and sea is precisely the process of making clay, suggesting that the pelagic space of liminality the two characters occupy is echoed by Lai Jin's throwing pottery as an act of artistic creation. The passage thereby juxtaposes Lai Jin's artistic act with Ayaana's cataloging of the surrounding ecosystem's flora and fauna, evincing Owuor's use of a littoral form. This form enables the narrator to articulate how a Kenyan woman and a Chinese man humanize each other through quotidian interactions, ultimately resisting the instrumentalization of identity by the bilateral relations of nation states. The point of departure for the positioning of cultural identity (Hall) is not located in the terracentricity of the mainland, and its implied discourses of state nationalism—be they Chinese, Kenyan,[11] or even colonial—but rather in a palimpsest of peripheries: that is, in the "sweat of the sea" and "time's crouch." Such an ontology resists instrumentalization because these peripheries mold identity, or weave worlds, through a "limitless *métissage*" as creolization (Glissant 34).[12] This swirling, fractal

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process of creolization slowly accretes the alluvium of any person's lived experience (our opacity) precisely through how individuals "give-on-and with" (*donner-avec*), an exchange that changes the self (142). That is, if all identities are constantly changing, they can perpetually demystify any hegemonic discourse, any myth of purity—whether racial, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or national.

While Ayaana and Lai Jin's love story takes place against the controversial geopolitics of Kenya and the PRC, their attraction is not one that must directly overcome the violence of European colonialism. Instead, their exchange helps Ayaana answer the simple yet all-consuming question that is repeatedly and provocatively posed in Mandarin: "*Ni shi shei*?" (你是谁?). Embodying creolization, the novel continually pivots between several languages including Swahili, Arabic, Mandarin, and English. This multilingualism points not only to how the Indian Ocean represents an alternative history of globalization but also to how the swirl of these languages complicates any one-to-one relation between language and identity. For example, while the protagonist's mother names her Ayaana, which means "God's gift" in Arabic, Lai Jin[13] calls her Haiyan, which, depending on the tone of "yan," can mean either storm petrel (海燕), a seabird they encounter on their voyage across the Indian Ocean, or sea salt (海盐), yet another littoral reference. Owuor most consistently switches between Swahili and English, blending the two languages' syntax as a way to represent the many folds of her characters' consciousnesses. One of the most effective uses of Swahili lies in the epigraphs she uses to separate chapters. The epigraph for the entire novel, and thereby arguably the most important, is "*Roho ni mgeni.* The soul is a visitor (stranger)." The most straightforward interpretation is simply that we are all visitors, or strangers in this world, and we will eventually leave it for some great beyond. Another interpretation captures precisely the inextricability of the self with the other that I described as the process of creolization. If the soul, or perhaps here the opacity of selfhood, is constituted through encounters with strange visitors in space and over time, then we are all always already the other. Moreover, any attempt to extricate or purify the self will necessitate an act of dehumanization, a fundamental source of colonial trauma.

This piece has shown how the term *Afropolitanism* can be expanded and perhaps even reconceptualized in relation to Afro-Asian encounters. I have argued that Soumah and Owuor weave Afro-Chinese worlds that not only decenter the West as the fulcrum of transnational comparison for postcolonial literature but also reconfigure the ways in which the politics of language and identity manifest themselves for the twenty-first-century African subject. To do so, the two texts provide contrasting approaches to narrative form: an analeptic, griot-inspired technique in the case of Soumah and a proleptic, littoral technique in the case of Owuor. Both texts defamiliarize the space and time of African postcolonialism, capturing a new matrix through which the individual relates to the collective and vice versa. These alternative matrices even suggest that the term *Afropolitanism* may no longer capture all the complexities of cosmopolitanism in contemporary African cultural production.[14] Moreover, and despite their contrasting approaches, both narratives counter the dehumanizing trauma inherited from European colonialism by asserting the importance of humanizing interactions between individuals. In sum, they warn against the emergence of any new discourse of dehumanization to justify exploitation—and specifically within Africa-China relations—thereby updating postcolonial critique to the realities of the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. I use the terms *Africa* and *African* as an analytic shorthand and not to treat a continent as a country. As of this writing, Africa consists of fifty-six sovereign states—fifty-four of which are members of the United Nations. There are also ten entities that are constituent parts of non-African states, and one dependent territory of a sovereign state.

2. I use the terms *West* and *Western* to refer to European colonialism and Euro-American neocolonialism in accordance with how Young defines them.

3. See Hodapp; Coetzee; and Knusen and Rahbek.

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4. An extremely cursory list of voices in this debate includes Mbembe; Gikandi; Musila; Selasi; Bwesigye; and Santana.

5. I use the terms *China* and *Chinese* to refer primarily to the People's Republic of China. However, as Shu-mei Shih warns us, "'Chinese' functions as a category of ethnicity, language, and culture only to the extent that it designates the Han, excluding all the other ethnicities, languages, and cultures. The term 'ethnic Chinese' is therefore a serious misnomer, since the 'Chinese' includes not one but 56 ethnicities, if not more. There is no such group called 'ethnic Chinese'" ("Against Diaspora" 76–77).

6. I do not have the space to adequately historicize these texts here. For an overview of contemporary bilateral relations, see Shinn and Eisenmann.

7. I have chosen these two texts in part because of their formal juxtaposition. However, these are by no means the only possible choices, either formally or temporally. See, e.g., my article "Africa."

8. Three publications in *PMLA* are immediately relevant to my essay's engagement with the Indian Ocean, Africa-China relations, and race: Lionnet, "Continents"; Hofmeyr; and Shih, "Race."

9. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

10. The note appears on an unnumbered page at the beginning of the book.

11. For an exhaustive account of how the novel complicates Kenyan national identity, see Yego.

12. For an analysis that demonstrates how and why Glissant's theory of creolization works within the Indian Ocean, see Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices*.

13. One interpretation of Lai Jin's name could be "come close" (来进), which has a humanizing effect, deepening the sense of intimacy between the two characters.

14. I thank the editor of *PMLA*, Brent Hayes Edwards, for this insight.

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