TALKS FROM THE CONVENTION

Afropolitanism from Below

OLABODE IBIRONKE

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.
>
> —T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

A few years ago, I offered a graduate class on Afropolitanism that posed certain ideological challenges. In the name of a radical critique of gendered Western power, some in the class demanded a revised syllabus that did not include Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*. Their argument echoed the conventional critique of cosmopolitanism as a product of privilege: Afropolitan writers enjoy the privilege conferred by their blockbuster novels and are too ingrained within Western cultural and aesthetic norms. It was not so much the implacable political questions or causes that asserted themselves at the expense of much else that I found to be curious, it was the self-righteousness that imperiled even the most benign observation of the irony of it all. While it is accurate that *Behold the Dreamers* is a blockbuster novel for which Mbue signed a million-dollar deal with Random House in 2014, she had, as a Rutgers international student from Cameroon about a decade earlier, walked in their very shoes. Most likely, she was of similar outlook if not disposition and wrote the novel when she was jobless. A dismissal of Afropolitan writers based on a so-called class privilege has become modish and pervasive, requiring serious scrutiny. Historicizing Afropolitanism will demonstrate an ironic tension between the vestiges of privilege and the reality of marginality. The ambiguous subjectivity of the Afropolitan informs the narrower, specific, shorter, and more contemporary genealogy of Afropolitanism that I explore in this essay.

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The dominant critique of Afropolitanism as a product of neoliberal elitism has not been sufficiently attentive to the historical condition that motivated the concept. Afropolitanism could be situated alongside the revolutionary energy that erupted into the French race riots of 2005, the same year that Taiye Selasi coined the term to give expression to the phase-of-life activism and radical imaginary of Gen Y. Like the 2005 riots in Birmingham, England, the French riots popularized Ambalavaner Sivanandan's aphorism: "We are here because you were there." The point of the aphorism is to argue that "colonialism and immigration are part of the same [dialectical] continuum," meaning that the "model minority" status of immigrants is often misleading ("Catching History" 95). Indeed, one could argue that the term *Afropolitanism* is the literary expression of the riots.

Afropolitanism conjoins the logic of generational existentialism with the "rightless, rootless, peripatetic and temporary" conditions of existence that Afropolitans share with migrant workers (Sivanandan, "New Circuits" 16). For elites, plebeians, and financially and culturally dynamic youth alike, the African experience within global networks and exchanges is often marked by difference and a "dialectic of being and having" that evokes the conjunction of class and race (Fanon, *Black Skin* 27).[1] Beyond being born black abroad, Afropolitanism speaks to the general condition of difference that being African in the modern world engenders. It becomes possible, through that term, to posit dialectical materialism from below while not pretentiously claiming that the Afropolitan is necessarily grassroots. After all, social disadvantages have little if nothing to do with class status. Afropolitanism could be viewed as black cosmopolitanism in which blackness colors, or for Fanon epidermializes, the privilege, travel, and wealth associated with cosmopolitanism. What it cannot be, however, is a formula for classifying white as cosmopolitan and black as Afropolitan.

The "rightless, rootless, peripatetic and temporary" conditions of marginality and coloniality are also replicated within the national space, without virtually any notice at all. In Teju Cole's *Open City*, Julius is labeled by the other kids in high school as an Ajebota—that is, a butter eater. In the framework of this peculiar sobriquet, if you are not a butter eater, you are a normative Ajepako, a wood eater. What is an Ajebota? A Nigerian website describes the Ajebota as follows:

> If you see the words, Madam, Sir or Esq. after your folks' name on an envelope, you might be an Ajebota. But, if people refer to your folks as either "Iya-beji," "Mama-baby," "Mama-Chukwudi," or "Baa Lamidi," you are NOT Ajebota!
>
> If, after using the bathroom, you have an assorted barrage of scented toilet tissues to choose from, you just might be an Ajebota. But if you use water to "wipe" yourself, you're an Ajepaki!
>
> If your folks carry wallets and purses, you're possibly an Ajebota. But if your mom reaches into her bra to get money in the glaring eyes of the public, your Paki is level 5!
>
> ("Are You an Ajebota?")

Ajepako is not simply a sobriquet denoting ruggedness and masculinity, it is a malicious form of self-affirmation. The Ajebota is an exotic child of sophistication, privilege, and, like Julius, often mixed race. This distinction between the Ajebota and the Ajepako (or the variant Ajepaki, a cassava eater) and the levels of belonging and unbelonging it signifies have serious consequences for social acceptance and integration and for delineating the other within the self. Either within the nation or abroad, these "beautiful, brown-skinned people" endure the question, "where are you from?" (Selasi, "Bye-Bye Barbar" 528). At a metaphoric level, the label Ajebota highlights and helps underscore the implicit dichotomy and hierarchy among African writers. Yewande Omotoso objects to the term *Afropolitan* for this very reason. Why do some African writers need a new name?

