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Research Africa Reviews Editorial Voice:  
*Afropessimism and Afropolitanism Revisited*

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Before the COVID pandemic, in the first quarter of 2019, I suggested in an editorial that “The potential negative impact of public health issues on the productivity of the younger generation of scholars in Africa must also be accounted for, whether in terms of insufficient medical infrastructure or the spread of infectious diseases. All of these issues should be factored into discussions about the future of intellectual production on the continent.” I could not have possibly imagined the disorder and tragedy that would begin to unfold one year later, nor the success many African countries have had in fighting the ongoing pandemic. The events of 2020 have been unanticipated in their magnitude, even though many suspected that the future would probably hold some new iterations of old problems as the world economy continued to eradicate middle class life where it exists, and to favor the 5% richest families over the rest of the world. COVID 19 began to rage throughout the planet, and brought into clear focus intransigent problems of poverty, social justice and racism, and weak public health systems fashioned along the lines of ‘lean and mean’ national economies. These are all significant reasons to focus this editorial on the pandemic, but that is not what follows here. There are many outstanding Africanist scholars of public health, and such experts should, and no doubt will, contribute a meaningful and compelling discussion on the impact of the pandemic on African spaces and among Africa’s diasporas in Europe and elsewhere.

This past year also brought the pornographic violence of black deaths. The murder of George Floyd galvanized communities around the world in its venal, sadistic display of the disregard of black life. While national and global responses were a cause for hope and a demonstration of how diverse actors are able to rally against racism and violence, it also represented a confirmation of the frailty of black citizenship in white-dominated spaces. Additionally, it motivated youth in Africa, South America and Asia to speak out against the unacceptable practices of violence perpetuated by the police and the neo-liberal state. These events illuminate the physical terror that many live with in their assigned, or even chosen, post-colonial spaces. There has been an eruption of online discussion about social justice and black histories. There has also been a new swell of outrage against the corrupt financial state of the world, predicted, incidentally, by Thomas Piketty almost a decade ago. Part of our conundrum is that we cannot be defined wholly by our physical attributes, racial categories, or material accomplishments, and neither can we take action from these positions alone. As detractors of the Afropolitan perspective argue, the acquisition of airplane tickets, posh apartments and post-graduate degrees as Selasie described in *Bye Bye Babar* (2005) have proved insufficient to the task of overcoming the current violence we are experiencing.

Along with physical well-being, the search to live a good life aims to go beyond mere survival, and survival is unfortunately still a pressing problem among too many communities on

the African continent and abroad. Education and a robust intellectual life are key to creating change. Creative minds, committed to seriously contemplating the state of Africa as a composite as well as its constituent countries and outlying diasporas, are needed. *Research Africa* plays an important role in this by furthering scholarly exchange and encouraging intellectual production. It provides a space where ideas are shared and new work is introduced, to the benefit of all readers. How do we see Africa in a world context? How do we imagine the future? It is in difficult times such as these that we must recommit ourselves to critical thinking and creative problem solving. Among the theoretical tools at our disposal, the perspectives of Afropessimism and Afropolitanism remain under discussion among Africanist scholars. Below I provide some thoughts on these two approaches to viewing our current circumstances. In the context of the growing world threats of populism and xenophobia, it seems particularly fitting to revisit these ideas, as they provide two very different perspectives on how people of African descent, and those interested in African futures, envision African possibility.

Here I speak of Afropessimism less as a literary style or individual worldview, and more as a *tendance*, a stream or trend, of practices and perspectives that are employed in diverse intellectual projects. The Afropessimist view addresses both the local and the transnational, the nation-state and global conditions. Especially in the U.S., the appearance of this approach seems connected to other global and national tendencies, particularly those of nativism and populism. Through the Afropessimist lens, problems are distinct and identifiable; one must only figure out how to live, or die, with them. For example, the work of Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (2020), presents a perspective that is strongly constructed around the ‘white gaze’ and the power behind that gaze. African Americans and various black Others are caught and almost frozen in this gaze of whiteness, which translates to ubiquitous white power and contempt. For Wilderson, if I understand correctly, African Americans are doomed to an ever-renewing regime of violence and hate, cycling repeatedly in new forms. He enlists Orland Patterson’s definition of the slave and social death, in which slavery equals the destruction and loss of former pre-capture identity.

For Wilderson, in many ways African American identity means slave identity and can only mean that. In this view, identity is co-terminus with the state, it exists on the state’s terms, and depends largely on state definitions. In my own view, the human being is always re-inventing itself. As one identity is being lost, the human begins to construct another. This seems to me one of the defining characteristics of what it means to be a human. While one identity is threatened, negated, or a heavy burden to bear, humans initiate processes of redefinition. This resonates with Mbembe’s discussions of the flexibility of the individual in the post-colonial world, and the agility of the African subject in contexts of chaos and uncertainty. Afropessimism seems to take us to a place where the assigned identity (in a European or American context) overcomes the interior logic of a person or persons. This is an important assertion, and is worth reflecting on – is this an inevitable outcome? It might be that one of the earliest precursors of Afropessimism was *Le Devoir de la Violence* by Yambo Oluquem. Oluquem’s work shares this frame of violence and inevitability.

