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Deborah Posel & Ilana Van Wyk (Eds), *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, 2019. 304 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1776144662.

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This book, with a delightfully illustrated cover, comes at a time when we are all taking stock of our consumption practices as a global humanity. The idea of consumption, especially in excess, has come under scrutiny in the last few decades. Our consumption habits as human beings, whether of food or material things, has come under the spotlight as we navigate a world pummelled by COVID-19, adverse climatic events and depressed economies. The book is the product of a symposium held in December 2014. The convenors of the symposium and editors of the book could not have imagined the state of the world at the end of 2020. The central thesis of the symposium and the book is a critique of the idea of conspicuous consumption as posited by Thorstein Veblen at the turn of the 19th Century. What emerges from this diverse collection of very well written essays is a thorough critique focused on Africa but with a global and multifaceted lens; one which navigates time and space to bring to the fore the relevance of the thesis and to highlight the need for scholarly engagement with the subject. What threads the thirteen chapters together so well is the different dimensions; each author takes to reflect on Veblen's original thesis and each one locates it in a context of lived experience with different actors and events.

Conspicuous Consumption in Africa (Posel and Van Wyk 2019) reframes some of the assumptions of the original thesis giving new meaning to some of the concepts first articulated in Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* first published in 1899. What the editors and chapters highlight is that there is no universal standard or yardstick for conspicuous or excessive consumption. Similarly, there is no discipline which can claim a privileged analytical lens to interrogate the subject. The thesis lends itself to transdisciplinarity and intersectionality which enables scholarly discourse and continuous engagement with the original thesis by Veblen. The editors (chapter 1) maintained a very steady grip on the essays ensuring that the expanse and nuances of the multiple themes covered did not fall into the trap of framing Africa in subjective terms which could have been tempting given the subject matter. Their recognition of the need to revisit the frames and narratives on and about Africa often presented as objective fact in the media is commended. As Africanist scholars continue to deal with deliberate negative framing of the African continent in intellectual discourses and the media, it is good that this volume was able to go beyond the stereotypes and to place Africa in global scholarly discourses on conspicuous consumption.

The volume navigates subjects across the diversity of Africa's cultural and politico-economic landscapes. The essays explore a rich tapestry of ideas including the tensions between tradition and modernity, globalisation and technology, power, and authority, and, above all, the idea of humanity from the perspective of African experiences. The editors were quick to provide a necessary disclaimer that the book focuses on Africa south of the Sahara. This was necessary as the volume leans heavily towards southern Africa with an even heavier leaning into South Africa. Seven of the twelve essays focus on South Africa with an additional two focusing on southern African countries (Angola and Zambia). Only three essays focus on West Africa. Despite the lack of representation for north and eastern Africa, the volume was

still able to capture the continental experience as many of the themes and actors are immersed in a globalised world. As a student of material culture studies, it would have been delightful to read a chapter on the Maghreb or the Swahili coast. I was reminded of the Medinas of Morocco with the bustling markets and endless supply of sumptuous food. Likewise, the Swahili markets in Mombasa, Zanzibar and other coastal towns evoke the memories of earlier bustling trade routes along the eastern seaboard. The editors will probably have enough material for another volume from these two regions.

The themes which emerge across the different chapters cover issues of race, gender, religion, politics, and economy. The agency of humans is adeptly captured throughout the essays and the authors deftly address the subject of the human condition in its various states. The elusive search for happiness and the anxieties which consume humans as they try to “fit in”, to belong, to impress and to gain honour are all subjected to scrutiny without trying to influence the reader towards a particular position. The hunger and desire to be recognised and celebrated probably transcends space and time divides as illustrated by the protagonists in these essays from the late Chiluba (Hansen chapter 6) to Patrick (Orock chapter 7). One of the interesting themes which also emerges in this collection of essays is the subject of sex and sexuality which is intricately woven through the essays. Rink (Chapter 11) and Orock’s chapters best capture the ambiguities around sexuality and desire in very different but truly African contexts. Other essays also give insightful perspectives into the subject of African masculinities which has evoked contestations in African scholarship (Masquelier chapter 9, Mnisi chapter 10). Once powerful leaders (Gastrow chapter 5, Hansen Chapter 6, Van Wyk chapter 7) who commanded power and authority fell from grace and in their fall the precarity of their status as “Big men” was also exposed. Their desire to be big is exposed in the excesses of their plunder of resources. Impoverished countries and communities in Africa continue to struggle to survive while leaders help themselves to resources meant for national development. The various authors highlight the fluidity of the idea of honour especially when “Big men” seem not to feel shame when outed for their ill-gotten gains. If anything, the glorification of looting has taken root as more exposés of grand theft emerge and are played out in the public sphere including the State Capture commission in South Africa. Teasing the idea of what drives big men’s hunger through the book is the sub-theme of patriarchy and patronage. This topic deserves a dedicated symposium when one takes a feminist lens to the dynamics of power and governance in the context of the continent’s recent history.