> My mother was from the Caribbean, so I'm multicultural anyway, not only Nigerian. But I feel this doesn't mean I'm Afropolitan. I've travelled to places and I've learned things, but I'm still African. It

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> doesn't mean I'm less African, and that's why the term is problematic. Why do we have to have another distinction? You have class, language and so on and now another special group of Afropolitans. Many of those Africans who travel and get educated overseas have the money and the means to do that. So they are of a privileged class, that's all. (qtd. in Fasselt 235)

The general perception is that the Afropolitan writer is cosmopolitan and culturally mobile, whereas the local writer is stuck in the space of national culture and identity. The baseline criticism of Afropolitans thus targets their presumptive privileged status relative to other Africans with little appreciation that the Afropolitan subject is locked in a unique material conflict or saga, just like the migrant worker brilliantly depicted in Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*. The refusal to accept Africa as a space of mere locality, devoid of the possibilities of cultural enlargement, provoked Achille Mbembe's 2006 reflection on Afropolitanism, where he appropriates the term and brings it home, as it were. Using concepts of dispersal and immersion, Mbembe tracks African subjects westward and eastward, drawing attention to the long history of migration to, from, and within Africa to show that "cultural mixing" and "the interweaving of worlds" has long been an African "way of belonging to the world" (59). Along with Selasi's 2005 manifesto, these have been the dominant ways of thinking about Afropolitanism.

Afropolitanism emerged at the beginning of the twenty-first century as a new name for the experience of a subset of African migrants. It quickly started trending as a new way of thinking about global Africanity, the historical conditions of being African, and Africans' material relations in the world. It provided a new grid for theorizing transnational and translational African modernity. To the extent that Afropolitanism explores literary production and cultural exchanges beyond the literature of migration, the concept promised to perform the critical functions neglected by concepts such as diaspora, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism. It assessed both the relevance of contemporary African writings as critiques of Western global power and the entanglement of African writing and neoliberalism.

This essay outlines an alternative genealogy of Afropolitanism as a biographical concept, tracking the forms of cosmopolitan enlargement engendered in the movements of wayfarers from below. It proceeds from the biographical destiny that circumscribes and delimits the citizenship rights of the children of foreign-born citizens, sometimes called aliens, and the rights of the natural-born children of foreign-born citizens. Selasi coined the term *Afropolitan* in deliberate opposition to *cosmopolitan*, as a refutation of cosmopolitan privilege, and as a neologism to describe a generation of Africans born outside the continent. "We are Afropolitans," she wrote, "not citizens, but Africans, of the world" ("Bye-Bye Barbar" 528). That line has not been sufficiently interrogated for how it places the rights and privileges of "Africans of the world" at the core of the identity of the Afropolitan.

Contrary to what Omotoso opines, Afropolitanism does not address distinctions between Africans or erase Africanness. Rather, it highlights the Afropolitan's class position relative to the global order by affirming simultaneously the problematic persistence of Africanity within the neoliberal cosmopolitan ideal and a nonexclusionary pledge to Africa. Afropolitanism, in that sense, is a radical critique of cosmopolitanism, a rejection of its universal assumptions of rootless existence. Selasi does not accept the premise of being "strangers" in the world, but she also does not presume to embody the privileges of a world citizen. The central question of Afropolitanism is the question of citizenship and the scales of inequality: not only of global citizenship but of national citizenship as well.

The inequalities of national and global citizenship here are the direct effects of colonialism and immigration. They can be further established in an unbroken chain from the peregrinations of the African writer in the twentieth century—which Chinua Achebe lamented as lacking the privilege or power of global citizenship—to the interminable challenges of twenty-first-century migration. The effects of power are most pronounced at the

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margins, at the borders. Consider Cole's journey to Leukerbad, a remote village in Switzerland, as Cole ritualistically enters into the point of view of James Baldwin, listening to some of the same music in the bath of the same hotel room Baldwin had stayed in. But he disagrees with one of Baldwin's central observations in "Stranger in the Village": "These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it" (Baldwin 165). Achebe hits a strikingly comparable note in *Home and Exile*, putting Baldwin in somewhat awkward company:

> The list of European and American painters and writers who have left home for some other country in this century and the one before is very impressive indeed. Let me mention an arbitrary half-dozen that come first to my mind—Picasso leaving Spain for Paris; Rimbaud leaving France for Abyssinia; Rilke changing homes twenty times in two years; even James Baldwin returning to America from France in a casket and W. E. B. Du Bois finding a resting place in Ghana. Diverse as their individual situations or predicaments were, these children of the West roamed the world with the confidence of the authority of their homeland behind them. The purchasing power of even very little real money in their pocket set against the funny money all around them might often be enough to validate their authority without any effort on their part. The experience of a traveler from the world's poor places is very different, whether he is travelling as a tourist or struggling to settle down as an exile in a wealthy country. One could give a whole lot of time to that subject but I am not going to. Let me just say of such a traveler that he will not be able to claim a double citizenship like Gertrude Stein when she said: "I am an American and Paris is my hometown." (92–93)

As far as Baldwin was concerned, Stein's claim to the world, even if she does not know it, might as well be infinite. Thus, when Cole writes of Baldwin, "I disagree not with his particular sorrow but with the self-abnegation that pinned him to it," he simultaneously understood yet failed to grapple with the profundity of Baldwin's statement (*Known and Strange Things* 11). Baldwin was not saying that these Europeans in a remote village were truly entitled to world citizenship. That anyone would think they were is, as Achebe says, "sad in the extreme" (93). Selasi understands the immensity of claiming citizenship anywhere in the world under the banner of a superstate with massive purchasing power. As Achebe demonstrates, African writers will not be able to share this claim, and neither will Afropolitans, precisely because they are willy-nilly interpellated as African. Afropolitanism provides a language not available to Achebe to articulate an obstinately liberating embrace of the world in the face of dual marginality within the nation and in the world at large. The equation of Afropolitanism with Africa's globalization thus ignores this dimension of Africa's destiny, inseparable from historical blackness. The only kind of citizenship that the inexorably marginalized black migrant worker, the progeny of the slave, can claim is what Esi Edugyan calls "[b]roken citizenship," a "lonelier citizenship" that is always in need of patching together (25). If viewed from the perspective of broken citizenship, Afropolitanism becomes an expression of the universal disequilibrium of power and the inherent marginality of the Afropolitan subject. Broken citizenship is a product and consequence of biography.

Under what conditions does biography function as a curse on the subject or a badge of honor? Afropolitanism's "multidimensional thinking" and the task of "forging a sense of self from wildly disparate sources" (Selasi, "Bye-Bye Barbar" 530) hark back to the multiculturalism of the 1980s, at the crest of which the Chinese American writer Amy Tan, the author of *The Joy Luck Club*, famously stated in a 1989 *New York Times* interview that "when my feet touched China, I became Chinese. I knew I was not totally Chinese, but I felt the connection, nevertheless. It was a sense of completeness" (qtd. in Mussari 25). This was perhaps at the cusp of the era of hyphenated identity in the United States. Multiculturalism works when difference is not mediated by coloniality. The inoperability of the hyphenation in the immigrant experience of Africans has produced the patchwork of Afropolitan identity.

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In contrast to Tan's and perhaps a variety of Asian experiences, Edugyan recalls how in her first visit to Ghana she was desperate to find some connection between herself and the strangers who were supposed to be her "forty-three aunts and uncles . . . and hundreds of cousins." Closely observing her host, she writes, "whether blood or not, I could see my own features in his. I sensed my brother and sister doing it too, searching for resemblances. . . . [I]t felt perplexing, almost stupefying, to find the echo of our own selves in a complete stranger, as if some part of us had been waiting for us to arrive all these years" (21). A similar moment of arrival in Selasi's novel *Ghana Must Go* describing a spontaneous dance has become a widely referenced passage:

> Sadie glances up as she moves. "Yeah? Like this?" More movement. More cheering. Transporting, the drumbeat. Tension in the stomach. Which moves to the thighs. Then the knees, then the calves, then the shins, then the feet. Too embarrassed to stop, she keeps moving. Starts dancing. Slowly at first, with her eyes on the ground, on the feet of the girl, which she follows with ease—then a spar, something clicking, a logic inside her, a stranger inside her that knows what to do, knows this music, these movements, this footwork, this rhythm, the body relaxing, eyes trained on the feet, she is moving, not looking, afraid to stop moving, afraid to look up at the small cheering crowd, she is moving, she is sweating, she is crying (*I am dancing,* she, thinks, disbelieving, unable to stop), . . . unaware of the exterior, unaware of the skin, unaware of the eyes, unaware of the onlookers, aware of the pounding, aware of the drum. (270)

African diasporic literature is replete with this moment of ritual dance as a trope of homecoming. Paule Marshal's *Praise Song for the Widow* represents dance as the closing of the circle, the final healing phase. In Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, it marks the unique moment of self-reflexivity. "When I went dancing, between the beats and during the steps, I thought, 'Here I am, Maya Angelou, dancing in Africa. I know I'm having a good time.' Shopping in the crowded streets I thought, 'This is me at last, really me, buying peppers in Makola market, aren't I lucky?' I decided that I was too aware of my location" (148). The hyperconsciousness of locating oneself in moments of returning and visiting saturates Afropolitan novels.