Some have placed TaNehisi Coates’ book *Between the World and Me* (2015) as an Afropessimist project. Another text which shares some similar dark preoccupations is Lorand Matory’s book *Stigma and Culture: Last Place Anxiety in Black America* (2015). Both are wonderful representations of black worlds in the United States, in spaces that are dominated by an exterior, distant ‘white’ threat, a threat that enters black lives from the systemic racism of the larger society, if not the state itself. Though neither approaches the morbid future that Wilderson

describes, as examples of an Afropessimist *tendance*, they evince a world where the American black is sealed away from black Others. In all three works, American communities are condemned to the parameters of the victim. An imaginary that is able to transcend the nation as an arbiter, or transcend the power of the invisible white “other,” does not operate in these narratives. This can be read as a sort of stalemate. Outside of the continent, how is black subjectivity constructed beyond what is formed (and maintained) by racism? To what extent are these tensions and their attendant worldviews exported abroad? Is it ever possible to seize time away from the macabre dance of western ‘progress’ and surveillance to engage a black gaze in the mirror of a black world? This is a concern that must be considered in the discourse, and the application, of Afropessimism.

On the other hand, it has been assumed that Afropolitanism is for an imagined cosmopolitan few, and that these few are those of considerable wealth in large urban centers, whether on the African continent, in Europe, or in America. One frustrating element in this perspective is that cosmopolitanism is not imagined as a process and quality among Africans in Africa. The continent is three times larger than the United States. Europe could fit into the geographic expanse of the African continent many times over. As Michael Gomez has recently described, states such as Songhay, Tekrur and Mali were sites of concentrated processes of building new societies, of intellectual rigor and experimental governance (2018). Scholars were subsidized from other regions (Yemen and Egypt) to participate in these cultural/political experiments. Southern African populations encountered the Afrikaaners centuries ago. These are examples of cosmopolitan process on the continent. One could go on and on, citing Agadez or Marrakesh, Old Zimbabwe or the Swahili island states. Why, now, would encounters among diverse Africans not constitute cosmopolitan streams? Given the ubiquity of cell phones and relatives abroad, it is not accurate to reserve the cosmopolitan experience to the new, or even old, elite. Moreover, as Appadurai discussed (1996), understandings, interpretations and appropriations of ideas and objects from global markets are now diffuse, diverse and dynamic across national and class lines.

When Europeans first wrote of cosmopolitanism, it was within the geographic expanse of Europe, among Europeans. Since the end of colonialism, something new has been happening, which is increased travel within Africa. It was colonialism, as Mbembe rightly notes, that interrupted the mobility of people and the regional expansions of states that formed the basis of many ‘African’ practices. I would argue that a new African cosmopolitanism, already in process, marks the twenty-first century. This cosmopolitanism does not depend on Europe, although Europe (as America) is indeed a locus of African exchanges, innovations, and creativity. The exciting possibilities of encounters in Africa, however, remain to be understood. This includes, but is not limited to, war. In this view, Afropolitanism is not class bound. It is a process that includes the discovery of new places, the re-definition of social space, and the circulation of wealth in unexpected locales. The digital world is a compliment, but not a source, of this new cosmopolitanism. Need and aspiration are more likely the foundation of much of these new dynamics. Houseboys and female domestic workers do aspire for different futures, contrary to Dabiri’s expectations (2016). Increasingly, they are the beneficiaries of international remittances from siblings and others which send their children to school and to university.

The weakness of the Afropessimist logic is its narrow treatment of contradictions caused by historical forces, and the failure to embrace the idea of rupture with externally defined identities. However, this is a fraught and problematic choice, as it requires imagining a future outside of racist or nativist logics. The Afropessimist view, whether emerging from North America or among African intellectuals, does not allow for the as yet unknown variables of African agency, western

social decay, and the role to be played by African descended populations in diverse geographic locations (Sarr, 2020).

As it turns out, the entanglements of African-derived social formations somehow hold a promise for the future. As the west/north discovers that humans do, indeed, need other humans, it would appear that Africa has yet another resource to be exploited and circulated. That would be skills at recognizing, living with, and incorporating other humans. How can we combat climate change, pandemics, and severe economic inequities if not through some form of cooperation and inclusion? The violence and perfidy that we observe in African conflicts are part of the picture, but not the whole picture. A salient question is: how have Africans survived chaos? Another would be: how can we look to each other to recover or create modes-of-living that enable rupture with race-based logics that might no longer serve our interests? Afropessimism has alerted us to some of the major problems; perhaps Afropoliticism can reveal some viable responses.

Accepting nuance and ambiguity is key to deconstructing the rigid social categories of racialism, gender, and western hegemony. It may be useful to pay attention to the nuanced differences between assigned identities and internal, in-group ideas of self. Transnational mobility is not ending; it is only beginning. Unlikely travelers will still find a way to go somewhere else.

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