Another theme which the book captures is the complexity of identity making in Africa. Given the long history of the continent’s entanglement with other worlds it is no surprise that the global stage of consumption influenced African appetites for material things. Sylvanus (Chapter 3) aptly captures this ambivalence of the continent’s identity making in the post-independence nation state and the continuation of material ties to imperial others (see also Hansen Chapter 6). The enduring allure of the “Dutch wax” says a lot about the contradictory symbolisms and ambiguities of identity making in Africa and the rest of the world. Similarly, the flirting with the idea of race and identity comes through in the framing of “Blackness”. Gastrow perfectly captures the complexity when stating that “... it is impossible to discuss African consumption outside of the histories of colonialism and racism which constantly try to represent black consumption as pathological” (Gastrow 2019:91). Chevalier (chapter 12) also raises the importance of historical context in the framing of narratives on African people (c.f. Masquelier Chapter 9, Mnisi Chapter 10). By turning the lens on others who are neither “Big men” nor privileged others (see Posel, Chapter 2, Sparks Chapter 4), the book is able to give voice and visibility to the people who could have been left out but are also central to the subject of consumption and identity making. The essays highlight how ordinary and sometimes invisible people are central to discourses of excessive consumption. Mnisi perceptively points

out that "...women on the sidelines of the performance are often seen as coveted ornaments" (Mnisi 2019:170).

A chapter which does not fall neatly into the various themes highlighted above but remains key to the subject is the final chapter. I am glad the editors also highlight this in observing that the "... chapter is an outlier in the volume" (Posel and Van Wyk 2019:20). Brenner and Gupta's chapter (Chapter 13) raised intriguing questions which I suspect will not be easy to answer. Presented in an autoethnographic voice, the chapter reads more as Brenner's story and one misses the voice of the co-author. A fleeting reference to Brenner as someone "who was born in Bulawayo" (Brenner and Gupta 2019:217) creates a peculiar silence in respect to the women's cooperative which is in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Whether intended or not, the ambiguity of identity for Brenner and her role as agent/merchant also overshadows the producers who do not feature much in the essay. The consumers also seem to have a privileged access if not to Brenner then to circles where the beads are sold. Whilst the editors view this chapter as perhaps a reflexive piece for "academic consumers", it left me wanting to ask a little more on the power relations especially in the context of trade goods, gender, race, and identity. The bead makers whose 'labour of love' is consumed and appreciated elsewhere are conspicuous in their absence and silence. One hopes they do get to converse with the audiences who consume their products and to share their stories of the degenerative Zimbabwe they inhabit.

In conclusion, I can only commend the editors for a volume which has given us an opportunity to explore a thesis which is as central to our everyday lives as it is to scholarship. "Eating well" will always be a complex subject whether framed in terms of food consumption or the metaphoric "eating" of material goods. It may never be easy to unpack the subject and I applaud the editorial rigour that the editors took to ensure the book represents the multiple and layered themes of the volume. Each chapter has a rich reference list which enables one to further delve into the topics and to get a more nuanced and global reference for the themes. I recommend this as an everyday read for enthusiasts of material culture studies and as a critical text on Africa's political economy. It transcends any one discipline and will remain relevant to our scholarly engagement for many years to come. It definitely deserves a second volume to fill in the gaps for this truly interesting subject.

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