Does the category of Afropolitanism extend to all African writers whose work touches on what it means to be underdog in the world, or only to African writers overseas? The biographical specificity of Afropolitanism sketched here is not an attempt to limit the term's application to the more historically precise work by mostly second-generation migrants, but rather an attempt to draw from their experience the grounds for a theoretical framework of the concept. After all the resemblances and the performative gesture of dance, Edugyan writes, "[w]e were simply, profoundly, not at ease. We did not belong." She encountered in that first visit difference rooted in resemblances. "Not-belonging is so often rooted in difference that we forget, sometimes, that it can be rooted in similarities as well." Her unease with her ancestral home in Ghana derives from "a bond of blood and history which did not require mutual consent" (24). Her unease with her nonancestral home in Canada derives partly from being uneasy in her own skin. However, there, "the roots do not go deep; the past is not one's own" (30). The consciousness of a borrowed past causes her to feel a certain remove and dissociation of sensibilities toward the nation's memories, monuments, and classics, not unlike Baldwin's attitude toward Rembrandt, Chartres Cathedral, and the Empire State Building. What difference is there from the perspective of a borrowed past between a Nigerian American child singing "The Star-Spangled Banner" and a Cameroonian child in colonial times reciting "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois" ("Our Ancestors the Gauls")?"[2] As Edugyan argues, "Home is the first exile" (10). Afropolitanism emerges from this originary moment of discovery as a formulation of a new kind of paradoxical sensibility induced by dual marginality and a refusal to define oneself exclusively by ancestry and birth even when those are the de facto determinative conditions.

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Afropolitanism is thus a sensibility born from "lonelier citizenship" and unbelonging. It could be argued that much of twentieth-century literature is about alienation, not being home. We could think of writers like Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Joseph Conrad, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gilles Deleuze, who celebrated the sense of dislocation, exile, and loneliness, to suggest that this existential condition is hardly unique to the Afropolitan or Africans in diaspora or exile. Or, even in the United States, we might think of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby, the midwesterner who goes to New York. However, much as the general conditions of modern life percolate contemporary literature, none of these modern writers felt uneasy in their own skin. Moreover, none of the Afropolitans roamed the world as modernists did with the subconscious confidence of having made the modern world—to conflate Achebe's and Baldwin's phrases.

These considerations are reflected in the form of the Afropolitan novel. Gone are the elaborate details of characters' environments from the realist novel, intended to provide depth and dimension. Space itself takes on an evocative and dynamic character in the narrative. Also absent is the celebration of dislocation from the modernist novel. Instead, the Afropolitan novel portrays characters across generations and, more often, across localities. We see temporal movement, a character in a rapid halting motion akin to a film, presenting us with a kaleidoscopic collection of moments. In the Afropolitan novel, we experience neither the uprootedness that defined the initial diaspora nor even cosmopolitan rootlessness. The roots of the Afropolitan subject, often split between the home of residence and ancestral home, are simply not deep enough.

In some cases, characters have second or third homes in addition to the ancestral home. The shallow roots of the Afropolitan translate directly into the emotional distance that we see in Cole's Julius. Cole expertly embraces this emotional distance and turns it into a liberating space of sublime enlargement. He gives us the Buddha's knowing smile of total detachment, magnificently isolated from all primordial claims and loyalties. This existentialist curse of freedom is borne with the paradoxical longing for mobility and rootedness. Exile and the diaspora had asked us to imagine home, especially when the return was improbable, thereby inducing a dream of home and perpetually commemorating home and identity. The question for the Afropolitan is not the possibility of return. Of course you can go anywhere, but will you recognize home when you find it? Home is just another stop, a moment in the exploratory journey toward completeness.

The Afropolitan mode of thinking has broad implications for the study of African culture and society, which have been radically transformed by the independence movements and the post–Cold War era. These two phenomena have had contradictory effects because the direct collective rebellion of the independence movements has given way to new forms of mobility in a unipolar world system that accentuates individual activism and actualization. Afropolitanism allows us to grapple with the precise nature of these sociocultural and material transformations.

Notes

1. Elsewhere Fanon describes the nexus of racism and classism that produces the condition: "In the colonies, the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich" (*Wretched* 5).

2. The contention that reciting "The Star-Spangled Banner," as opposed to "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois," does not involve erasing Africanness may have some merit. The purpose of reciting the French story was to remind colonized subjects that the African home did not exist, whereas the American ideal is based on being able to move your home. However, if that ability to move one's home implies the notion of choice, it is incompatible, as Cole alluded to in *Open City*, with the African ports of entry into the United States: "Ellis Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, 'we blacks,' had known rougher ports of entry" (55).

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